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Frank Zhang: Hipster Extraordinaire

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Writing Process
After the delicate deliberation of the characters of the series Heroes of Olympus by Rick Riordan, it was decided by both writers that Frank Zhang, son of Mars, is the ultimate hipster demigod. The structure of this essay was based on a simple argument, and carefully dissects the full series in order to really convey who Frank Zhang really is. It was additionally concluded by both writers that as complicated and intricate a character as Frank Zhang is, we wanted the audience to be able to not only imagine the illustrations of the character, but to further empathize with the character’s emotions. Through the attendance of two separate classes, a review from the professor, and careful editing, the essay comes to a complete conclusion demonstrating our perspective on the author’s ultimate purpose.

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In Rick Riordan’s sequel series, *Heroes of Olympus*, the protagonist, Frank Zhang, demonstrates a break in racial as well as economic stereotypes. Frank Zhang’s attributes predispose him to portray his Chinese heritage, wealthy and strict family, as well as depict aspects of his father Mars, the god of war. According to a study on stereotypes of Chinese by American college students, Chinese athletes are often described as perfect and infallible: “the study found that personal segments with Chinese athletes on American television centered on their machine-like, precise performance…and the commentators often praise Chinese athletes’ hardworking ethic” (Zhang, 2015). Moreover, some people are said to “perceive Chinese people’s hard-working ethic and intelligence as factors…and might perceive Chinese people’s inventiveness and aggressiveness as contributing to their ambition to take the lead in world affairs” (Zhang, 2015). Additionally, Chinese culture is well known for having a profound respect for their elders by holding them in high regard, and have a reputation for praising and revering their ancestors. Unexpectedly, Frank is characterized as a weak adolescent with “a babyish face that didn’t go with his military haircut or his big burly frame. He looked like a toddler who’d taken steroids and joined the Marines” (*Son of Neptune* 30). Further, this so-called “hero,” raised by a single mother and grandmother, begins ranked *probatio*, which is one of the lowest rankings at Camp Jupiter in the Twelfth Legion Fulminata, and has a distant relative who is infamous for disgracing the camp. As evidenced in the role of Frank Zhang throughout the series *Heroes of Olympus*, Riordan attempts to break racial, cultural, and economic stereotypes. However, while he experiences relative success in diverging from racial and economic expectations, Frank does
exhibit cultural stereotypes through his continually drawing advice from his family and carrying around a reminder of his ancestral destiny. By breaking deep-rooted stereotypes, Riordan attempts to convey that success is not inherited, but rather, it is the work that a person puts forth that ultimately determines his potential.

Initially, Frank exhibits behavior that clearly diverges from typical racial stereotypes. An article on East Asian stereotypes clearly states, “Chinese individuals were stereotyped as […] sly, poised, conservative, tradition-loving, and loyal to family ties” (Ruble and Zhang 204). In complete opposition, Frank Zhang exhibits a clumsy character that seeks to break free from his traditional expectations as a warrior, and dislikes his godly parentage. In a conversation with Percy Jackson about the reason the Fifth Cohort is looked down upon, Frank mentions, “archery...They don’t like that either, unless you’re a child of Apollo. Then you’ve got an excuse...They say I’m too stocky for an archer. Maybe if my dad would ever claim me” (Neptune 98). Despite his size and strength, Frank is deemed an outcast because of his unpopular fighting style. Further, in a conversation with Vitellius, the Fifth Cohort’s house spirit, the two discuss the weakness of archers: “As for archers,’ the ghost said, ‘they’re wimps! Back in my day, archery was a job for barbarians. A good Roman should be in the fray, gutting his enemy with spear and sword like a civilized man!...Roman up, boy!” (Neptune 107). Through both descriptions, Frank demonstrates a weak Roman soldier with unfavorable aspirations; his talent as an archer shows how he rejects traditional “warrior” views and strives to be individual. By placing Frank in a critical role as a leader throughout the series, Riordan attempts to break racial stereotypes through the seeming incompetent behavior that Frank displays; however, as the series continues, Frank is put to the test and is given the opportunity to prove his worth, revealing his true potential.

In addition to Frank’s unexpected talent for archery, he also breaks racial stereotypes through his selflessness and non-competitive spirit. In the previously mentioned article, negative stereotypes for Chinese athletes include traits such as “antisocial, cold, deceitful, narrow-minded, nerdy, selfish, and above all, competitive” were listed (Ruble and Zhang 205). As Riordan’s series
continues, Frank’s character must develop as he faces monsters, in spite of his seemingly helpless nature. Without the initial courage needed to escape with his friends, Frank is confronted by his first challenge given from Iris, who tells Frank, “the task ahead of you...Well, I wouldn’t wish it on anyone, especially a nice boy like you [...] If you’re determined to leave, you’ll have to clear those basilisks off the hill [...] Only you have the ability to kill the monsters” (Neptune 248).

Having to find his courage, Frank must kill the fire-breathing snakes on his own in order to leave Iris’s shop and continue with the quest to free Thanatos. Through this selfless act, Frank portrays a character that is willing to put his friends’ lives before his own. Additionally, his eagerness to succeed on the quest demonstrates how Frank portrays a more open-minded mentality, allowing him to accept challenges as they come. Therefore, in opposition to the negative Chinese stereotypes, Riordan utilizes Frank to break the stereotype of narrow-mindedness and selfishness through Frank’s brave acts as well as his search for courage.

On the expansion of his necessary growth as an individual, Frank further breaks racial stereotypes through his lack of an innate “model behavior” and his need to work hard in order to gain success and reach his full potential. Along with the negative stereotypes, the same article describes positive stereotypes, noting, “Asians are often considered a ‘model minority’ in that they are seen to be intelligent, mathematical, [...] self-disciplined, serious” (Ruble and Zhang 205). According to this article, Asians have been perceived to be naturally intelligent, self-disciplined, and serious. Frank Zhang does not naturally carry those traits, however, and must work hard to do so. In The House of Hades, the fourth installment in the Heroes of Olympus series, Frank is faced with a conflict and must act quickly and cunningly. Challenged by Triptolemus, the demigod threefold warrior who is also connected to the goddess of the harvest, Frank stands in fear as his friends are turned into vegetables. Frank frantically attempts to devise a plan and deliberates in his head, “if he declined Trip’s offer, Frank figured he would offend the guy and end up as sorghum or wheat or some other cash crop. If it was the only way to save Hazel, then sure, he could agree to Trip’s commands and become a farmer” (House of Hades
Even further, Frank mentally begins to criticize himself in comparison to his other powerful friends: “What was he thinking? He wasn’t Leo. He couldn’t even figure out a stupid pair of Chinese handcuffs. He could barely change the batteries in a TV remote. He couldn’t fix a magical chariot!” (Hades 141). Through his clear speculation and doubt of his abilities, Frank does not represent a Chinese man of extreme intelligence or one with the ability to mathematically devise a plan to escape with his friends. However, Frank knows that this is his task. After long deliberation and a plea for help to his father Mars, Frank decides exactly what he needs to do, but he does not know how, or if, he is able to pull it off. In the book, we learn that Frank’s “odds of dying were excellent, but he had to try. Hazel’s life depended on him” (Hades 146). By unearthing poisonous vines, Frank manages to attract and defeat hundreds of katoblepones, which were cow-sized monsters whose name means “down-looker.” Through tirelessly transforming from human to animal and battling with a cavalry sword that was not his own, Frank is able to defeat his enemy, save his friends, and completely reach his full potential. More specifically, Frank realizes that “Triptolemus hadn’t gotten shorter. Frank was taller. His gut had shrunk. His chest seemed bulkier” (Hades 155). Although Frank is able to defeat his enemies, it is not done with ease and he has to struggle before he becomes victorious. As seen through this need to work hard in order to succeed, Frank demonstrates a character that breaks racial stereotypes and challenges the norm. Clearly, Riordan is attempting to illustrate that hard work and perseverance are two qualities that are necessary to achieving success.

In a similar way to breaking racial stereotypes, Frank Zhang also represents a character who deviates from economic clichés. As described in an article by Allison M. Rothman and Janice M. Steil, wealthy adolescents have been stereotyped as “spoiled, superficial, and, most notably, narcissistic and entitled, such that they are excessively concerned with their own rights without regard for the rights and feelings of others” (53). A depiction of wealthy people from an article written in 2012 exhibits that this perception of expectations of entitlement for wealthy people still prevails in today’s society. In the second installation of the Heroes of Olympus book
series, Frank Zhang’s family appears well-off: “His grandmother’s house was a rambling gray stone mansion on twelve acres in North Vancouver. Her backyard ran straight into Lynn Canyon Park [...] He loaded some of his grandmother’s porcelain in a wagon and tooted it into the yard, where he set up targets” (Neptune 116). Although Frank was raised in a mansion, his humility, selflessness, and ineptitude throughout his life have caused him to maintain low expectations, and does not feel he is entitled to anything. After employing Frank’s laundry as a diversion to escape from the hoard of Roman demigod soldiers, Frank was at a loss for pants, and “poor Frank had to borrow a pair of too small pants from Jason” (Mark of Athena 304). Although he had to sacrifice all he had brought onto the Argo II ship, Frank was able to keep his friends safe and avoid a seemingly inevitable war. Frank’s act of selflessness diverges from the stereotype that wealthy people only worry for themselves and have no regard for the feelings of others.

Furthermore, in addition to the selfless sacrifice of his supply of pants, Frank additionally breaks from typical economic stereotypes through his disbelief in his entitlement to anything. In an article on entitlement in a world of wealth, the author describes, “the popular notion that the wealthy are socialized to higher levels of entitlement than the less wealthy” (Rothman and Steil 55). Apparently, a common perception of the wealthy includes the assumption that they are more privileged due to their upbringing. In complete opposition, Frank Zhang’s father and grandmother give him constant reminders of his low worth and entitlement. For example, a time of need for gallantry, Frank imagines his grandmother’s reaction: “Frank Zhang riding to the rescue? Ha! He’d fall off his horse and break his neck” (Son of Neptune 104). Undoubtedly, according to his imagination of how his grandmother would react if she saw him, Frank was not raised with high expectancy for his success. Moreover, even as a son of a god, Frank was expected to prove his worth before receiving any help from his father. In response to Frank’s request for help, Mars, his father, responds, “You think I would do that for you? You have not proven your worth! Only the greatest hero could ask such a boon” (The House of Hades 145). With the constant banter in Frank’s mind from his grandmother and father, Frank continuously questions his own strength
and risks his life in order to prove his strength. Clearly, Frank breaks economic stereotypes as he expects the least despite his family’s monetary value.

Furthermore, at his time of highest doubt and highest need for strength, Frank remembers his grandmother’s slander and his father’s doubt. With uncertainty, Frank doubts himself, thinking, “No, I’m only a centurion. Frank’s mind was sluggish. He didn’t understand what Nico was saying. Promote him. How?” (Hades 508). Breaking racial and economic stereotypes, Frank was challenged with working hard and reaching his full potential on his own. In a flash of emergency, Frank is promoted to praetorship of the Twelfth Legion Fulminata, granting him the powers to command the legion and save his friends. Instantly, after all the reluctance and uncertainty, Frank’s feelings are described: “Frank felt as if a door had opened somewhere in the House of Hades...The arrow in his arm suddenly didn’t matter. His thoughts cleared. His eyesight sharpened. The voices of Mars and Ares spoke in his mind, strong and unified: Break them!” (Hades 508). Given the opportunity to succeed, Frank seized the moment, and was able to unleash his full potential through the ghost legion that assisted his friends in winning the battle against the monsters unleashed from Tartarus. Through the hard work and ability that is within him, Frank not only breaks racial and economic stereotypes, but additionally proves that hard work and perseverance truly define a person’s potential.

Although the protagonist Frank Zhang exhibits a character that breaks racial and economic stereotypes, he does exemplify stereotypic characteristics when dealing with cultural expectations. Initially, an article on a study of the role of superstitions and death beliefs among the Chinese states, “Past research has shown that traditional Chinese death beliefs, which mostly consisted of superstitious thoughts, are related to death anxiety” (Wong 55). In accordance with the article, Frank’s character revolves around Grandmother Zhang’s warning to Frank of his imminent death. She explained, “A woman appeared at the fire [...] Before the goddess disappeared, she pointed at the fire and said, ‘But the Fates have decreed he will also be the most vulnerable. His life will burn bright and short. As soon as that piece of tinder is consumed--that
stick at the edge of the fire -- your son is destined to die’ [...] That is the very stick. The goddess disappeared, and I snatched the wood from the fire immediately” (Son of Neptune 123).

Receiving the warning from a goddess, Frank’s grandmother passed the warning onto him, allowing him to decide whether or not to carry the burden. With his innate Chinese superstition, Frank keeps hold of the firewood and feels the weight it bears when he doubts himself the most. At the beginning of Son of Neptune when Frank still has yet to prove himself as a warrior, he holds the firewood close to him and ponders, “Through it all, he’d kept the half-burned piece of firewood wrapped in a cloth in his coat pocket. ‘Keep it close,’ his grandmother had warned. ‘As long as it is safe, you are safe’” (104). Frank constantly contemplates the worth of his life as his fate rests in the survival of a stick. Without a doubt, Frank demonstrates cultural stereotypes through his superstition and belief in his inevitable death.

Finally, in addition to exemplifying cultural stereotypes, Frank utilizes his superstition to conquer his fear of trust, and ultimately reach his full potential. In the third addition to the series, Mark of Athena, another protagonist, Hazel daughter of Pluto, is trusted with Frank’s weakness. After explaining the story of the firewood to his girlfriend, Frank trusts the firewood to Hazel and her care. Constantly protecting Frank, Hazel defends him when talking to Leo, son of Hephaestus, “Go easy on him, you and your fireballs make Frank nervous” (Mark of Athena 260). After all the time of being described as weak and having personal doubts, Frank finally finds himself able to trust another with his fate. Truly, aside from the physical tasks to save his friends, Frank deals himself the ultimate challenge of trusting another with his life. Through this, Frank Zhang is able to prove himself worthy of others’ trust, and is able to convey not only the potential of his sword, but also his heart.

In conclusion, Frank Zhang, the son of Mars, demonstrates a true breaking of racial and economic stereotypes. Through his lack of innate talent to lead, unapparent presence of monetary wealth, and selflessness towards his friends, Frank embodies a character that almost completely diverges from Chinese stereotypes. Additionally, Riordan exemplifies the true meaning of a hero
through Frank’s many trials with adversity. However, Frank also depicts a character that renders accordant with cultural stereotypes through superstition and his belief in his imminent death. Ultimately, through Frank Zhang, author Rick Riordan exhibits that an individual’s worth and potential should not be predetermined by the judgment of others, but rather, by the hard work of hand and truth of heart.
Works Cited


