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THE BIRTH, DEATH, AND REBIRTH OF (ETHNIC) IDENTITY IN GENE LUEN YANG'S WORK

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Abstract: *Authored by Gene Luen Yang, American Born Chinese (2006) is one of the most critically-acclaimed multicultural graphic novels published in the mid-2000s. Due to the target readers' age, the majority of the characters that populate its pages are young middle-class Americans. If read from a non-ethnic perspective, Yang's graphic novel makes for an entertaining coming-of-age story in terms of not only plot but also disrupted structure. An ethnic reading, however, brings out its focus on issues pertaining to ethnicity, identity, and self-acceptance. By additionally looking at the comic through the prism of the literary trope of the birth, death, and rebirth cycle, readers, especially those of Asian descent, can open up even more interpretational space and possibilities. Yang's more recent work, including Level Up (2011) and The Shadow Hero (2014), the former of which was illustrated by Thien Pham and the latter by Sonny Liew, offers yet another take on the birth, death, and rebirth archetype, focusing on intergenerational differences and expectations of first- and second-generation Asian Americans. By the same token, New Super-Man Vol. 1: Made in China (2017) explores how the Superman archetype can be regenerated in a more diverse setting, namely China. The aim of this paper is to explore the metaphorical application of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in Yang's comics with regard to the main characters' evolving (ethnic) identities.*

Introduction

Cartoonist and National Ambassador for Young People's Literature Gene Luen Yang is one of the most prominent contemporary Asian American comics creators. His oeuvre has been the study of a number of scholarly works, including Jared Gardner's "Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim" (2010), Min Hyoung Song's "'How Good It Is to Be a Monkey': Comics, Racial Formation, and *American Born Chinese*" (2010), and Lan Dong's "Reimagining the Monkey King in Comics: Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*" (2011), all of which focus on the award-winning graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (2006). In this work, Yang explores the themes of ethnicity, identity, and self-acceptance, among others, making it an exemplary multicultural graphic novel and, as Ann Cong-Huyen and Caroline Kyungah Hong assert, a "productive ... [text] for Asian American and literary studies classrooms" (81). Apart from *American Born Chinese*, Yang has also authored *Level Up* (2011), *The Shadow Hero* (2014), and *New Super-Man Vol. 1: Made in China* (2017). They

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may all be explored through the birth, death, and rebirth cycle, which, as Christine Sanderson writes, “involves a struggle that leads of a new realization of self” (24).

American Born Chinese: The Monkey King, Christian Themes, and the Ethnic Self

American Born Chinese consists of three narrative strands that come together to create a bigger story. The first features the Monkey King, a character that has been the hero of countless (graphic) narratives authored by creators of Chinese descent, including Patricia Chao, Maxine Hong Kingston, Timothy Mo, and Ed Young. In Asian American literature, as Hongmei Sun writes, “the Monkey King’s stories take on new forms. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, for instance, uses the Monkey King as a trope to relate the story of a fifth-generation Chinese American, Wittman Ah Sing” (297). In essence, the Monkey King is “an icon of transformation representing mobility, hybridity, migration, and spiritual journey” and is an integral part of Asian American culture (Sun 297). In his work, Yang was eager to find a way to tell his own Monkey King story, one that would resonate with his experiences as an American of Asian descent:

And shortly after I started creating comics, I knew that I wanted to do an adaptation of his story in comics. The problem is that in China, the Monkey King is practically his own genre. He’s so popular that pretty much any comic-book creator who is worth his or her salt has taken a crack at the story. I couldn’t think of what new approach I could bring to the table. In the end, I decided on a more Asian American take on the story. (“Gene” 75)

The author’s high-school attempt at depicting the Monkey King was met with his mother’s critical yet thought-provoking appraisal. It helped him realize how relatable the Monkey King’s story might be to many Asian Americans, who, like the character of the Monkey King, find themselves on the periphery of U.S. culture and society:

In a high-school art class, I drew a picture of the Monkey King. When I showed it to my mom, she said, “You drew it wrong. The Monkey King always wears shoes.” I asked why, and she said, “Well, he doesn’t really want people to know he’s a monkey.” That feeling connected well with something that I think Asian Americans in particular, and maybe immigrants to America in general, struggle with. (Yang, “Gene” 75)

Despite being a deity, the Monkey King is denied entry to a dinner party in heaven on the grounds that he is not wearing shoes and, most importantly, that he is a monkey. Enraged, he makes use of his kung fu skills on the guard and all the goddesses, demons, and spirits, proving his strength to them. After the incident, he decides to forsake his monkey identity; he takes on a more human form and starts calling himself the Great Sage, Equal of Heaven, which symbolizes the death of his previous self. He seeks recognition among the gods, wreaking havoc on those that “need convincing” (Yang, *American* 66). His deeds, however, do not go unnoticed by the creator of all things, Tze-Yo-Tzuh, who buries him under a mountain of rock in order to help him embrace his true identity. After all, no matter how hard the Monkey

King tries, he was, is, and will always be a monkey. It takes him five centuries to understand this simple fact and to realize that only by returning to his monkey form will he regain his freedom. At this moment, the Monkey King is reborn and becomes a faithful emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzuh. Before setting out on his journey to the west, he takes off his shoes, which symbolizes his rebirth.

A parallel can be drawn between the story of the Monkey King and that of Jin Wang, the main character of the second and third storylines. Both feel left out and go to great lengths to obtain a sense of power and agency, which can be achieved by being among the privileged or part of the majority group, for instance. Jin, a second-generation Chinese American, spends the first nine years of his life in the vicinity of San Francisco's Chinatown, where he is among people that share his ethnic background. One Sunday, he learns that he can be whatever he wants to be when he grows up provided that he is "willing to forfeit ... [his] soul" (Yang, *American* 29). Hoping their child will become more American than Chinese, Jin's parents decide to move to the suburbs. Jin suddenly becomes an outsider. On his first day at school, he realizes how much he stands out from his classmates and how unaccepting of otherness his peers are. After a falling out with his only friend, Wei-Chen Sun, Jin abandons his ethnic self and becomes Danny, thereby distancing himself from his Chinese heritage. With time, however, he too realizes that his transformation was a mistake. With the help of the Monkey King, Jin becomes Jin again. He is born anew and reconnects with Wei-Chen, thereby reconnecting with his ethnic identity.

The birth, death, and rebirth cycle is present throughout *American Born Chinese*. The Monkey King is born a monkey, dies to become the Great Sage, and is reborn as an emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzuh. He accepts his fate with humility and devotes his life to serving He Who Is. Similarly, Jin is an American-born Chinese, dies to become Danny, and is reborn as a Chinese American. He realizes that he cannot disregard his Chinese heritage and that it is an integral part of his identity. Also, it is clear that his place in society is closer to the margins as opposed to the center, but he should accept this fact and embrace his ethnic identity if he is to save himself from his own "five hundred years' imprisonment beneath a mountain of rock" (Yang, *American* 223).

It should be pointed out that *American Born Chinese* is a highly intertextual graphic novel not only due to the fact that it features the character of the Monkey King, who may be seen as a metaphor for race, but also because it draws on Christian mythology (Cadden, "But You Are Still a Monkey"). Throughout the graphic novel, readers may witness the three Wise Men's visit to the Christ child and may recognize the similarities between the portrayal of the Christian God and Tze-Yo-Tzu. Striving to avoid writing about faith in a straightforward manner, Yang infused it with subtle references. In fact, much of his work contains covert religious themes, which "... [emerge naturally] when he writes about life" (Liao 48). According to Yang, "There's an underlying spirituality in every story we tell. ... For people who grow up in between cultures we often don't feel at home in either one[.] ... You can't find a home in either culture, so you find a home in the divine will" (qtd. Liao 48). By referring to his eastern and western heritage, Yang created a graphic novel that represents his experience of being Asian American and at the same time reinvents the character of the Monkey King through references to Christian themes.

Level Up and The Shadow Hero: Living the (Asian) American Dream

Level Up and *The Shadow Hero* may be read as immigrant and intergenerational narratives. The main characters, Dennis Ouyang and Hank Chu, are second-generation Asian Americans, which is of great importance to both graphic novels. In the former, Dennis is passionate about video games; however, his passion goes by the wayside due to his parents' expectations that he pursue an academic degree. Two weeks before graduating high school, Dennis is faced with the death of his father. To cope with his grief, he begins to play video games compulsively. Not surprisingly, the main character's reliance on the video game experience as a means to gain control over his life has a negative effect on his academic performance. Nevertheless, with the help of four angels, Dennis actually manages to get into medical school, which he soon quits to become a professional gamer. However, realizing that it brings only temporary happiness, Dennis decides to abandon gaming and eventually goes back to medical school, thereby returning to the path to fulfilling his destiny.

Dennis's journey to becoming a gastroenterology student is marked by moments of crisis, which can be defined as "momentous events and changes" that take place in the main character's life (Nünning 66). At the age of six, Dennis is greatly influenced by an old arcade game he sees at a Chinese restaurant. "From then on, I dreamed in pixels," he confesses (Yang, *Level Up* 7). The next crisis begins shortly after his father's passing. Dennis escapes from reality by immersing himself in the world of games, which interferes with his studies. Only thanks to the four angels does he get accepted into medical school. The angels are, in fact, his father's broken promises, one of which is that he will become a doctor. Since he became an engineer, Dennis's father has only one way of keeping his word: he has to make sure his son becomes a doctor. Dennis succumbs to his destiny and throws away his arcade tokens, a highly symbolic act representing his decision to give up the idea of pursuing his dreams. However, he soon decides to drop out after running into an old friend and seeing that he is living the gaming dream. Although everything seems to be falling into place, Dennis experiences yet another crisis. He gives away his Big Boy Electronics jacket and resumes his medical studies. This is when he levels up and is reborn.

The structure of Yang and Pham's graphic novel resembles the structure of a video game and can be read as an allusion to the birth, death, and rebirth cycle. Dennis is playing the game of life and has to complete a number of levels in order to win it. During his first attempt, the character dies multiple times, as represented metaphorically by three pixel images of his face that disappear as the story progresses. However, only by losing his video game lives can Dennis grow as a person and learn to achieve his full potential. When the first game comes to an end, he can finally start over. He is reborn and begins to forge his own identity. To achieve the latter, however, he must confront the expectations of his first-generation Asian American parents with his own dreams. On the one hand, Dennis feels the pressure to succeed. He is aware of the fact that his accomplishments are a measure of his immigrant parents' success and is reminded of the sacrifice they had to make in order to live the American dream.

However, by simply fulfilling his filial obligations, Dennis neglects his own identity and is likely to end up living an unhappy life. The key is to find a balance between his father's wish for him to become a doctor and his passion for video games, a balance which he eventually succeeds in achieving.

In *The Shadow Hero*, Yang reinvents the Green Turtle, the first Asian American superhero (Wang, "Was The Green Turtle The First Asian-American Superhero?"). As China is plunging into chaos, the Tortoise, one of the four spirits of China, sails to the United States in hope of finding someone worthy of the Mandate of Heaven. He approaches an intoxicated young man, and the two strike a deal: The Tortoise will help the man maintain sobriety in return for his body. Thanks to the Tortoise, Hank's father never drinks again. He works hard and becomes the owner of a relatively successful grocery store in Chinatown. He then marries Hua Chu, with whom he has a son, Hank. When Hank grows up, he wants to follow in his father's footsteps, but his mother has more ambitious plans for him; she tells her son to become a superhero. Hank does not want to let her down and becomes a vigilante despite his lack of special abilities. Due to an unfortunate turn of events, Hank's father is shot and dies. At this point, Hua wishes that her son return to the shop and lead a life free from danger, but Hank decides otherwise. When the Tortoise takes up residence in his body, Hank is reborn as the Green Turtle, his superpower being immunity to gunfire. He defeats the evil Ten Grand and helps put Mock Beak behind bars, earning the respect of Detective Lawful and the Anchor of Justice, who, in a gesture of unity, reveals his true alien form only to Hank.

Although his enemies are no longer a threat to him and his family, Hank continues to fight injustice. He is transformed into a superhero that does not quite fit in the American superhero landscape. He is in between two worlds, which many Asian Americans can relate to: "Every superhero has this superhero identity and a civilian identity[...] ... A lot of their lives are about code switching. It's about switching from one mode of expectations to another mode of expectations. And I really think that mirrors something in the immigrant's kid's life" (qtd. in Wang, "Was The Green Turtle The First Asian-American Superhero?"). While the Green Turtle may never be accepted by the majority population, Hank is not disheartened by this thought: "Maybe being a superhero would make me a part of them. Maybe it wouldn't. Either way it didn't matter, because the Green Turtle had already become a part of me" (Yang, *The Shadow Hero* 152).

Many parallels can be drawn between Dennis and Hank. For example, both of them are second-generation Asian Americans that later become half orphans. Also, they feel parental pressure to pursue a career path chosen *for* and not *by* them. However, they undergo major transformations and manage to find their place in the world. Finally, both of them save people's lives: Dennis in clinics, whereas Hank on the streets of San Francisco. Ultimately, they are reborn as better and stronger versions of their initial selves and manage to develop identities of their own.

Made in China: Super-Man Turns Chinese

The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is a major theme in North American comics, especially those belonging to the superhero genre. No matter how strong and

agile, superheroes have risen, fallen, and risen again both literally and metaphorically. The deaths and resurrections of popular characters, for example, Superman and Spider-Man, have served many purposes, including making them more relatable to younger generations of readers. In an attempt to bring new life into its superhero universe, DC Comics launched the New 52 and Rebirth initiatives in 2011 and 2016 respectively. The latter is, as Co-Publisher of DC Entertainment Dan DiDio said in 2016, “a ‘Rebirth’ on so many levels. It’s a rebirth of our characters, bringing them back to their core conceits. It’s about a new company that’s been in two portions for over five years coming together in one, single location now, with almost a new staff” (“DiDio & Lee”).

While Superman has been reinvented many times, Yang and his team of artists have given him a Chinese face. Following the presumed death of the American Superman, 17-year-old Kenan Kong becomes his Chinese counterpart. Critics of this idea view it as “affirmative action for superheroes” (Campbell, “DC Comics’ Chinese Superman”). Its supporters, on the other hand, perceive it as “a form of honesty and as a valuable creative investment” (Hudson, “It’s Time”). In a 2016 interview, Yang commented on DC Entertainment’s undertaking by referring to the cover of Detective Comics’ first issue, which featured a denigrating image of a Chinese villain: “For DC Comics to take their most iconic symbol, ... the Superman emblem, and put it on not a Chinese American character but a Chinese character is a way of both apologizing for that original image, and it’s also a way of showing how far we’ve come” (“DC Comics”).

Yang’s *New Super-Man* offers an intriguing iteration of Superman, the archetypal superhero. Prior to becoming China’s very own Super-Man, Kenan lives in Shanghai with his largely absent father, Zhongdan Kong, an auto mechanic by day and a conspiracy theorist by night. Believing in the existence of a secret government agency called the Ministry of Self-Reliance, Zhongdan is dedicated to exposing the truth and, as a result, neglects his parental duties by spending more time with his writers’ group than with his own flesh and blood. “He never once poured me tea in all my life,” Kenan tells his readers at one point in the comic, which shows how disconnected they were from each other (Yang, *New Super-Man* 96). His father’s absence has a negative impact on the main character, who grows up to become a bully. In the opening scene of *New Super-Man*, Kenan physically assaults his peer, Luo Lixin, for a can of soder cola. By no means is this behavior worthy of a superhero. Kenan’s first-person narration does not make him any more likeable; in fact, it attests to his arrogance and tendency towards violence. As the story progresses, however, readers are encouraged to sympathize with the main character, who makes up for his shortcomings with his sense of humor and courage. Although he may initially seem to be a poor version of the Man of Steel that most readers are familiar with, a closer look at Superman’s early portrayals reveals that he too was a bully and, according to Yang, was far from “the moral paragon that he is today” (Yang, “DC Comics”).

Kenan becomes Super-Man out of his own will, albeit not fully aware of his motivation behind and possible consequences of the decision. “I came here to make my Dad angry, or proud, maybe? I’m not sure,” he admits while recalling his pre-procedure thoughts (Yang, *New Super-Man* 22). Nevertheless, the old Kenan dies in the Origin Chamber and is reborn as Super-Man. Slowly, he learns how to control his

powers and to embrace his superhero identity. Unlike Clark Kent, however, he does not keep his civilian name secret. In fact, he recklessly reveals his identity simply to impress a young *Primetime Shanghai* reporter, thereby fusing his secret and superhero identities.

Conclusion

Gene Luen Yang's work abounds in examples of the use of the birth, death, and rebirth cycle. His characters undergo major transformations in order to achieve self-fulfillment and to live up to their (parents') expectations. Their internal 'deaths' often find their visual expression in the characters' altered appearance: a monkey sheds his original form and takes on a human shape, while an ordinary Chinese American teenager endures countless bruises and injuries as he aspires to turn into a Chinatown vigilante. By the same token, their rebirths are marked symbolically, whether by removing their shoes or making them don a superhero costume. The worlds these characters inhabit are full of intertextual references, ranging from graphic and non-graphic literature. By infusing his oeuvre with numerous Chinese as well as Christian elements, Yang creates comics that are less predictable to non-ethnic readers, while at the same time more relatable to their Asian American counterparts, allowing them to understand and develop their own ethnic identities.

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