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Employing Visual Narrative to Alternate Readers' Perspective: A Case Study of *Boxers & Saints*

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ABSTRACT

Over the recent decade, interdisciplinary research in literature has witnessed a burgeoning interest in visual narratives such as picture books and comics. Despite some scholars' acknowledgement of their transformative value, the field still remains debatable as others question the universality of visual language. This study uses *Boxers & Saints* as an example to join this debate and explore the effects that visual techniques can produce in readers. *Boxers & Saints* is a graphic novel created by Gene Luen Yang, which depicts the racial and ethnic conflicts during the Boxers Movement. By employing unique and creative artistic techniques such as the diptych form, contrastive colour palettes and visual braiding, Yang intends to help readers alternate between double perspectives and see the connection between the two seemingly opposing sides, thus developing a more nuanced way of thinking about the historical past and conflicts. Drawing upon reader-response theory and a cognitive approach to comics, this study conducts empirical research to investigate how and to what extent comics can help readers lay aside their preset beliefs and alternate between different perspectives. By conducting interviews with two participants—a Chinese and a British Catholic—and studying their responses to the selected panels in the book, this study questions the taken-for-granted universality of visual language and reveals how preset beliefs influence the way they switch between different perspectives. The study ends with implications for future interdisciplinary research in comics and literature: what ethical considerations future researchers should attend to while doing interdisciplinary research in literature, what specific questions can be asked for future research regarding the cognitive approach to visual language, and how to tailor the research design for specific questions.

KEYWORDS

cognitive approach to comics, visual narrative, value conflicts, reader-response theory

1. Introduction

Boxers & Saints (Yang, 2013) is a two-part graphic novel about the racial and ethnic conflicts sparked by differences between Chinese beliefs and Christian values. *Boxers* pieces together the male protagonist Little Bao's story by weaving his experiences into the progression of the Righteous and Harmonious Society, from a little village in Shan-tung Province to the capital Peking, starting from the spring of 1894 and culminating in the summer of 1900. Dedicated to their mission of eradicating foreigners and restoring the glory of the Qing government, they kill all the Western missionaries and what they call "secondary devils"—converted Chinese Christians—who they encounter along the way. *Saints* offers a parallel perspective of the same events by following Four-Girl, who, though despised and abused by her family for being an unwanted girl, emancipates

herself from overloaded humiliation by reinventing herself with the newly conferred name “Vibiana”, after converting to Catholicism. By creating dual narratives and iconographies that symbolise faith and presenting it in the diptych form—the two interconnected yet separate parts—the author Gene Luen Yang seeks to employ comics as the medium to explore double identity as a Chinese Catholic and “translate the ambivalence [he] was feeling inside onto the page” (2013, p. 5).

Yang’s efforts to explore faith and identity in *Boxers & Saints* have been recognised by many critics. Tarbox (2016) unravels how Yang creates the “tableau vivant effect” (p. 147) in violent scenes by combining *ligne claire*, the clear line style pioneered by Hergé in *The Adventures of Tintin*, with vibrant colours. Earle (2018) dissects how Yang visualises spirituality and faith on both sides through rendering religious or cultural rituals on the page and employing multi-layered narratives of faith. Grice (2017) also discusses how artistic techniques such as visual repetition, panel permeation and colour alteration work in concert to reveal the contesting narrative about faith. Dong (2019) reveals how the parallel yet interconnected images such as the “thousand palms with eyes” provoke readers to see the rapprochement between the two seemingly irreconcilable sides. These analyses altogether convey the same message: by employing artistic techniques of comics, the author’s inner ambivalence is made more explicit and nuanced to the reader, which elicits a more intricate way of reflecting on the identity of both sides.

Such consensus on the transformative power of *Boxers & Saints* and the comic form per se is debatable. Proponents such as McCloud argue that comics can help readers extend their identity, “mask themselves in a character” (1993, p. 42), and travel through the world of concepts. While interviewing Yang, Rozema also mentions the “universal quality” of comics proposed by McCloud (2013, p. 7) and relates it with Yang’s use of iconography, the unique language of comics. Opponents such as Neil Cohn, however, question the universality of visual language in comics. Enlightened by this central debate in comics scholarship, this essay is intended to explore how and to what extent *Boxers & Saints* helps the reader alternate between the two opposing sides, invent more nuanced ways of contemplating the conflict, and understand the author’s message that Carter (2013) interpreted as “actual compassion regardless of land, lore, or laud” (p. 50), the very essence of humanity.

Based on the research question, the rest of this essay is divided into two parts: the first part is section two, in which textual analysis on artistic techniques reveals how they are designed to convey messages about faith and identity in *Boxers & Saints*; the second part is comprised of the remaining sections, in which two semi-structured interviews are conducted. The interviews are designed based on findings of the textual analysis, and two participants are selected based on the assumed audience of the book to explore how the target audiences decipher the double narrative and whether the double narrative can achieve the transformative effects presumed by scholars.

2. Visualising the Double Narrative

This section conducts an in-depth textual analysis of *Boxers & Saints* to explore how artistic techniques are employed to visualise the double narrative and convey messages. To conduct an in-depth analysis, and to connect to the central debate regarding the universality of visual language, this section limits the scope to the analysis of the following three visual aesthetic features of the book: the paratextual attributes, the contrastive colour palettes, and visual braiding. The textual effects produced by these features that are assumed to evoke responses from the reader are also revealed: together, they invite readers to delve deeper into the character’s inner world and contemplate the root of the conflicts.

2.1 Paratextual Features

Paratextual attributes refer to the materials that supplement the main text such as the book cover, front matter, formatting, and typography. In *Boxers & Saints*, the paratextual features that contribute most strongly to the double narrative are the diptych form and the contrasting yet complementary book covers of the two parts (see Figure 1). In the light of Yang's deliberate choice of using the diptych form instead of "playing with the comic medium's unique propensity of simultaneity" (p. 51), Carter (2013) argues that this affirms Yang's intention to disrupt the conventional way of thinking and refusal of a clear and soothing solution. The diptych form—which refers to the two-part form that conveys the narrative—indeed conveys certain messages to readers. *Boxers* provides an insider perspective by exploring the relationship between the Boxers' indigenous faith, the ceaseless and even blind pursuit of a pure and solid country with a unified collective identity, and the crimes committed by the Righteous and Harmonious Society. By contrast, *Saints* presents an outsider's perspective by interweaving Four-Girl's quest for self-identity and mission with the growth of her spiritual guide Joan of the Arc. Four-Girl, or Vibiana, the unwanted and abused girl in her family, sets out on her quest for self-identity by serving in the Catholic community. Although rendered in parallel narratives, the plots also overlap at the beginning and end of the story. By rendering the conflict on page from two independent yet interconnected storylines, this unique form conveys Yang's ambivalence in deciding "which side [he] sympathized with more" (2013, p. 5) and invites the reader to look into both sides of the conflict more deeply.

Apart from the diptych form, the book covers are also worth critical attention. The book cover of *Boxers* features vibrant colours, with the left side of Little Bao's face situated in the right part of the foreground. With clenched teeth and a frown, Bao's look echoes the annoying facial expressions and gestures of Ch'in Shih-huang, who stands behind him, upright with his right hand clenched and a sword in his left hand, howling with anger. The glaring blaze against the blue backdrop enhances the anger conveyed through the two characters' images. With radial grey smoke released from the blaze, the picture foreshadows themes of the book: war, violence and unrest. By contrast, the book cover of *Saints* is muted. The right side of Vibiana's face is positioned in the left part of the foreground, with a frown and a tight mouth. The tension is counterbalanced by the mild golden contour of Joan of the Arc, indicating that by following Joan's story, Vibiana's anxiety is mitigated. The golden hue of Joan of Arc also stands in sharp contrast with both the sepia trees in the backdrop and Vibiana's dark brown clothes, denoting the enlightening role Joan plays in Vibiana's life. When aligned side by side, the two covers complement each other with the two half-faces integrating into a whole. Grice (2017) suggests that such interrelated covers convey the message that "no single narrative is complete without considering the whole narrative contest in which it exists" (p. 34). In this case, the two contrastive covers contest but eventually unify with the same theme: both Bao's vengeance on Christians and Vibiana's allegiance to the Christian community are quests for identity and the actualization of faith. In sum, the book covers work together to reveal the contesting yet unifying perspectives with the unconventional format, which invites a new way of contemplating this historic event.

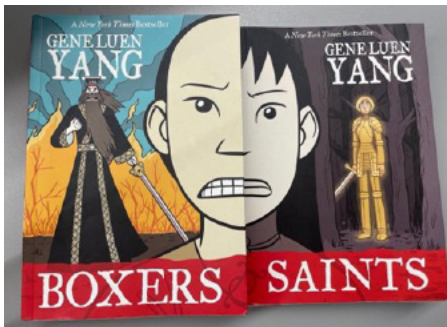


Figure 1: *The book covers (Yang, 2013)*

2.2 Contrastive Colour Palettes

The contrastive colour palettes employed by the two books help differentiate the characters and indicate their psyche. At first sight, *Boxers* employs a brighter colour scheme, which sets an exciting tone for readers. The protagonist and his comrades are always clad in dim colours such as khaki, grey or dark brown, conveying a sense of bleakness and dismay (see Figure 2). Standing in sharp contrast is the palette of the official troops and the gods: bright and kaleidoscopic, arresting with coloured faces and fancy attire (see Figure 3). *Saints* is presented homochromatically in strokes of grey and dark brown, except for Christian narratives. Joan of the Arc always appears in gold, surrounded by a halo (see Figure 4). Her story is also presented in gold throughout, as is the narrative about Jesus (see Figure 5). Such a colour scheme reveals the central role of religion in Vibiana’s life—it provides her with spiritual guidance and a model to frame her own narrative.

The distinctive palettes in *Boxers* and *Saints* also accentuate the different motives of the two protagonists’ personal advancement. Respectively driven by heroic patriotism and self-affirmation through religious identity, they set out on opposing sides and eventually confront each other as opponents on the battleground. Yet, insights into the denotation of the different colour schemes do not stop here. Apart from the irreconcilable ideological conflicts between the two sides, the colour schemes still imply an eventual rapprochement. As Earl points out, “as with Joan’s vibrant light, it is the gods who are depicted brightest in *Boxers*” (2018, p.78). The illuminating force of gods in the two protagonists’ life expresses something about their deepest fear and desire: the fear of being marginalised and neglected, the desire for a more powerful self, and a coherent and accepted identity. When aligned with the visual braiding in the two books, a more overarching interpretation emerges, as discussed in the next section.



Figure 2: *The colour palettes of Boxers (Yang, 2013, p.203)*



Figure 3: *The colour palettes of Boxers* (Yang, 2013, p.204)



Figure 4: *The colour palettes of Saints* (Yang, 2013, p.49)

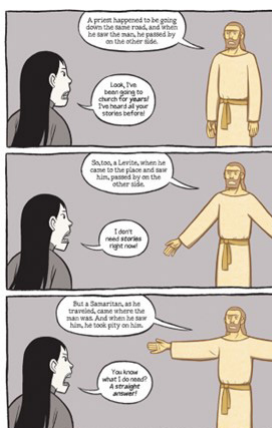


Figure 5: *The colour palettes of Saints* (Yang, 2013, p.155)

2.3 Visual Braiding

When unravelling the synthetic narrative, Grice (2017) applies the concept of “braiding”, an approach proposed by Thierry Groensteen in his ground-breaking work *System of Comics* (2007). This approach provides a framework for analysing interactions between the panels to uncover “a supplementary relation that is never indispensable to the conduct and intelligibility of the story, which the breakdown makes its own affair” (Groensteen, 2007, p. 123). Noticing how braiding occurs with repeated images or symbols, as revealed by critics such as Craig Fischer and Charles Hatfield, Grice brings two repeated and modified full-page panels, Guan Yin and Jesus Christ with a thousand palms

with eyes, together to add another layer of interpretation. These two panels unify the narratives from two opposing sides: both figures have gone through resurrection and transmit compassion. Grice argues that such an image “creates a message of parallel beliefs and spiritual harmony” (2017, p.37). Standing in the same camp is Dong (2019), who connects such textual interpretation back to the author’s deliberate choice to craft symbols of compassion and the comic’s unique way of generating meaning between fragments. Both interpretations point to a more overarching narrative: compassion can unify people regardless of their identities, merge boundaries and create harmony.

Despite the agreement, differences are less explored. An extra layer of interpretation emerges from the different modalities. Guan Yin’s panel is silent (see Figure 6), whilst in Jesus’ panel, words interact with the image to create meaning (see Figure 7). The caption “be mindful of others as I am mindful of you” are the words directly spoken by Jesus to Vibiana, and as Vibiana opens her eyes and mouth wide, the message strikes a chord in her heart. Vibiana’s faith in Christianity provides her with a sense of belonging and community, the pivotal part that constitutes her self-identity. Her actions afterwards also attest to the assimilation of this creed: by teaching Little Bao a prayer before she is executed, Vibiana enacts this credo in her own way. Yet, for Little Bao, who falls asleep when his crush Mei-Wen reads the story of Guan Yin to him, the very quintessence of Buddhism fails to go through. When putting these two panels together, another layer of meaning comes into view: although compassion traverses both religions and creates a more unifying narrative, with one side enlightened to see and the other side being blind, conflicts remain unavoidable. This also reveals the sad part about humanity: despite the relentless pursuit of compassion and unity permeating through folklore and religious narratives, the walls of ignorance imposed by the refusal to cultivate a grander vision impede communication, giving rise to incessant conflicts and sufferings.



Figure 6: Guan Yin (Yang, 2013, *Boxers*, p.282)



Figure 7: Jesus Christ (Yang, 2013, *Saints*, p.158)

3. Empirical Research Design

3.1 Methods

In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response from the viewer” (p. 9). He further argues that with visual language, the information can be universally understood. This statement reveals the intrinsic nature of comics: it anticipates certain responses from the audience with deliberate design and is supposed to change readers’ perceptions without difficulty. Such assumption is also appropriate to *Boxers & Saints*. Many scholars argue that such techniques would provoke readers to contemplate the complexity of conflicts from both sides

more deeply. For instance, Grice (2017) presumes that this book will “lend the text to facilitating a more critical audience of readers” (p.41). Carter (2013) also assumes that this boxed set will unveil to readers “perplexing character, motivation, and the universal forces that drive us and can derail us” (p. 51). Dong (2019) also discusses how such conscious choices can prompt readers to see a more nuanced historical past with parallel perspectives. These critics’ conclusions echo Yang’s response to Tarbox’s academic query on his intention for creating this work: he wishes his “reader could spend her neurons on the complexity of the time period” (Tarbox, 2016, p. 150), and invent a new way of thinking, which would happen effortlessly and without difficulty.

Standing on the opposing side is the iconoclastic and interdisciplinary camp represented by Neil Cohn. In an article, he synthesises clinical findings from cross-cultural, developmental and psychological research to reveal the complexity of visual decoding and question the supposed universality of visual language (Cohn, 2020a). Following this argument, Cohn (2020b) further uncovers the implicit requirements of proficient and smooth decoding of visual language like comics: exposure to and practice with relevant cultural codes and the graphic system. These revelations provide more insights into the complex nexus between culture, context, and cognition for successful visual decoding and challenge McCloud’s argument about comics’ universal quality of helping readers extend their identity, “mask themselves in a character” (1993, p.42), and travel through the world of concepts.

This research draws upon the concept of dynamics between text and reader in reader-response theory to frame the qualitative research design to engage in this central debate. In his article on the meaning-making process of reading, Chambers comes up with the idea of referential gaps: the ones that “challenge the reader to participate in making meaning” (1985, p.47). He continues to argue that by revealing the implied reader, and by putting the ideal reader in dialogue with the book, the expected critical meaning-making process can be accomplished through readers’ active participation in contributing to the text. At the same time, the reader is also reformed “into the kind of reader the book demands” (p. 42). Iser further posits that by establishing personal interrelations with the book and filling in the indeterminacy imposed by the text, readers help “work out a configurative meaning” (1988, p. 298). In this process, they also exercise their faculty to interpret meanings and formulate the unformulated part in themselves. The dynamics between text and reader proposed by both Chambers and Iser resonate with scholarship around *Boxers & Saints*: by actively participating in the meaning-making of the text, with unconventional artistic techniques, readers are also encouraged to be more perceptive and critical by drawing upon personal understandings to fill in the indeterminacy.

Based on the presupposed dynamic relationship between the text and the reader, this research investigates how readers interpret the ambivalence imposed by the visualised double narrative in *Boxers & Saints*. By conducting a semi-structured virtual interview, this research invites participants to react to the selected features to see how and to what extent these techniques could work together to help readers alter their perspectives, thus producing a more nuanced way of thinking about the historical event.

3.2 Participants

Following Chambers’s view on the ideal meaning-making process (1985), two participants are selected based on the implied reader of the text: the Chinese and the Catholic community. Their backgrounds overlap yet diverge greatly. The first participant Rachel is a 21-year-old Chinese female, with basic knowledge about the Boxers movement and Chinese folklores, who used to be a Catholic. The other participant Jenny is a 25-year-old British Catholic, also a female, who has solid background knowledge in Catholicism but little understanding of Chinese culture and history. To ensure

their privacy, pseudonyms are adopted.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

As this comic involves stereotypes on Chinese and violence towards Catholics, any brutal parts or panels prone to perpetuate stereotypes or incur uncomfortable feelings were cautiously avoided during the interview. Only panels or spreads regarding the aesthetic techniques that may help the participant elicit a more nuanced interpretation were discussed to avoid provoking pain or discomfort in the participants. To ensure the readers were not influenced by the “implied author” while interpreting relevant panels, the author’s identity and biography were not disclosed in advance of the interview. The participants were also advised not to investigate the author’s information beforehand.

Although both participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, the Chinese participant was paid whilst the British participant was not. The reason for paying the Chinese participant exclusively is post-abysal—a set of research ethics proposed by de Sousa Santos (2018), which indicates that researchers are unavoidably affectively involved in research and should acknowledge their own positionality. Illuminated by this principle, the researcher decided to obey the implicit cultural rules while researching the relevant community. The Chinese participant is a personal acquaintance, and under the Chinese cultural context, not giving a token of gratitude might sabotage the sustainable development of the long-term friendship. Considering that the participant is in China, which makes it hard to present gifts face-to-face, the researcher sent her a token fee of fifteen pounds through WeChat pay (an online payment app popular in China). The participant’s response is not supposed to change greatly by being paid; the participant agreed to participate in the project before being informed of the token fee. Also, it was the researcher who insisted on paying her to show gratitude and courtesy despite being declined by the participants multiple times.

3.4 Procedures

The interviews were semi-structured and were broadly divided into three parts: the opening phase, during which a 3-minute video about the Boxers Movement was played to the participants to familiarise them with historical facts, followed by several questions about the participants’ perspectives on the different sides involved; the second stage, during which questions regarding their view of the movement were given; and the revisiting stage, during which the participants were encouraged to reflect on their opinions in-depth and identify any trivial changes. Jenny’s interview lasted for forty minutes, whereas Rachel’s interview lasted for two hours as she also shared her story of growing up as a person in limbo—she felt caught between Christian and traditional Chinese ideologies.

During the interview, contextual information and relevant plots were summarised to the participants to facilitate their understanding of the broader picture. To imitate the sequential order of the original book, the excerpts in *Boxers and Saints* were presented separately in two parts. To avoid being leading, the researcher only provided relevant information after the reader had finished reading the panels and provided some preliminary assumptions about them. Both participants were encouraged to reflect on their intuitive responses and modify their answers if they wished.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim through transcription software, which, though it greatly facilitated the process, still required collation due to occasional inaccuracies. To ensure the transcript’s validity, the researcher manually collated the transcription by verifying it with the video recording. The decoding process was done manually and deductively.

4. Results and Discussion

Participants' reactions to the paratextual features of the comics are divided into two parts: interpretations of the book covers at the very beginning and the diptych form in the end after the participants were familiarised with the storyline. Following their interpretations of the book cover are the subsections on the contrastive colour palettes and visual braiding, which pave the way for analysis of participants' responses to the diptych form and double narrative.

4.1 The Book Covers

As aforementioned, previous scholarship generally points to the opposing but interconnected message implied by the book cover. This message seems to have come across to Rachel even without much contextual information. She recognised the first Chinese emperor Chin-Shi Huang at first sight and commented that "it looks like he is trying to revenge or conquer something." Turning to the background, she said, "it seems like the king is leaving a battlefield or his homeland that has been invaded." While interpreting the book cover of Saints, Rachel was bewildered as she could not tell who the person in the background was. After a slight pause, she inferred the relationship between the characters upfront and in the background—"I feel like the kids in the front become the person behind them, or at least they are whom they aspire to be." Initially, the colour differences did not seize her attention. Still, when asked about this detail by the interviewer afterwards, she successfully interpreted the deliberate design—the colour on the boy's side is "flamboyant and colourful," but the girl's side is very "bland and dark." She also continued to suppose that this hinted at "more depictions on the inner world like spiritual searching," and "actual fights and rebellions in real life" on the boy's side. In general, she sensed the differences and similarities quite smoothly even though certain contextual information remained obscure: both characters are spiritually inspired by the people in the background, but the acts on this inspiration through violent acts while the girl does so in a mild and spiritually pacifying way.

Different from Rachel, Jenny emphasised the opposition and differences between the two sides over the interconnection. She first noticed the contrastive facial expressions of the characters. She said, "the boxer looks more dominant, feistier, aggressive and powerful, whereas in the Saints, the girl looks more scared, timid, and shy." While describing the characters in the background, she assumed the one in Boxers to be an aggressor while the one in Saints is "Arthur or a martyr, a kind of Crusader Christian." She also noticed the differences in colour and supposed that the person in gold against the dark setting "makes him like the victim," and the figure on the boy's side is painted more vibrantly, which makes him "look more like the aggressor and the one who's ultimately going to get the best out of this situation." In her viewpoint, this means that "the boy's side is better than the other and more positive." She did not make any assumptions about the relationship between the different characters but related the characters behind the protagonists with the ideology they stand for: the aggressor represents the East, the martyr the West.

4.2 Contrastive Colour Palettes

When viewing the panels that present particular characters in each part, both participants had difficulty interpreting the identity of and relations between the characters. Rachel interpreted the colours of the gods in Boxers as the suggestion of supreme power but felt disturbed because "they are actually fighting and killing people when they are supposed to be heroic actors in theatrical plays." From her perspective, turning the performance into actual killings indicates the misappropriation of Peking Opera. Added to her feeling of offence was how these heroic characters' faces were portrayed: "they look quite intimidating and scary to me" because they appeared to be so annoyed and militant, when

in her mind they were supposed to stand for positive pursuits such as justice and equity instead of violence and hatred. Reviewing the relationship between the villagers and the flamboyant gods, she believed that the dim-clad villagers were enlightened by the gods and thus were driven by the heroism within. Jenny initially did not recognise the relationship between the gods and the villagers and assumed that they were on opposing sides but soon realised that “they’re fighting for their nationalism, they are fighting for their past and their history” after being informed of the cultural origin of the gods. She further commented that these gods looked quite aggressive and disorganised compared to the other troop. Both Rachel and Jenny noticed the Manchu words in Figure 2 but mistook them for Arabic and concluded that the troop was another invading force at that time. Although both of them recognised that the colours provided hints to the spiritual connection between the villagers and the gods, neither of them understood the identity of the troop for a lack of knowledge of the Manchu written language. While Rachel felt offended by such a portrayal of the heroic and mythological figures, Jenny deepened her understanding of the role of nationalism in constructing the Chinese locals’ faith.

Apart from the Manchuria soldiers, both participants had difficulty recognising Joan of Arc in Saints. Though successfully decoding that the gold paint of Joan implied her illuminating power in Vibiana’s life, Rachel did not recognise Joan of Arc at first sight, and it was only after she was briefed about the story that she grasped the complex spiritual connection between Vibiana and Joan of Arc. Such was also the case with Jenny. She mistook the character for Arthur, but this misconception did not hinder her from recognising the relationship between Vibiana and Joan of Arc: to her, gold is the colour of God and holiness, reinforcing the highest form people should aspire to be. After being informed of the golden figure’s real identity, Jenny added, “so the girl was also inspired by a sense of communal good.” Clearly, the gold and brown colour scheme in Saints helped both participants understand the spiritual enlightening role of Joan of Arc, but a deeper understanding of the nuanced and complex relationship could not emerge without knowledge of the historical figures and the cultural context.

4.3 Visual Braiding

Both Rachel and Jenny decoded the message of transcendental compassion with contextual knowledge of relevant religions. For Rachel, the image of Guan Yin conveyed a more tranquil and pacifying feeling, which is enhanced by the two characters’ facial expressions upfront. However, she was intimidated by the thousand palms of eyes—which reminded her of the Chinese saying that “whatever you are doing now is watched by God”. This impelled her to conclude that this image is filled with contradiction—pacifying because the goddess represents healing power, intimidating because the eyes reminded her of the omnipresence of the higher power’s gaze. Looking at the panel of Jesus Christ, she intuitively related that with Guan Yin’s image and accentuated the feeling of intimidation. Jesus’s panel reminded her of “the wrath of God,” but at the same time, with knowledge of basic Catholicism, she was also aware that this panel tried to portray an all-loving God—“they love you no matter who you are, even if you have sinned. That’s how it works. Even though this girl is ignored by her family and perhaps nobody in this world cares about her, there is still a God that is fully mindful of her.” Putting the two panels together, she interpreted the resurrection of the two deities as “the moment of epiphany for the kids.” She believed that this implies the characters would become more committed to their belief as they had witnessed miracles. Rachel seemed to have seen a moment of similarity between the two characters despite their different faiths.

Jenny’s interpretations of the two panels are close to relevant criticism. Seeing the image of Guan Yin, she related the eyes with the stigmata where the nails went through Jesus. While presuming the role of “the goddessy person,” she assumed that she brings spiritual joy and harmony based on the

facial expressions of the two characters in the front. This feeling was also strengthened by the harmonious colours and curvatures as well as the soft lines in contrast to strong lines. The conclusion she drew resonates with the consensus of the critical literature: “we can all love each other no matter what religion or spiritual things we believe and that we own one world.” While presented with the panel of Jesus, she also immediately related this page with the one of Guan Yin, and interpreted the panels as “forgiveness of sins” and “one idea of goodness.” Yet, she thought the girl looked unconvinced and bewildered as always when relating this panel with Figure 5 where Jesus did not give a straight answer to the annoyed and impatient Vibiana. Putting Guan Yin and Jesus Christ together, she came to the conclusion that “the boy’s side is obviously happier than the other.” With a solid knowledge of Catholicism, Jenny realised the unifying message the author tried to convey here but also sensed the nuanced feelings of the other characters.

4.4 Reflecting on Double Narrative

At the end of the interview, after being shown the selected sections of the comic book, both participants were asked about their opinions on the parallel narrative and whether their way of thinking about the historical event had changed. Although both participants replied with a firm “NO,” changes did happen to one participant but not to the other. For Rachel, that meant in-depth reflection on her painful situation of “growing up in limbo”: she felt caught between Chinese culture and Catholicism. During this process, she reaffirmed the stronger emotional attachment to the Chinese side: she always intuitively recognised the face of Chinese figures, felt offended by the way theatrical characters were portrayed, and was even annoyed by the narrative on the girl’s side, calling it “preachy and typically Western,” as the story emphasises spiritual redemption rather than being more down-to-earth. She expressed her disappointment in the book after knowing the ending that Little Bao is indirectly saved by Vibiana by using the prayers Vibiana has taught him while confronting Western soldiers, which convinces the soldiers to release him. Frowning, she explained, “this still glorifies the Western side by portraying the Chinese side as narrow-minded and blind, but in fact, many elites and intellectuals in higher class were also involved in this event, and their relationship with the Western forces can be more positive and open to multiple interpretations, why didn’t he incorporate that into the narrative?” When compared with her answers at the very beginning, her stance did not change as much as she was already familiar with the complex relationship between Chinese people and the Western forces. Despite her unchanging viewpoint, changes occurred while she was reflecting on Vibiana’s story: “Vibiana’s part shows me a more Catholic and Western perspective, which, though annoying and even offensive, makes me contemplate the fundamental differences between Chinese culture and Western ideologies.” “I think I have understood my pain better,” she added.

Jenny, however, kept using the words “tortured and opposing” to describe the relationship between the two sides. The revelation of the presupposed message seemed to have come to her quite smoothly—“in Catholicism, we always emphasise goodness, forgiveness, love, and spirituality over everything else.” To her, the root of the conflict was quite transparent—“the idea of civilising them to the correct way of worshipping is a big one. The West thinks they are civilised especially with regards to religion and spirituality, and they try to educate and civilise the rest of the world, especially the East. This is quite ironic given most of the intelligent stuff comes from the East,” she said. While relating to her family’s story that her grandfather worked in Hong Kong while it was under English rule, she concluded that “I definitely come from a family whose wealth has been created by colonialism and imperialism whilst I am very against it. This part of history always annoys me.” After hearing about the ending of the story and the death of both characters, she unleashed a sigh and commented, “Well, that’s so sad.” To her, the double narrative did not elicit a more nuanced way of thinking: she

remained critical on the colonial history throughout the interview, quickly decoded the message that “we can all love each other no matter what religion or spiritual things we believe and that we own one world,” a concept entrenched in her mind.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Throughout the two interviews, I kept mulling the same question over: are comics truly the universal language that can be used to combat rigid ways of thinking? Comics scholars seem to have celebrated its transformative power too naturally. Just as Carter (2013), Grice (2017), Dong (2020) and the author Yang himself extol the value of comics in reinventing the way readers view history, many other comics scholars naturally perceive comics as a medium to seek truth in history. Kersten and Dallacqua (2017) posit that with multimodality, “the comics form is in a unique position to consider history and factual representation through layers of narration” (p. 17). In defending the value of comics in representing history, Chute (2008) also dissects how the form per se is “a mode of political intervention” that “demands a rethinking of narratives” (p. 462). Indeed, Yang has successfully conveyed the interconnected yet diverted double narrative onto the page with creative artistic techniques, as both participants have, at some point and to some extent, grasped the information even without much contextual knowledge. Although they do not always fully grasp the overarching message Yang tries to convey to readers, this research still attests to comics’ potential in shifting readers’ perspectives: while criticising the Catholic narrative, Rachel became more aware of her own positionality, and actively participated in meaning co-construction through seeing the other side. Yet not many revelations occurred to Jenny, which might affirm Cohn’s argument that visual narrative is not “universally transparent” (2020a), and only becomes transparent when readers are equipped with related knowledge and trained to read in a certain way.

While these findings provide a place to start, more research needs to be done to provide more validated and solid insights. Due to ethical concerns, only a few relevant sections were shown to the participants instead of the whole comic, which prevented them from alternating between the two perspectives smoothly and hindered them from gaining more coherent and in-depth insights. Future research can conduct full-scale experiments by providing participants with support systems. In addition, researchers might further the empirical study on comics’ power in shifting readers’ perspectives by excluding the influence of entrenched ways of thinking: for example, by selecting a comic that is not set in a socio-historical background familiar to the participants. More empirical studies are anticipated to keep refreshing the debate and shed light on the decoding process of visual language.

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Appendices

1. Letter of Consent

Dear XXXXX,

As part of my MPhil in Education (Critical Approaches to Children's Literature), I am conducting a research project that investigates the way readers react to alternative perspectives in comics. I would like to ask for your approval to participate in this project.

The comic I will present to you is *Boxers & Saints* by Gene Luen Yang, which sets the historical background in the Boxers Movement, and renders two opposing sides on the page by alternating between two perspectives. I am happy to familiarize you with the historical facts before the interview begins.

During the interview, I will show you some panels from the comic and ask for your interpretations. I will record the interview on video to facilitate transcribing the script for analysis exclusively, the video will not be used for any other purpose. In my analysis, you will be given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. If at any point you would like to finish or withdraw from the interview, please feel free to do so. After withdrawal, all data collected will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this research project, I would be very grateful if you would sign the consent form below.

Yours sincerely,
Yi Wang

I agree to participate in the research project outlined above.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

2. Transcript Excerpts

[Jenny: Guan Yin Visual Braiding]

Yi: Based on this full-page panel, what prominent features have you noticed?

Jenny: Stigmata, like where the nails went through.

Yi: What about the central figure on this page? What information can you get based on the characters in this panel?

Jenny: Kind of looks like a suit of goddessy person. The people below also seemed very much like at peace. Um, together. So it's like quite a spiritual joy.

Yi: What makes you feel spiritual joy?

Jenny: Quite harmonious colours and harmonious setting and... the lily? Also, in comparison other panels, there are more curvatures and soft lines rather than like the kind of strong lines of like guns and people in lines and stuff, so it feels a bit calmer.

Yi: Yeah. Okay. What about the palms with eyes in the centre? Do they remind you of any rituals or concepts in religion?

Jenny: Yeah. Crucifixion.

Yi: And how could you relate that with this panel and is there any other information you can get?

Jenny: I don't really know because I'm not sure why they've got a Christian symbol if it's on the Chinese side.

Yi: The author did that deliberately. Why do you think the author does that?

Jenny: I think it is something like we can all love each other no matter what like religion or spiritual things we believe and that we own one world.

.....

[Yi Cheng: Guan Yin Visual Braiding]

A: On this panel, what characters have you noticed? Could you relate that with any mythological or any important figures in Chinese culture? Anything striking or strange for you?

R: I think it's obviously Guan Yin with 1,000 hands. I don't remember in Buddhism if the Guan Yin has eyes on their hands, at least in artistic works. I'm not sure. I don't think so anyway, but I know that in the Bible, the angels are depicted in this way. The arc angels are forms that are with a lot of eyes, always staring at people. And I think this is something that strangely resonates with this character. But I think, at first glance, it's definitely a Taoist character of the deity Guan Yin. And let me see... there are two people with the lotus at the bottom as well. Let me see. Uh, that's the feeling Guan Yin gives to people. Feelings like calmness and blessings. She's not a god that brings violence. So basically, she's a very protective god, and I think that this picture generally gives off that feeling.

A: Yeah, okay, so very pacifying, right? Any other feeling or information you can get from other images like the thousand eyes in her palms?

R: Okay, yeah, yeah. But I would say that there is a different feeling involved. For example, the eyes give us a feeling that deities or angels are all watching and observing. Also, there is a saying in Chinese that "whatever you do, God is watching you". But that's Chinese wisdom, and is not necessarily related, or refers to the deities in the Taoist religion. I don't think that the Guan Yin deity is depicted intentionally as the omnipresent deity here. So this is a very interesting interpretation of it.

A: Well that's quite an interesting perspective. What do you think do the hands mean here based on their relationship with Guan Yin? What do they imply?

R: Uh, um, I actually feel a contradiction in this picture, because Guan Yin herself is always pacifying, but the concept that a deity is always watching is also intimidating at the same time. But overall, I would say that it's still pacifying. Because perhaps like if there is a deity observing, they can observe all the suffering on earth and perhaps bring peace to people. Yeah. But I have to say that I might have to do some research on what exactly the god with one thousand hands is like and what are the functions there.