SECTION THREE: Girl Power

The stories in Section Three seek to redefine the female Asian American superhero—offering up depictions that are strong but three-dimensional, dealing with real-world issues like family expectations, peer pressure and body image, as well as the more extraordinary ones that costumed crimefighters face. In doing so, it combats the exoticization and sexualization that mar the characterizations of heroines like the X-Men’s Psylocke, Batman nemesis Lady Shiva and independent comics icons Shi and Kabuki.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT, pg. 100

Story by: Lynn Chen; Art by: Paul Wei
In this story, bulimic teenager Ting receives a mysterious birthday gift from her grandmother—a mystical sash intended to help her overcome her eating disorder, by guiding her toward a healthy equilibrium of qi. But Ting unexpectedly realizes that eating foods traditionally believed to have “hot” properties while wearing the belt causes her body to radiate extreme heat, and consuming foods with “cold” properties causes her to generate paralyzing cold—powers she uses to help others in need. As a side effect, she finds that her appetite for doing good has given her a less self-destructive way of curbing her weight: Exercise.

The story takes a humorous look at a very serious problem—some studies show that Asian American women aged 18-28 may be nearly eight times as likely as the norm to exhibit binge eating disorder, something that author Chen, an actress who has appeared in movies such as “Saving Face,” has experienced firsthand. Even more troubling: Due to Asian cultural taboos against discussion of mental illness, very often such problems remain undiscovered until serious harm results. (Eating disorders are just the tip of the iceberg: 15.9% of U.S.-born Asian American women have contemplated suicide in their lifetime, exceeding the national estimate of 13.5% for all Americans; lifetime estimates of suicide attempts are also higher among U.S-born Asian-American women than the general population, 6.29% versus 4.6%.)

Note: The issue of body image is also addressed by the introductory one-page comic for this section of the book, written and drawn by Kripa Joshi.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the pressures Asian American women face that might lead to body-image issues and eating disorders?
2. What are some of the reasons why psychological and emotional problems might go unnoticed among Asian Americans and other immigrant communities?
3. In the story, Ting is unable to discuss her problems directly with her parents or her friends, but is able to speak about them freely with her grandmother. Why do you think that is? What are some of the communication gaps that exist between immigrant parents and their American-born children? What are some of the cultural gaps that exist between the children of immigrants and their more acculturated friends?
In "Sampler," June Park is a spunky, no-nonsense young woman who works with her brother at the family business, Park Cleaners. But this isn’t an ordinary laundromat: Park Cleaners services the "special needs" of the local superhero community, e.g., by removing alien stains from nanotech-infused Lycra. When a couple of thugs try to rob the store late one night (seeking costumes to sell online to souvenir-hungry fans), June discovers her innate ability to "sample" the residual superpowers of others, left behind on personal items like clothing.

In "A Day at CostumeCo," a girl named Val who’s struggling to be "normal" despite being surrounded by superpowered family and friends is dragged by her mother to a shopping expedition at the local big-box store outfitter for heroes, CostumeCo. Despite her dreams of being ordinary, Val begrudgingly overcomes her embarrassment and accepts her destiny as a heroine in order to save the ones she loves.

Both series feature protagonists with similar outlooks on life—ironic, practical and uninterested in the showy, flamboyant side of superhero existence. June expresses her disgust at how the masked marvels ignore her working-class neighborhood when they don’t need their capes cleaned; Val wants to fit in with the "regular" kids, resisting her parents' supernormal expectations. (Similar themes are explored in the "Ordinary Heroes" section of this book.) At the end of the day, however, both find themselves putting family first—a common theme in Asian American culture. Among the issues invoked by these two stories: The social and economic divides that separate residents of ethnic enclaves from the urban "mainstream," and which can lead to civic isolation, the often overwhelming pressure placed by immigrant parents on their children to succeed and embrace certain career paths; and the desire by young Asian Americans (perhaps particularly women) to fit in with their peers, which may place them at odds with cultural traditions.

Discussion Questions
1. In "Sampler," June Park lives in a largely immigrant Korean neighborhood in her city, and complains that superheroes don’t take crime in her neighborhood seriously. What are some of the reasons that ethnic neighborhoods may receive a lower level of law enforcement? What are some of the other issues faced by residents of ethnic enclaves?
2. In "CostumeCo," Val’s parents want her to grow up to be a superhero. What are some of the professions that Asian immigrant parents tend to prefer for their children, and why?
3. What are some of the ways the children of immigrants might find themselves different from their peers? What might they do to try to be "just like everyone else"?
Lesson Plan

Rationale: In the long tradition of superhero comics, many of the most prominent representations of females have been stereotypical in nature—characterized by exaggerated sexuality, victimhood and subordinate status. Such traits have been particularly associated with the media image of Asian women, and the comics are no exception to this rule. The stories in the “Girl Power” section attempt to redefine the role of comic book girls and women away from this standard, making it a particularly appropriate platform for the discussion of the intersection between gender roles and racial stereotypes.

Grade Levels: Middle school and above

Objective: The student will be able to demonstrate an awareness of how the media perpetuates gender and racial stereotypes of Asian women; identify how young boys and girls respond to these stereotypes; appreciate how gender representation in comics has changed over the past few decades; compare the roles of the female heroes in “Secret Identities” to those of prominent Asian/Asian American women characters in mainstream superhero comics.

Make the Connection: Women characters have always been a part of the comic book medium, though their depictions have often not been central, and rarely without controversy. Indeed, the portrayal of women in comics has frequently been constrained to such questionable roles as “damsel in distress,” “love interest,” “scantily clad bombshell” or “exotic ‘bad girl’”—not entirely surprising given the male-dominated demographics of the comic book medium. The images of Asian women in comics have been particularly problematic when they have been included at all.

Direct Teaching: On the board or overhead, list the names and images of popular Asian women heroes and characters from mainstream American comics. This may require some research on your part. Some characters to include are Batgirl (the second to wear the costume), Shi, Lady Shiva, Kabuki, Psylocke, Jubilee, Katana, etc. After listing and showing these characters, have students discuss whether these images reinforce or redefine common stereotypes of Asian women. Give examples.

Assign one of the stories from the “Girl Power” section of Secret Identities. Before reading, ask the students to jot down traits that are associated with the Asian female heroes you listed on the board. What characteristics do most of these heroines have in common? After reading, have students compare and contrast the characters from the book to the Asian women characters you discussed earlier. Your discussion can also include stories from other sections of Secret Identities. Other stories to consider include female characters as depicted in “The Hibakusha” (page 45), “Flight” (page 131), “Jia” (page 133), “Parallel Penny” (page 136), “Twilight” (page 143), and “Meet Joe” (page 155).

After they read these selections from the book, ask the students the following questions:

1. Did any of the women in Secret Identities perpetuate stereotypes of how Asian women are portrayed in mainstream media? If so, how? If not, why not? Which ones ran counter to such stereotypes, and why?
2. What stands out (appearance, background, attitude, etc.) about female heroes in Secret Identities versus those in mainstream superhero comics?
3. Stereotypes of Asian men tend to be different from stereotypes of Asian women. Describe how.
4. How do racial stereotypes change the way people of different ethnic backgrounds are perceived?
5. How do gender stereotypes change the way people of different sexes are perceived?
6. How might these two stereotypes work together to create particular distortions of perception?
SECTION TWO: Resources and Further Reading

Books and Magazines

Articles