The “Asian Invasion”: An Interview with Gene Luen Yang

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Gene Luen Yang in Conversation with Marek Oziewicz
and Emily Midkiff

Since 1941 the University of Minnesota has been hosting Book Week: an annual celebration of children’s books and authors. One of the oldest ongoing literary events of this type in the country, Book Week draws the audience of teachers, librarians, and students to hear a keynote address by a featured author or illustrator. The event is sponsored by the College of Education and Human Development and by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. The 2013 Book Week hosted the award-winning Asian-American cartoonist and author Gene Luen Yang.

Gene has been drawing comics since fifth grade. Ten years after the publication of his first work, he was catapulted to national fame when his *American Born Chinese* (2006) broke new ground becoming the first graphic novel to be nominated for a National Book Award and the first to win the Printz Award for excellence in young adult literature. *American Born Chinese* and another of Gene’s books, *The Eternal Smile*, both won Eisner Awards for best graphic novels. Gene’s most recent publications—companion volumes *Saints* and *Boxers*—were finalists for the National Book Award. These companion books are set at the time of Chinese Boxers Uprising in 1899–1901 and offer a glimpse into the complexity of the political turmoil of the time as experienced by two adolescent protagonists swept into the opposite sides of the conflict. Through killing and dying, both of them struggle to achieve selfhood in extremely trying circumstances of cultural and religious clash. Gene is also the author of the script for a comics continuation of Nickelodeon’s *Avatar: The Last Airbender* series. He teaches creative writing for Hameline University’s MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults.

Gene lives in California with his wife and four children, but travels whenever he has a chance to advocate the use of comics and graphic
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novels in education—even at the risk of being tarred, feathered, and shipped back as cargo. An affable person whose smile lights up everything around him, Gene won the minds and hearts of the audience at the University of Minnesota’s Book Week through his passion for graphic formats and his understanding of the potential they have for engaging young readers. The full video recording of Gene’s talk is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-e9KM0RelQ&feature=youtu.be. The following interview includes questions asked during the conversation on stage, incorporates some of Gene’s answers to questions that were asked by the audience, and accommodates our follow-up communication through email.

MO & EM: What kind of child were you? Were you a good student?

GLY: (laughs) I was... a cookie-cutter geek and I wasn’t awesome at school. My brother was the guy, the kid who got straight A’s, and he’s now a medical doctor, which makes sense. But I was a cookie-cutter geek, so I basically collected, read, and made comics. One thing I clearly recall from when I was a kid, is that I really wanted to work for Disney. That was my dream when I was in third grade or so. In fact, I was kind of obsessed about Disney and reading as many books as I could about him. I remember looking up in an encyclopedia when Disney died. I was really hoping it would match my birth date because that would mean I could be his reincarnation. But then, as I got older, I realized that animation is so labor intensive that you really need a team to produce an animated movie. Very few people actually have direct control over the story and I would find it hard to believe that I would be able to express anything of myself within a corporate environment like that.

MO & EM: Looking back at what other dreams and aspirations shaped you as an artist, we wonder if your parents exposed you to traditional Chinese stories and folklore or is this something you discovered on your own?

GLY: It was both, in fact. On the one hand, even before I could read, my mother would read to me out of Chinese language storybooks and that’s where I learned about the Monkey King and a lot of these other Chinese myths. On the other hand, when I started reading myself, I wasn’t able to find a lot of those stories in English. So I loved Beverly Cleary and Lloyd Alexander, and this author named Clifford Hicks, who nobody remembers anymore, but who used to have this series called Alvin Fernald, which for some reason has fallen out of favor. But when I was a kid I loved those books. But I do remember being around, um, fifth and sixth grade and going to the library and seeing how back then the library didn’t have a YA section. Back then,
the library just jumped from J straight to Adult and I remember going and thinking that there is nothing really for me there. That is part of the reason why I switched over to comics.

**MO and EM:** One thing you said during your talk was that the graphic novel is a marketing term: a way of separating the medium of comics from the genres that had dominated it for so long—that is superheroes and funny animals. Can you unpack this statement a bit?

**GLY:** A few decades ago, comics legend Will Eisner put together a collection of realistic fiction stories about a Jewish neighborhood in New York, done in the comics form. When he approached publishers and called this new book of his a comic, nobody was interested. When he called it a graphic novel, he was able to find a publisher. It’s now available under the title *A Contract with God*, and it is known as a graphic novel even though it’s really a collection of short stories.

From the beginning, the term “graphic novel” was an attempt to separate the medium of comics from the genres that had dominated for decades in America: superheroes and funny animals. It’s a klutzy term. Many books we refer to as graphic novels are not novels at all. Joe Sacco’s graphic novels are nonfiction, Lynda Barry’s are short story collections. . . . But the term has done its job. It’s made a category in people’s minds for comic books that deal with more literary topics.

**MO and EM:** Another important thing you said was about comics and graphic novels as a subversive and multicultural medium. We were intrigued by the term “Asian Invasion” you used . . .

**GLY:** I don’t have hard numbers to back this up, but it seems to me that Asian Americans are better represented in American comics than in any other American entertainment industry. If you ask any American comics fan for their ten favorite creators, chances are that at least one of them is an Asian American.

This is something I discuss with many of my cartoonist friends, usually after a comics convention, and usually after a couple of beers. We’ve come up with a number of theories. Maybe Asian Americans are drawn to comics because of the way they combine image and text. In contrast to traditional European art, traditional Asian art always incorporates both visual and textual elements. A Chinese brush painting, for example, isn’t considered complete until it’s paired up with a poem. And the entire work isn’t considered masterful unless both elements are masterful.
Another theory comes from the origins of the comic book. Many of the early comic book greats were poor Jewish teenagers. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, creators of the Fantastic Four and the Avengers, were both Jewish. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, creators of Superman, were both Jewish. Harvey Kurtzman, one of the founders of *Mad Magazine*, was Jewish. They were outsiders, but they were able to make a name for themselves in comics because there were so few gatekeepers. So from the beginning, comics were an outsider medium, and maybe that’s why Asian Americans find comics so welcoming.

This “outsider medium” perspective, by the way, may also explain why there are increasingly more women authors. When I started going to comic book conventions in the eighties and nineties, it was almost all guys. The women who were there were basically staff or publishers’ employees. And all the participants were just men. But nowadays, if you go to a comic book convention, it’s pretty evenly split. And if you look at the cartoonists who are thirty and under, it’s pretty even too. There are just as many female cartoonists as there are male cartoonists. A lot of that seems to be a historical accident, in fact. From what I read of the 1940s, there were a decent number of American girl comic book readers. There were genres targeted at girls and there were also genres that appealed to both genders. And then, probably after the attack on comics spearheaded by Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), which listed comic books as a cause of juvenile delinquency, a lot of those other genres died off. American superheroes became the dominant genre and superheroes are basically just adolescent male power fantasies. Because of the way women are portrayed in a lot of those superhero comics, girl readers were simply put off. Now, in Japan it’s been completely different. Largely because of the work of one guy, Osama Tezuka, the god of manga, comics in Japan are read by both genders and by all age demographics. Tezuka actually focused on lots of different genres and targeted a lot of different age groups. So he had comics for boys and comics for girls, comics for adults, and comics for kids. And because of that, the manga readership is pretty evenly split between males and females. I think one reason why we’re seeing this shift from this boy’s club that American comics had traditionally been to this more diverse set of readers is because of the popularity of Japanese comics. If you look at those female cartoonists who are thirty and under, many of them draw in a Japanese-influenced style. This trend will likely continue, but even now we have a number of young different female cartoonists who are prominent: Kate Beaton, Vera Brosgol, Jen Wang, Eleanor Davis, and Jessy Fink. Their works are amazing in how they blend genres and conventions and their appeal is really wide.
MO and EM: Thinking about *Saints* and *Boxers*, we find it a curious serendipity that your visit at the University of Minnesota happened just weeks after the release of your *Saints* and *Boxers* and just weeks after the university began celebrating its one hundredth anniversary of engagement with China, for it was exactly a hundred years ago when the university admitted its first three Chinese students. The link between your two new graphic novels and the arrival of Chinese students in Minnesota is the Boxer Rebellion. Specifically, the events you describe in *Saints* and *Boxers*—the largest and the longest uprising of the Chinese against colonial exploitation—allowed the eight colonial powers to force the Chinese government to agree to pay astronomical indemnities, and the payment of these made the U.S. government realize that the indemnities were not just more than the U.S. demanded but were, in short, outrageous. As a result, in 1906 President Theodore Roosevelt approved of diverting these surplus funds into a scholarship program that would pay for Chinese high school graduates to study in the U.S. And it was that program, known as the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program, that brought the first Chinese students to the University of Minnesota. Their presence here at that time offers a glimpse on interconnectedness that also happened tonight, as we heard you speak about *Boxers* and *Saints*.

GLY: Last October, I had visited Taiwan. I got the opportunity to meet Ma Ying-Jeou, the president of Taiwan. When I told him about my upcoming pair of graphic novels about the Boxer Rebellion, he replied that there was a silver lining to the dark, dark cloud of that particular war. Many of Taiwan’s early leaders received Western educations because of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program. While the Americans did not always act honorably during that time period, he admired their foresight in this one particular instance.

MO and EM: It was amazing for us to discover much factual, historical information you included in *Saints* and *Boxers*. In *Boxers*, for example, there is a character called Red Lantern Zhu who was a historical personage: a Robin Hood of the Shandong Province and a leader of one of the secret societies that predated the Boxers. Also, the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fist did exist, the brutal colonization of China was a fact, and so too was the burning of the famous Hanlin academy. Also the fact that some Chinese criminals would convert to Christianity to enjoy the “exterritorial” status that protected foreign settlers and take advantage of legal immunity from local Chinese courts—something you wove into the fabric of *Saints*—is supported by historical evidence. It’s obvious that you do research for your books. Do you see *Boxers* and *Saints* as historical fiction, perhaps with a potential for education?
GLY: Yeah, they’re definitely historical fiction. At the same time, I really had a debate in my head about how closely I wanted to stay with history. So I ended up having to take these dramatic licenses, just for storytelling’s sake. And I have had historians already call me on some of that stuff (laughs).

What I would hope is that reading *Boxers* and *Saints* would inspire people to actually look closer into the actual historical event. And it would be amazing if they were used in classrooms. Writing these books was certainly a great way to learn for me too. Before I started on this project, I knew very little about the Boxer Rebellion. I think I was like most Americans: I vaguely remembered hearing about it in high school history. The Boxer Rebellion has really been overshadowed by the two world wars that came after it and for good reason— I mean, they’re world wars. Nevertheless, a lot of people would argue that the Boxer Rebellion was a foreshadowing for the world wars. It was the first time that there was a global conflict that involved both Eastern and Western nations. It was the first war in the age of media, the first conflict that people were following in their newspapers. So in a lot of ways I think it sets the stage for the world wars. The second thing is that even though we don’t look at it very much in American history, in Chinese history the Boxer Rebellion and the events that preceded it and followed it still very much weigh on people’s minds. It does help you to realize that people in China are still very cognizant of the Boxer Rebellion. Collectively, all those events are considered China’s century of humiliation. And I really think that Chinese foreign policy, the way China sees itself in the world, is very effected by this century of humiliation.

MO & EM: This is, indeed, a perspective that most Western people are unaware of, even though we had a similar precedent with the abysmal Versailles Treaty that ended World War I and, in fact, precipitated the rise of fascism and World War II. Like the Versailles Treaty was an attempt to both humiliate and financially exploit Germany, so too the “Boxer Protocol” was a very similar means to humble and exploit China. Both agreements were forced, widely condemned in much of contemporary public opinion, and eventually backfired on those who imposed them. Looking at these specific cases, it seems we tend to come up with solutions that are even worse than the problem we are trying to solve. Is this also the case for your characters in *Boxers* and *Saints*? For example, anyone who has read these books knows they are dark and gruesome. There’s heartbreaking violence that affects the lives of these young protagonists: they are part of it, as victims, perpetrators, part of it all. One question you were asked from the audience is what it was like to write these books, knowing you were working with this historic material. Can you talk a little bit about that?
GLY: Yeah, I made a choice early on to make this my most violent book. As part of my research I got the opportunity to go to a Jesuit archive in France, where they have all these letters and photos sent back to France by French missionaries to China. Now, I couldn’t read any of the letters because they were written in French, but the photos that I gathered there served as the basis for my visual reference when I was doing this book. And to be honest I was just . . . shocked by the kinds of photos I saw. You know, they have photos of incredibly violent acts. For instance, there are photos of beheadings where the head was actually midway in the air between the body and the ground. And if you think about camera technology back then, you really had to set it up and you really had to want to get that shot. . . . There are dozens and dozens of photos like this. There were also dozens of Europeans committing atrocities against the Chinese and countless Chinese committing atrocities against each other. So pretty early on I realized that if I wanted to be true to the time period, I had to include at least some of that violence in this book. It was just part of the fabric of that time. I think that working on these two books was actually very depressing for me. I outlined the two books together and then I wrote Boxers. While drawing Boxers, I was writing Saints, but after I finished Boxers, I just had to take a break. I had to get out of the Boxer Rebellion for a little while. That’s when I started working on The Shadow Hero, my current project. I just felt like I really needed a more hopeful story. The Shadow Hero actually has a relatively happy ending, and so after The Shadow Hero I felt I was refreshed enough to go back to Saints and I did finish it.

MO & EM: Where did your sympathy lie in these works? If you were inside the story would you choose to be a Boxer or a Saint?

GLY: (laughs) Well, the reason I did two books is because I couldn’t decide! Researching the Boxer Rebellion, in the beginning, I really honestly felt I was trying to choose a side. And I really couldn’t, you know? I grew up in a Chinese American Catholic community, so because of the faith tradition of my childhood, I really sympathized with the Chinese Christian side of things. At the same time, I also sympathized with the Boxers, with this yearning they had for empowerment in the stories that surrounded them, stories that were part of their own tradition. It really reminds me of modern day comic book, or modern day geek culture. So I really felt a deep connection there both ways.

MO & EM: Speaking about the format in which your stories are told: whether we call it a comic book or a graphic novel, what we have is a format where pictures and text combine to create a multilayered narrative, but also create
a challenge to understanding. For example, in *Boxers* you have episodes where human characters become sky gods. It takes some research to realize that one of the most distinctive features of the Boxers was that they believed in spirit possession; that through prayer, incantations, diet, and exercise they could actually draw gods into their own bodies. They also circulated stories that they can fly and in their god-forms are invulnerable to harm—a claim very similar to the belief some American Indians accepted less than a decade earlier, that their buckskin Ghost Dance shirts are impermeable to bullets. Thinking back about how you represented this belief in *Boxers*, we’re not sure if it could be done at all without pictures. . . . So we wonder if you can share your thoughts about the advantages of the comic and graphic novel over that of a traditional, text-only narrative.

**GLY:** We’re just beginning to tap the educational potential of comics. For a long time, teachers and librarians actively avoided comic books because they were seen as the enemy of “more serious” reading. These days, though, it’s the exact opposite. Educators are using comics to build a bridge between the stories our students watch and the stories our students read.

Of all the visual storytelling media—film, animation, television—comics is the only one that allows the audience to control the rate of information flow. The narrative unfolds as quickly or as slowly as the reader would like. If the reader doesn’t understand a passage, she can reread it over and over until she does. This is a huge advantage in educational settings.

**MO & EM:** Another recurring theme we saw in *Boxers* and *Saints* but also in your other books is that your characters are visited or guided or inspired by some supernatural beings, be it manga ghosts of past promises in *Level Up*, the Monkey King in *American Born Chinese*, angels and Joan of Arc in *Saints*, and Sky Gods in *Boxers*. Can you say something about the role of supernatural in your stories?

**GLY:** I’m really drawn to magical realism and I think that’s my favorite genre to write in. This might just come from being a comic book fan—in comics you say “Shazam!” and then you turn into a superhero. Regarding *Boxers* and *Saints*, the facts that I learned about the Boxer Rebellion gave me an easy way of introducing magical realism into the narrative. The Boxers themselves had mystical beliefs. They believed that when they did this mystical ritual they would be able to call the Chinese gods down from the skies, and these Chinese gods would give them superpowers. So, as I worked on the book, it became more integrated with those magical realist elements, more about an expression of how important stories are in our lives. The boxers wanted
to embody the heroes that they read about in these stories, and they felt empowered by the stories that surrounded them. I see the same dynamic in modern day geek culture. A lot of modern-day geeks, when we watch movies or read comic books, we want to become the heroes that we read about. I think that’s part of the impetus of things like cosplays, of dressing up like your favorite heroes. So this impetus that we see today in modern culture I was able to find reflections of in my historical narrative. I think that those boys in *Boxers*, powerless and helpless as they were, wanted to be empowered by the heroes of their stories.

**MO & EM:** There’s a tinge of essentialism in your writing too: a suggestion that there’s an essence to each and every one of us that we can’t change no matter how much we try. In *American Born Chinese* the Monkey King wants to be accepted by gods as their equal and as a human. He truly matures, though, when he recognizes who he is and what his duty is: he is a Monkey and he is meant to serve the monk Wong Lai-Tsao on his journey West. Likewise, Jin Wang, the protagonist of *American Born Chinese*, imagines himself as fair skinned and blonde Dennys so that he can be worthy of the white Amelia he has a crush on. These are all illusions: Jin really grows strong when he recognizes that he is Asian American and can draw on this legacy. This essentialism—an idea that there is some part of us that we cannot change, no matter how we try—runs counter to the modern American belief that we create our own destinies and are free to choose what we want to become. Is there a way to reconcile these two positions? Can you have both at the same time?

**GLY:** Maybe, I don’t know, maybe I’m a pessimist. Maybe that’s why. I have yet to write a story with a really purely happy ending. This idea of wanting to change yourself is something that all of us go through. All of us have gone through periods of our life when we really wished we were different, right? And then we try to change ourselves and we end up hitting these walls. I do think that part of growing up is figuring out what parts of yourself you can change and what parts of yourself you can’t. In this lies the balance you mention, because there’s also this other view that everything about me is unchangeable, which isn’t true either.

**MO & EM:** What would you say if a Hollywood producer approached you and asked for you to suggest one of your books to adapt into a movie. What title would you chose?

**GLY:** Oh man . . . (laughs) I did have a little bit of interest for *American Born Chinese* from a studio. I was super excited, but I was also very cautious. I
was very trepidatious about it because my biggest fear about that book is that I have this character named cousin Chin-Kee who is the embodiment of all the negative Asian, Chinese, and Asian American stereotypes I could think of. My big fear was that if it ever did get made into a movie, we would find little video clips of just that character decontextualized on YouTube. That would be horrifying to me. So I’ve always felt really protective about *American Born Chinese*, at least when it comes to putting it in other media. But if I had to choose I guess I would go for *Level Up*, which is a book I did with a friend of mine named Thein Pham. It is about this young man who loves video games and then gets visited by angels who tell him it’s his destiny to become a medical doctor. It’s very loosely inspired by my brother’s story. He loved video games and he is now a medical doctor.

**MO & EM:** How long does it take you to usually write a book?

**GLY:** *American Born Chinese* took me five years to write. *Boxers* and *Saints* took me six. . . . Writing really takes forever. I think comics have this way of eating your life. . . . You have to lose half your friends and all of your television in order to complete a comic or a graphic novel.

**MO & EM:** In your talk you did a great job of explaining yourself as an Asian American cartoonist, with a specific cultural background and interests. Do you think your stories speak specifically to Chinese Americans, or perhaps there’s a layer there that appeals to, say, pan-Asian or even any other immigrant or minority experiences?

**GLY:** The term “Asian American” is a social and political construct. What I mean is that the immigrants who came from Asia did not think of themselves as Asian Americans. They thought of themselves as Chinese Americans or Japanese Americans or Indian Americans or Hmong Americans. I think the construct of Asian American was created partially to gain political power as a larger group and partially because a lot of the racism that was there just didn’t distinguish between all these different groups. So if you talked to a Chinese American kid and a Hmong American kid, they were probably called the same names in school. It all comes out of this shared experience of adversity. For me, I generally refer to myself as an Asian American, even though my roots are Chinese. My parents came from China and Taiwan. The stories I grew up with are Chinese, so I think they are the easiest ones for me to draw from in my own work. But at the same time I think that if you look at all the different Asian cultures, many of them share common roots, be it in Buddhism or Confucianism. So on that level I think there is something
to be shared. For *American Born Chinese* specifically, what I’ve heard from people is it seems that immigrant kids in general, regardless of where their parents come from, are all able to find something in common with my story. I think there’s just something about growing up with one culture at home and another one at school, growing up feeling like you’re not completely a part of your surrounding culture, that appeals to such kids. That experience ties us all together.

**MO & EM:** It was a pleasure to talk to you, Gene. Thank you for taking time to visit the University of Minnesota and for answering these questions.

*Emily Midkiff focuses on children’s literature, visual storytelling media, archetypes, and speculative fiction. She is currently working on a Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota, where she is learning sociological research methods in order to study the way children read and understand through formats and genre. Her most recent publication is a chapter on the semiotic potential of fairy tales told through comics and graphic novels, co-authored with Orlando Dos Reis and included in New Fairy Tales: Essays and Stories, edited by John Patrick Pazdziora and Defne Cizakca (2013).*

*Marek Oziewicz is the Marguerite Henry Professor of Children’s and Young Adult Literature at The University of Minnesota Twin Cities. Marek believes in the power of stories to nurture empathy, the human potential, and understanding across cultures. He is the winner of the 2010 Mythopoeic Scholarship Award in Myth and Fantasy Studies for his book One Earth, One People (McFarland 2008) and he has served as the Chair of the International Committee for the Children’s Literature Association since 2011. Marek’s research includes speculative fiction and literature-based cognitive modeling for global citizenship, environmental awareness, and justice literacy.*