Gene Luen Yang on Iconography, Cultural Conflict, and his New Graphic Novel, *Boxers and Saints*

Robert Rozema

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm

Recommended Citation


Language Arts Journal of Michigan: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1976

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
INTERVIEW

Gene Luen Yang on Iconography, Cultural Conflict, and his New Graphic Novel, *Boxers and Saints*

ROBERT ROZEMA, LAJM EDITOR

*Gene Luen Yang is the award-winning author of American Born Chinese and an advocate for comics in the classroom. This past spring, we spoke on the phone about his newest two-volume work, Boxers and Saints (reviewed on p. 50).*

RR: Given your long-standing interest in using comics in education, I’m wondering if you conceived of your new work *Boxers and Saints* as deliberately educational. I certainly don’t remember much about the Boxer Movement from my high school or college education.

GY: I don’t either. Generally, it’s given about a paragraph in your average American textbook, and maybe rightly so. Historically, it seemed more like a precursor to the wars of the twentieth century than anything else. But I know that in Asia, in China especially, the Boxer Rebellion still has a lot of resonance, even to this day. It still influences Chinese foreign policy. What they would consider the humiliation of the Boxer Rebellion still influences Chinese foreign policy.

Even the Olympics were connected. The Chinese kind of became obsessed with the Olympics in the early 1900s. They whole idea came from Christian missionaries, who sold the idea that national power came from athletic power, came from personal, physical power. A lot of Chinese in the early part really wanted first, to be a major force in the Olympics; and second, to be able to host it. They felt like once they were able to do that, they could finally say they were on equal footing with the Westerners.

That’s why there has always been this huge push to get to host the Olympics in China. And a lot of that also was in response not just to the Boxer Rebellion, but to everything China went through in the 1800s. At the beginning of the 1800s, they considered themselves the world power. By the time the 1800s were over, they were completely weakened and decimated. So, the Boxer Rebellions was like the ultimate slap in the face for them.

RR: I think *Boxers and Saints* would make a pretty interesting addition to a high school or college course in world history. Do you have any kinds of intentions for that?

GY: For all my books, my primary intention is to tell a story that will get the reader to stick with the book from beginning to end. I tend to be naturally very didactic just because I’m a teacher, and I’m also an older brother. I like telling people what to do. Just naturally tell people what to do. I feel like if I start with that in mind, my books would come across as way too preachy. So I try to make it so that I’m just focused on telling a good story. The educational will come out naturally.

RR: You describe yourself as naturally didactic, but as I read through *Boxers and Saints* and your other works, I feel that you are very even-handed. You’re not preachy. You are not taking the side of Bao or Fourgirl. You are presenting them quite neutrally. Was that hard to do? To create two protagonists who are both equally sympathetic?

GY: I’m really glad you felt that way about the book. I wasn’t sure it would come across that way. I think I wanted to do the two books primarily because I had a hard time deciding which side I sympathized with more. And that was really the genesis of the project. I became fascinated with the Boxer Rebellion, and in studying it, I just couldn’t decide where my sympathies lay. I guess it was hard. But the difficulty came more from trying to translate the ambivalence I was feeling inside myself onto the page.

I grew up in a Chinese Catholic church. In the year 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized this group of Chinese Catholics. It was the very first time that Chinese citizens had been honored by the Roman Catholic Church —by this very deeply Western church. At my home church, they had all these celebrations. It was really a big deal. There was food, and music, and all sorts of stuff.

I looked into the lives of a lot of these canonized folks, and a lot of them—not all of them—were martyred during the Boxer Rebellion. And when the Pope canonized them, the Chinese government issued a protest because from their view, the church was actually honoring folks who had betrayed their own country and their own culture. So that’s sort
of the genesis of the project. I was looking at these canonized saints and feeling a sense of ambivalence about them.

And also ambivalence about the Boxers. They were poor and illiterate, and in a lot of ways I feel like they were kind of the late 1800s day equivalent of modern day geeks. Powerless kids who really had no position in life, no hope in life. So where do they turn? They turn to their pop culture. They turn to stories. And there were stories about heroes and magic and super powers and colorful clothing. And then they almost cosplayed. They wanted to be these gods so badly they came up with this ritual, where they believed they would be possessed by them, get their powers. So there’s a lot about them that I personally am able to connect with. But then at the same time, they were killers and terrorists. They killed innocent women and children over issues of faith.

RR: When I started reading Boxers, I was comparing it to Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, when the missionaries invade and destroy the Igbo culture. In Boxers, you drew the Father Bey character to look mean. He is a zealot, but he turns out in the end not to be all that bad. I thought was an interesting character.

GY: I’m glad that came across too. I was worried about that character especially. He’s based on missionaries that I encountered in research—he’s not a historical character, of course. When these Catholic missionaries went into China, it wasn’t like they were racist. They were the opposite of racist. They almost idealized the Chinese when they went in. They didn’t expect to find normal human flaws within Chinese people when they went in. That’s kind of what I wanted Father Bey to be like.

RR: As a Protestant, I tend to characterize Catholic missionaries as more willing to concede to some of the local mythology, the local beliefs, and work them into their theology. More so than Protestant evangelical Christians, who were more of the destroy-the-ids type.

GY: There’s an incident within Catholic history in China called the Chinese Rites Controversy. It was a debate within the Catholic church between the orders of missionaries about whether or not it was okay to Christianize the indigenous Chinese ancestor rituals. I think it was Franciscans v. Jesuits, and the Jesuits believed that you should—you should enunciate the gospel, and so the Chinese ancestor rites could be Christianized. The Franciscans believed that you couldn’t. In the beginning at least, the Franciscans won. The ancestor rites were considered incompatible with the Catholic faith.

And then a century or two later, they reversed that decision. At the turn of the century, the Catholic priests were still mostly Franciscan, which is what Father Bey is. He did go around smashing idols, and it was a big deal for the Chinese. It was a real affront to their culture at the time.

RR: Approaching some of your other works through that kind of split—between Christianizing existing belief systems and not doing that—one thing that strikes me about American Born Chinese is the way you have blended Christian religion and Chinese mythology. We even have the Monkey King witnessing the birth of Christ.

GY: I thought a lot about that. I wanted the Monkey King story within American Born Chinese. I wanted it to provide a mythological foundation for everything else that comes afterwards. And because it’s about the Asian-American experience, I really wanted that mythology foundation to reflect both East and West. That’s why I added the Christian elements in there.

The second thing is that in college, I noticed that a lot of my Asian-American friends were converting to Christianity. Some became mainland Protestants and some became Catholics. But it seemed like a trend at my college, and I always wondered why that was, especially if you look at the history of Christianity in Asia. Just 100 years ago, you were seen as betraying your family and your culture by doing something like that.

Part of the appeal of Christianity is embodied by Psalm 139, which talks about God having an intention. I think for outsiders in general, for people who in general have a hard time finding a place in the world, this idea of intention—this idea that there’s this divine will that wants you to be who you are—that intended for you to be who you are, is a really powerful one.

As for the Monkey King being at the nativity, I looked at the nativity narrative and the wise men. Normally, there are three of them because there are three gifts, though within the text itself there aren’t many details about that. We don’t know if they’re magicians, or wise men, or kings. We don’t know how many there were. There could have been 3; there could have been 70; there could have been 12. There are competing traditions about who they were and what part of the world they were from. From a narrative standpoint, the author allows the reader, regardless of where the reader was coming from, to enter into the narrative. You can imagine that those wise people—we don’t even know their gender—those wise people are from wherever you’re from. It seemed like there was a narrative device there.

RR: Your drawings are iconic in a couple of ways. First, in the sense that Scott McCloud talks about—in their simple,
universal quality. But there’s also a lot of iconography in your subject matter. Is Catholic iconography an influence on the way that you conceive not only of your subject matter, but also in the way the choices that you make as an artist?

**GY:** It is almost unconscious—it just comes from growing up Catholic. The visual arts are very important within Catholicism. They are the way one generation passes on the faith to another. There is even a connection between comics and Catholicism. Modern comics can trace their roots back to the illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages. They can find precedence in the Stations of the Cross—a prototype for a comic strip. I also think that the simplicity of the icon lets it represent the most essential thing. And I think I try to do that with cartooning as well. I think many of the greatest cartoonists are essentialists, able to capture the essence of something in just a few strokes.

**RR:** You said with *Boxers and Saints* you were translating the ambivalence that you felt inside. Your works are certainly characterized by themes of cultural conflict and assimilation. Is the comics medium uniquely suited to express that kind of conflict?

**GY:** What fascinates me is this idea of a dual nature: good and evil, two different cultures, two different identities. The most dominant comics genre in America was, for decades, the superhero comic. Superheroes are all about dual nature, about double identity, and about negotiating between two different identities. Beyond that, comics itself has a dual nature, because it combines two different media, still pictures with words. And it sort of sits in between. The words act like pictures, the pictures act like words. Comics itself has an ambivalence: it doesn’t really know. A series of panels doesn’t know if it’s a portrait that should be hung on a wall, or if it’s a piece of text that should be read and interpreted. It sort of sits in between. That’s really fascinating to me.

**RR:** *American Born Chinese* is already taught in a lot of schools. *Maus* is taught all over the place—in high school and college courses. Even works like Satrapi’s *Persepolis* are now finding their way into high school English classes. When you see this success, do you feel like the comics medium has arrived, in a way, in terms of education?

**GY:** I think it’s arriving. There are still teachers who are a little bit ambivalent about bringing comics into their classrooms. But it definitely isn’t the way it was in the 1950s, where comics were seen as the bane of reading. It’s been a really interesting shift, even from when I was growing up until now. Just look at your local library. When I was a kid, there were almost no comics at our library. Now, most libraries have a graphic novel section, and a lot of libraries have multiple graphic novel sections. They have one for the kids, one for teens, and one for adults. As a comic book fan, it’s been amazing.
RR: I was reading your blog and I wanted to get you to elaborate on something that you wrote there: “Pop culture isn’t frivolous; it’s empowering. When people feel powerless, they look for power in the stories that surround them . . . And sometimes, there are global consequences. It’s important to tell good stories.” What good stories are being told in popular culture right now?

GY: This could be because I’m blinded by a childhood love of the medium, but I do really appreciate a lot of the superhero comics that are out there. Actually, I wouldn’t even say superhero comics—I’d say superhero stories. My kids, for instance, love the Justice League and Batman, the Brave and the Bold. And at the root of almost every single one of those stories is the sacrifice of the self for the sake of the other. Like Batman—sometimes he’s portrayed as mentally deranged. But in the more positive portrayals of him, what’s at root is that he sacrifices his own time, he puts his own body in danger so that no one else will have to experience the pain that he experienced when he was young. And almost every superhero has that pattern: Superman is the most powerful being on earth, and he could be the ruler of the planet if he wanted to, but instead he humbles himself and sacrifices himself for the sake of the other. That’s an example of something that’s really incredibly popular, and also at root expresses something very deep about human beings, about the meaning of life.

In terms of comics, there are tons of comics that I love. Usagi Yojimbo I really love. It deals a lot with themes of honor and strength vs. weakness, and what it means to keep your promises. My son is really into Sidekicks by Dan Zantaff, which is about these pets that are also superheroes on the side. I’ve been reading Fables, which is much more adult, but I’ve really been enjoying that too.

RR: And then there’s this Avatar series.

GY: The Avatar series is great. It’s that same thing. I think Aang really embodies a lot of the struggles that we go through in the modern world. He has the struggle of duty vs. fun, what he loves. He has the struggle between the individual vs. the group. One of my favorite episodes in the Avatar series is called “The Guru.” Aang meets this guru who teaches him how to unlock his avatar powers. Basically, he goes on this path of self-fulfillment. Self-enlightenment. And at the very end, he’s presented with this choice: do you want to take the final step of fulfilling yourself, of achieving your own potential, or do you want to save your friends? Aang doesn’t want to give up his relationships. So, that whole series deals with tensions between Eastern and Western values, between modern and traditional values. And it deals with it in a really smart way.

RR: Could you talk about collaborating with another artist? What is the difference between just writing and drawing and writing?

GY: They both have their benefits. I really like doing stuff on my own. Maybe because I’m a control freak. But when I write and draw something myself, I feel like I have full control over it. I can just worry about getting my vision onto the paper and trying to communicate my vision clearly. Collaborating—often it’s a real learning experience for me. I get to see how other people approach a story and storytelling. In those instances, it’s less about me trying to communicate my own vision, and more about expressing something within the friendship. Or allowing a piece of the friendship to express itself. When I’m working on my own thing, I try, as much as possible, to get what’s in my head onto the paper. When I’m collaborating with someone else, it’s more like I have something in my head, but I’m interested in seeing what my collaborators have in their heads.

And that’s where the fun is. The final project is a little bit more free, I guess, to become something different. I definitely feel that way about Level Up. Level Up did not turn out the way I pictured. But it’s something different and maybe better because it’s two people’s sensibilities combining on paper. With the Avatar books, I’m really not trying to express my own vision at all—I’m really trying to stay as true as I can to the original source material. And it’s been a real learning experience.

RR: Would you ever think about adapting a classic literary text? You’ve seen many adaptations of literary classics, I’m sure. Would you consider doing something like that, and if so, which work or works?

GY: In the beginning, maybe five or ten years ago, I was totally against that idea. I had never seen a Classics Illustrated well done. I grew up with those Classics Illustrated. They were always terrible. Even when Eclipse Comics was getting these really high-end artists and writers to adapt, the comics still lost something. There was still something that was lost in the translation. So I just thought it couldn’t be done.

But I have changed my mind. There’s an adaptation of Hamlet done by Neil Babra. He did it for SparkNotes, of all people, but I think it’s a really well done adaptation. And I haven’t read it yet, but I heard really good things about the Wrinkle in Time adaptation that’s been circulating around lately, that’s been getting a lot of buzz. So, that has made me more open to it.
I’d say that a good adaptation shouldn’t just be about making the original work more accessible; it should have merit in and of itself. It’s almost like a good movie adaptation. It can take its roots in the original work, but it really ought to be something new as well. The one that pops to mind is one of my favorite books of all time, and it sort of sits in my wheelhouse of themes—Silence by Endo. He’s a Japanese writer, and he was a Japanese Catholic. He wrote a lot about the coming together of East and West. Silence is about this European Jesuit who discovers that one of his mentors went to Japan as a missionary and abandoned the faith and took a Japanese wife. He can’t believe it. So he goes to Japan to look for him at a time when there’s a lot of religious persecution in Japan. It’s a great book, a brilliant book. I love that book so much, I don’t know if I’d be able to do it justice.

Works by Gene Luen Yang

Animal Crackers: A Gene Luen Yang Collection (SLG Publishing, 2010) features two of Yang’s earliest graphic works—Gordon Yamamota and the King of the Geeks and Loyola Chin and the San Peligran Order. Both focus on Asian-American teenagers who are unwilling hosts to aliens intent on remaking the world. Like many of Yang’s works that followed, these two graphic novels are whimsical in tone but metaphysical in intent.

American Born Chinese (First Second, 2006) is the critically acclaimed story of a Chinese American teenager coming to grips with his culture. Deftly interwoven with Chinese mythology, this graphic novel confronts issues of racial stereotyping and cultural assimilation and is increasingly taught in middle and high school settings.

The Eternal Smile (First Second, 2009) collects three stories written by Yang and illustrated by Derek Kirk Kim. Kim’s visual style is more complex and less endearing than Yang’s, but the stories hang together around themes of loneliness and cultural conflict.

Prime Baby (First Second, 2010) may be the quirkiest of Yang’s graphic novels. A one-time math teacher, Yang returns to his roots with an imaginative story of a baby who is born knowing math—and the older brother who discovers why.

Level Up (First Second, 2011) is another collaboration, this time between Yang and the illustrator Thien Pham. Level Up tells the story of Dennis Ouyang, an Asian-American teenager who must choose between his love of video games and the medical career his parents want him to pursue.

Knock Knock, Neo

Even when you are the One, you still have to listen to Trinity. You still have to choose to follow the white rabbit, to swallow the red pill over the blue to wake up in the real world.

You have to let your eyes ache from using them for the first time to push your way out of your pod and to be disconnected from all that seemed and all that was real.

You have to ponder what the Oracle says and doesn’t say about you; you have to learn that if there is no spoon, there aren’t any bullets, either.

Facing the Agent who has come to destroy you, you have to grin at him and beckon him toward you with your own hand, just so you can kick his glasses off, after which both of you will see much more clearly who you really are.

But none of this will be possible if you don’t let Trinity love you, even when you are the One.

Brian White

Brian White is a Professor of English at Grand Valley State University. He would never have written this poem about a superhero if it hadn’t been for his children, who forced him to watch The Matrix with them.