Hybrid Languages and Literary forms in Gene Luen Yang’s American Born Chinese by Philip Smith

In his essay on the Chinese Writer and academic Lu Xun (1881-1936), Luo Xuanmin discusses the concept of *ying yi* (硬译) and *yi jie* (易解). Lu Xun argued that translation should retain the flavour of the language used in the source text (*ying yi*), preserving the turns of phrase and poetry of the original.[1] He also argued that Chinese literature needed to adopt foreign linguistic forms which offer syntactical precision (*yi jie*). He considered classical Chinese, the main literary form in China at his time of writing, to be too dependent on inferred meaning on the part of the reader to serve as an entirely adequate literary form. He wished to import the precise grammatical and semantic forms of European languages into a new Chinese literary language. His ideas were viewed by many of his contemporaries as unpatriotic. Luo Xuanmin encourages an understanding of the work of Asian-American writers through the concept of *ying yi* and *yi jie*. He contends that a literature which contains an awareness of both Western and Asian literary and linguistic forms might provide a bridge between the Asian-American experience and that of other American cultures. For such literature to be effective, he argues, it should offer a precision of meaning, and a sensitivity to potential syntactic confusion, negotiating a form which ‘draw[s] nourishment’ (Luo; 2007, 48) from Asian literature and culture. He argues that it is the duty of Asian American writers to work as translators, bringing Asian literature to other languages and cultures.

It is in light of this concept that I wish to explore Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006). I will argue that the text employs a hybrid literary form and language in its exploration of Asian-American identities. The following analysis will separate the two, first examining the literary form, and then the use of language in the text.

*American Born Chinese* tells three stories which ultimately resolve as one: that of the story of the Monkey King, a re-invention of the first seven chapters from the 16th Century Chinese text *Journey to the West*; the story of Jin, a young American born Chinese student in love with a Caucasian schoolmate; and Danny, a Caucasian high-schooler whose life is ruined by visits from his Chinese cousin Chin-Kee, a synthesis of racist stereotypes in the style of, amongst other sources (see Chaney; 2011), Jack Cole’s *Wun Cloo* (reprinted in Spiegelman and Kidd, 2001). After his romance fails, Jin has a fight with his best friend, Wei-Chen and transforms, overnight, into Danny. By becoming Danny he amputates his Chinese self, but, like a phantom limb, he continues to feel the presence of his racial background in the form of Chin-Kee. Eventually Danny loses his temper and hits Chin-Kee, who reveals himself to be the Monkey King. Danny becomes Jin again and resolves to mend his relationship with Wei-Chen. Each story revolves around the themes of exclusion due to minority status, transformation through violence, and eventual empowerment through self-acceptance.

**Form**

Gene Yang employs a distinctly American form in *American Born Chinese*. Graphic narratives have existed in various cultures for centuries, but the comic book form adopted by Yang is one described by Gopnik as ‘an American invention of the same vintage as contract bridge or the NFL’ (Gopnik; 1987, 30).[2] It uses thought balloons, broken lines around speech bubbles to indicate whispering, and a high instance of type 2 (action to action) panel transitions (see McCloud; 1994, 60-93), all of which are conventions of American comics. Yang follows in the footsteps of, to cite the most obvious example, Art Spiegelman in using the comic book as a means to explicitly ask what it means to be a racial minority in America, and how one should respond to family and cultural history. Further to this, Yang has rewritten the story of the Monkey King as a Christian story, complete with a creator being and a wise men journeying toward a star (see Dong; 2011, 235 and Vizzini; 2007, online).

China does have its own tradition of comic books called *man hua shu* (漫画书).[3] The conventions of comic books were imported by English colonisers in the late 19th Century, but Chinese comics have since developed their own conventions distinct from their European, Japanese and American equivalents. *Man hua shu* have been used to tell a variety of stories, including pictorial versions of Chinese classic literature. *The Journey to the West* and the Monkey King is a specific sub-genre of *man hua shu* (see Yang in Morton; 2010, online). By choosing to tell a story from classical Chinese mythology (perhaps the best known classical Chinese story in America) in a comic book format Yang has used an American form in a manner not dissimilar from the Chinese tradition.

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Further to the use of English, *American Born Chinese* uses the visual language of comic books. American
comics have their own language and require a specific visual literacy to decode, but the form can be used to offer an accessibility and directness unavailable to other literary forms. In comics which are written, like American Born Chinese, to be accessible to younger audiences, simple images are used in such a manner as to concretise the meaning of the words.[4] Crawford and Weiner contend:

Graphic novels can dramatically help improve reading development for students struggling with language acquisition, including special-needs students, as the illustrations provide contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative. They can provide autistic students with clues to emotional context that they might miss when reading traditional text.[5]

(Crawford and Weiner; 2013, online).

It is no coincidence that the initials of Yang’s book spell ABC: the English-speaking child’s first introduction to written language. As a multi-lingual text which may be read by children, the visual elements of American Born Chinese can serve to counter any potential semantic misunderstandings. The comic book language used, because it employs a visual language which compliments meaning, is yi jie.[6]

Language

Mirroring the comic book form used to tell a classical Chinese story, the language of American Born Chinese is American English with occasional inflections of Chinese. By using English primarily, Yang deploys a language which, Lu Xun argued, holds greater syntactical precision relative to the language of Chinese literature. He supplements this with traditional Chinese script and an awareness of Chinese grammar, creating a hybrid language befitting of the book’s title.

The characters in the Monkey King’s narrative speak English for conversation, and Chinese to create magical effects (specifically the characters雲, 大, 小, 多, and 變). The use of written Chinese is mirrored by Jin’s level of Chinese literacy. He speaks Chinese well but struggles to read it (when a waitress asks Jin what he would like to order he points to something on the menu. She replies ‘That says “Cash only”’ (Yang; 2006, 226). Chinese is thus presented as Jin, the second-generation immigrant, sees it; an impenetrable, mystical, historical, and fundamentally Othered language. It is the language of ancient wisdom and culture rather than the modern world. This is reinforced by the choice of traditional characters (the written language of Chinese poetry) rather than simplified Chinese used in mainland China today. Jin has no means to represent modern China or the postmemory of the Cultural Revolution, just a myriad of imagined Chinas drawn primarily from the American cultural imagination.[7] Jin is only Chinese in relation to the non-Chinese characters; the Other who his classmates imagine him to be is equally alien to him.

The intrusion of Chinese characters also serves to inform the reader that the story of the Monkey King has been translated from Chinese. Rather than translating the words from Chinese into English, the Otherworldly characters have been retained. This use of Chinese corresponds with Lu Xun’s concept of ying yi in that it retains the flavour of the original text through the process of translation, rather than rendering it entirely in the systems of the target language.

Ying yi is further explored in the use of English by Wei-Chen. Wei-Chen speaks in a Chinese-cadenced English, and, in moments of tension, Mandarin (indicated by ‘less than’ and ‘more than’ parentheses). His first question to Jin in English is ‘you–you- Chinese person?’ (Yang; 2006, 37). Later, as his English fluency improves, Wei-Chen confuses verb tenses and omits articles. He tells Jin ‘I find out in a sneaky way. Like ninja’ (Yang; 2007, 174). Unlike Jin, Wei-Chen is more comfortable speaking Mandarin than English, representing a partial assimilation into English-speaking American culture. He is also comfortable with the stereotyped associations of his Asian identity such as subterfuge and ninjas. His Chinese-inflected English is never a barrier to his being understood, however, nor is it used explicitly as a means to exclude him. His English is an alternative, equally valid, means of communication.

Wei-Chen’s language, it transpires, is part of his cover. When he returns to speak with his father the Monkey King, he uses technically ‘correct’ English. At the end of the text, when he meets with Jin once more, Wei-Chen only speaks in Mandarin. He appears dressed in a manner more typical of Taiwanese taike (台客), and drives a car decorated with Chinese characters. He is no longer interested, if he ever was interested, in performing a non-Asian identity. His presence, like the Chinese characters spoken by the Monkey King, is ying yi; he transplants fragments of unassimilated and authenticated Asian language and identity into an English language text.

Chin-Kee’s English, rather than adding syntactic clarity to the English language, serves to call attention to the damage that racist cartoons can do. His language is more inflected with Chinese grammar than Wei-Chen’s, in addition to which he speaks with a heavy accent and refers to himself in the third person. At one point he announces, for example, ‘Now Chin-Kee go to riblaly [library] to find Amellican girl to bind feet and bear Chin-Kee’s children’ (Yang; 2007, 120). Despite his technically incorrect grammar, Chin-Kee knows specialised English words such as humerus (Yang; 2007, 112). His speech is written with the /r/ /l/ pronunciation error is more typical of Japanese-speakers who are learning English as a second language (see Aoyama et al. 2004), a linguistic feature which has been ascribed to many Asian groups in racist caricatures.
A parallel might be drawn between Chin-Kee’s speech and the play *The Corrected Poems of Minah Jambu* (2001) by Singaporean playwright Alfian Bin Sa’at. Alfian experimented with deliberately bad translation as a means to create a conflicted reaction in an audience. The oulipeme in the play's title (‘corrected’ instead of ‘collected’) refers both to the stereotyped /r/ /l/ confusion of Asian English speakers, as spoken by Chin-Kee, and the ironic ‘improvement’ which supposedly comes from translation into English. In the play a Malaysian poet reads her works in poorly-translated English, eliciting first laughter, and then sympathy and guilt from the audience. Alfian contends that ‘bad and ineffective translation is a strategy with the potential to empower the audience member into examining cultural incompatibilities and political incongruities’ (Alfian; 2006, 283). Bad translation makes a reader or audience member aware of the gaps in equivalence between languages and the ways in which those gaps can be used to humiliate the non-native speaker. Like Minah Jambu, Chin-Kee is designed make the reader uncomfortable, and to invite them to examine the humiliation which non-fluent English speakers are subject to.

**Conclusion**

In *American Born Chinese* Yang has created a multi-lingual text which draws upon the distinctly American format and visual language of the comic book, and elements of Chinese written language and grammar. The combination of these elements can be understood through Lu Xun’s concept of *ying yi* and *yi jie* as creating a form which offers both the visual beauty of the traditional Chinese written form, an awareness of multiple Englishes, and an accessible gateway into Chinese literature.

The Chinese-cadenced English in *American Born Chinese* is not only *ying yi*. It serves to distinguish degrees of integration. Jin speaks English and struggles with written Chinese, Wei-Chen’s English authenticates his Asian identity, but serves as a barrier to complete integration, Chin-Kee’s pronunciation challenges, *reductio ad absurdum*, the Chinese male as imagined by racist American cartoons, and the Monkey King’s magical Chinese words invoke a mystical China which is perhaps no more authentic than the racist imagining of China which Chin-Kee comes from. By presenting a range of Asian-American languages and identities, Yang presents not one, but a multitude of Asian-American experiences.

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Philip Smith is currently in the final stages of completing his PhD thesis with Loughborough University. He is the author of several academic and non-academic publications.

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[2] – The American comic book medium has its own codes and visual language (which are distinct from the codes and visual language used in comic books from other cultures), but the form itself has origins which predate America.


[5] – The Canadian Council on Learning’s website summarises the results of many studies which examine the positive role comic books can play in developing literacy (CCL; 2013, online).

[6] – This argument does not necessarily hold true for other genres of comic books or, indeed, for all children’s comics. In many comic books, words and images are used in combinations which create, to name just two examples, dramatic irony or jarring juxtapositions. For an example of the latter, consider Spiegelman’s ‘Little Signs of Passion’ in the volume Breakdowns (2008). Spiegelman combines images of a man leaving a pornographic theatre and tripping over a tin of paint with a quote from Jack Woodford on sexual tension in romance fiction.

[7] – Hirsh defines postmemory as follows: ‘[p]ostmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood not recreated’ (Hirsch; 1997, 22). Hirsh coined the term to describe the relationship between the second-generation Holocaust survivor and their parent’s experiences, but it might usefully be mobilised to describe other forms of cultural trauma such as the Great Chinese Famine during 1958-1961.
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Only RUB 79.09/month. American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang. STUDY. Flashcards. Learn. Write. Spell. Test. An ancient Chinese counting device that used rods on which were mounted movable counters. forfeit. to give up. invulnerability. members feel they cannot fail. transcended. surpassed, exceeded--went beyond the limits. I will argue that the text employs a hybrid literary form and language in its exploration of Asian-American identities. The following analysis will separate the two, first examining the literary form, and then the use of language in the text. Discover the world's research. 17+ million members. This paper offers a synthesis and critique of the existing academic literature on Gene Luen Yang’s American Born Chinese and an overview of Asian American alternative comics. It examines the range of literary and linguistic sources which Yang draws upon in his collage of Chinoiserie and Japonism. It presents the argument that existing criticism has failed to take into account the rising presence of Asian and Asian American characters and creators in American comics. View. Show abstract. Gene Luen Yang is a cartoonist and also teaches in a master's program as a creative writing professor at Hamline University. Yang is a Bay Area native being born and raised here and his parents even met in the SJSU library. He specializes in writing for children and young adults. Some of his previous and more recent popular works include: Avatar: The Last Airbender and DC Comic’s The New Super-man. Yang much like in American Born Chinese, was a minority in his elementary school and was told many stories by his parents in his childhood. He holds a variety of awards for the works he has worked o Gene Luen Yang (Chinese Traditional: 楊謹倫, Simplified: 杨谨伦, Pinyin: Yáng Jǐnlún; born August 9, 1973) is an American cartoonist. He is a frequent lecturer on the subjects of graphic novels and comics, at comic book conventions and universities. In addition, he was the