

---

THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY IN GENE LUEN YANG'S "AMERICAN BORN CHINESE"

Author(s): Daniel Pinti

Source: *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (June 2016), pp. 233-247

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44490845>

Accessed: 28-04-2023 19:34 +00:00

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Oxford University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Literature and Theology*

# THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY IN GENE LUEN YANG'S *AMERICAN BORN CHINESE*

Daniel Pinti\*

## *Abstract*

While Gene Yang's acclaimed and widely-read graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, has been the subject of scholarship focused on its representation of the formation of its young protagonist's bicultural identity, critics have largely ignored its intensive and profound engagement with theological concepts. Christian allusions and visual imagery are prominently present at significant points in the book, interwoven with the Chinese legend of the Monkey King and the *Bildungsroman* narrative of the main character, Jin Wang. This article argues that theological discourses, verbal and visual, are constitutive elements in the characters' experiences, understandings, and discovery of identity in *American Born Chinese*.

Since its publication in 2006, Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, has garnered critical acclaim, a number of prestigious awards, the appreciation of both young adult readers and their teachers, and a growing body of scholarship designed to explicate Yang's multilayered depiction of a young Chinese American protagonist, Jin Wang, and his experience of racism, acculturation, and a developing sense of self.<sup>1</sup> For the most part this scholarship has understandably focused on how Yang, in the words of one critic, shows 'cultural and cognitive factors operat[ing] in the construction of identity', particularly factors of race and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> What has yet to receive serious attention, however, is the way in which theological concepts can and do play a role in the construction of identity in the novel. *American Born Chinese* has been studied as if its representation of the formation of Jin Wang's bicultural identity is exclusively secular, and whatever theological elements might be in the book are either ignored or implicitly recast as secularised matters falling under the ostensibly broader category of ethnic tradition. In an effort to re-balance somewhat this prevailing critical emphasis, this article explores how theological images and language function in Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel, and argues that the theological discourses (verbal and visual) woven into the

\*Niagara University, NY 14109, USA. Email: dpinti@niagara.edu

novel are, no less than ethnicity, constitutive of its characters' experiences, understandings, and discovery of identity.

Yang's book alternates among three distinct narratives, each in a different genre, until, in the climactic scene, it reveals these three narratives to have been interconnected all along. The first narrative introduced is a reimagining of the folkloric story of the Monkey King in the classic Chinese novel *The Journey to the West*.<sup>3</sup> The second narrative is a first-person *Bildungsroman* focused on the Chinese American boy mentioned earlier, Jin Wang, and his experiences beginning with his arrival at a new school as a third-grade student (age 8–9) through his teenage years into high school. The third narrative uses the conventions of an American television sitcom, including a graphically depicted 'laugh track' that appears whenever its protagonist, a white high-school aged boy named Danny, finds himself in any way sharing the scene with his embarrassing cousin, Chin-Kee, who appears as a grotesque amalgamation of exaggerated Asian American stereotypical traits. By the end of *American Born Chinese*, however, the reader has discovered that 'Danny' is in fact the new 'American' identity Jin Wang had transformed himself into in his struggle to suppress or deny his ethnicity, and Chin-Kee (perhaps rather more surprisingly) is really a disguise for none other than the Monkey King, who has been coming to visit Jin/Danny since the eighth grade in order, as he tells Jin, 'to serve as your conscience—as a signpost to your soul'.<sup>4</sup>

This brief outline of the plot and structure of *American Born Chinese* cannot do justice to the novel's subtlety and complexity, which to no small degree grow out of the form Yang employs: comics, the 'multimodality' of which, along with what Jared Gardner characterises as the 'ellipses and lacunae at the heart of the comics form', demand an especially active, even 'collaborative' role for the reader.<sup>5</sup> It can, however, indicate the reason for the focus of virtually all of the scholarship devoted to the book. Critics have profoundly illuminated issues surrounding race, ethnicity, and bicultural identity in Yang's work. Min Hyoung Song, for example, argues that *American Born Chinese* 'reflect[s] back to the reader the difficulty of following the development of Asian American racial formations', in part by tracing some of the 'visual vocabulary' (not least the commonplace simian imagery) used in racist stereotypes of Asians in early- and mid-twentieth-century illustrations.<sup>6</sup> Lan Dong, on the other hand, focuses on the Monkey King and the traditional stories in which the character appears, so as to establish the adaptability of the Monkey King figure and show how the book 'explores the possibility and process for an adolescent to define his or her bicultural identity'.<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Doughty expands the discussion somewhat by looking at several key scenes in the novel involving Jin Wang's Taiwanese friend Wei-Chen in order to make the case that Yang is interested in the development of the 'young transnational subject', arguing the book is 'both committedly transnationalist and nationalist'.<sup>8</sup> These three major articles

collectively provide a fair sense of the prevailing critical dialogue surrounding this graphic novel, which includes no voices giving sustained attention to the theological/spiritual aspects of *American Born Chinese*, particularly its pivotal use of Christian concepts and imagery.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, there are occasional, critical nods. Rosemary Hathaway, for instance, remarks in passing on the novel's 'references, both textual and visual, to mythological and Biblical narratives'.<sup>10</sup> And Jared Gardner describes parenthetically one character from the Monkey King portion of the book, Tze-Yo-Tzuh, as a 'god transplanted to the Buddhist myth from Yang's Catholic upbringing'.<sup>11</sup> But this lack of consideration given to the book's theological subtext is striking for two reasons. First, critics increasingly have been paying attention to religious themes and motifs in graphic novels, as shown by—to take just two examples—the articles in A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer's recent collection, *Graven Images* (2010), and Ben Saunders' book, *Do the Gods Wear Capes?* (2011).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in his Foreword to Lewis and Kraemer's book, Douglas Rushkoff goes so far as to suggest that the very form of sequential art, which, because of its inherent gaps, requires a kind of 'leap of faith from its readers every time they move from one panel to the next', gives the medium great power 'to generate cultural iconography [and] create modern mythology'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, *American Born Chinese* particularly merits such attention because Yang himself has made no secret that he was not merely raised with (as Gardner's comment implies), but continues to practice, Roman Catholicism.

In any number of interviews with Yang the subject of his faith comes up, and it did so repeatedly in the wake of the 2013 publication of his two-volume graphic novel *Boxers and Saints*, a work of historical fiction set during the Boxer Rebellion, the Chinese uprising at the turn of the twentieth century against, among other things, Christian missionary activity in China.<sup>14</sup> In one interview Yang talks about faith as a 'struggle' but nonetheless 'central' to his life:

I'm a practicing Catholic now. Among adults who are still practicing their childhood faiths, I think I have a fairly common story. I grew up in the faith tradition, I went through a long period of doubt, but then I eventually came back to it and embraced it as an adult, but it definitely is in a different form than I experienced it as a child.<sup>15</sup>

In a different interview Yang says: 'Religion and culture are two important ways in which we as humans find our identity. That's certainly true for me. My experiences growing up in both a Chinese American household and the Catholic Church define much of who I am.'<sup>16</sup> Indeed, not only does Yang draw direct connections between his faith and his own sense of his bicultural identity, he expects his perspective as a person of faith to manifest itself in his

work: 'If your religion is actually a part of you,' Yang has stated, 'it will leak out in your writing.'<sup>17</sup>

Yang has even ventured into more explicitly theological commentary in some interviews, in ways that suggest a tendency toward theological syncretism on his part even as he seems to give ultimate emphasis and allegiance to Christian theological views. For instance, invoking an implicitly Pauline notion of kenosis that he links to Asian, and specifically Buddhist, spirituality, Yang closely connects ethnicity and theology in ways that cannot but resonate with, as we will see, certain aspects of *American Born Chinese*:

I do think the Christianity I experienced was definitely Asian-tinged. There was a lot of talk about 'emptying yourself'. But the way it was expressed is that you empty yourself to make room for the spirit of God, as opposed to emptying yourself for the sake of emptying yourself. But there was this sort of talk. I remember my mom would come home from these Catholic retreats with these pictorial representations of Buddha's journey. Because they would talk about them both together. I think it's just part of how I understand religion.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere, Yang again emphasises the theme of kenosis in his conception of religion and spirituality. He references in one interview C.S. Lewis' notion of 'good dreams', which he understands as how 'pieces of the story of Christ, of self-emptying love, are reflected in all cultures'.<sup>19</sup> Taking the matter a step further in a comment quoted in still another article, Yang draws on his particular sense of 'self-emptying', which enables one to (as we have seen him put it) 'make room for the spirit of God', as he articulates a theological understanding of bicultural identity: '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.'<sup>20</sup> This theological notion of 'finding a home in the divine will' is a pivotal part of the Monkey King narrative in *American Born Chinese*, and thus, an important, albeit implicit and open-ended, part of Jin Wang's experience as well.

This article's focus is on the intersection of theology with selfhood and bicultural identity in Yang's book. Consequently, before moving to an analysis of the Monkey King's story, it is important to recognise the distinct 'paradigms' for understanding selfhood and identity introduced directly at the outset of the Jin Wang narrative. His story opens with a very young Jin Wang riding in the back seat of a car on the way to his family's new house. Jin is playing with a Transformer toy, a plastic toy that can be manipulated so as to appear either as a robot or a truck, while his mother is telling him an 'old Chinese parable':

Long ago, a mother and her young son lived near a marketplace. Every day when the son played, he pretended to buy and sell sticks he found on the street,

haggling over prices with his friends. The mother decided to move. They settled into a house next to a cemetery. Now when the son played he burned incense sticks and sang songs to dead ancestors. The mother decided to move again. She found a home across from a university. The son now spent all his free time reading books about mathematics, science, and history. The mother and her son stayed there for a long, long, time.<sup>21</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Jin recounts visiting the local Chinese herbalist every Sunday with his mother. On one occasion, the herbalist's wife asks Jin, who again is playing with his Transformer toy, what he wants to be when he grows up. Manipulating his toy to change it from robot to truck, the boy says he wants to be a Transformer, 'a robot in disguise . . . more than meets the eye'.<sup>22</sup> Jin, however, then expresses some doubt, saying his mother has told him boys do not become Transformers, but the herbalist's wife assures him: 'It's easy to become anything you wish, so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul.'<sup>23</sup> In these few early pages, Yang evokes three distinct conceptions of the human person and human identity. In the mother's parable, one's identity is the product of environment and circumstances, and outside the conscious construction, much less control, of the subject in question. The mother repeatedly moves the family until she finds the location that will shape her son to grow up to become who and what she hopes he will be. In Jin's admittedly naïve but nonetheless earnest response to the herbalist's wife's question, however, identity is a matter of manipulated appearance, and, more importantly, a matter of choice, the subject's independent self-construction. Yet the herbalist's wife introduces an essentialist concept of the human person, invoking the term 'soul' for what one infers is thought of as the unchangeable core of one's personhood, which can be denied or lost, but not changed. The rest of the novel will suggest that there is some truth to each of these, even as it ultimately seems to validate the essentialist view of the herbalist's wife. Jin Wang in many ways is influenced, indeed, shaped by his environment, growing up as he does as one of relatively few Asian Americans in his school. And he manipulates—and even, when he 'becomes' Danny, manages to transform—his own appearance, and take on a new identity. After encountering the Monkey King, however, he reverts to Jin, and his 'soul' is invoked (this time by the Monkey King) once again. Yet none of these paradigms within the opening section of Jin Wang's narrative allows for what the book as a whole leads to: a conception of the self ultimately constituted by a relational encounter with the divine.

To explore this conception we must turn to Yang's version of the Monkey King and his distinctive adaptation of his 'journey to the West'. Yang introduces the Monkey King as the ruler of Flower-Fruit Mountain, who through his intensive study of kung-fu has mastered the 'four major heavenly disciplines,

prerequisites to immortality'.<sup>24</sup> Such mastery grants him, in his estimation, status as a deity, one worthy of entering a heavenly dinner party attended by an array of gods and goddesses. He is refused admittance, however, because, as he is told, while he may 'be a deity', he is 'still a monkey'.<sup>25</sup> The Monkey King reacts violently, physically besting the heavenly beings, but finds himself troubled, even haunted, by his new self-consciousness about his 'monkey-ness'. After mastering further disciplines of kung-fu, he eventually declares that he has 'transcended' his former title of 'Monkey King' and is to be called 'The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven'.<sup>26</sup> He proceeds to announce his new name to the various deities. They respond by ridiculing him, leading the angry and frustrated 'Great Sage' once again to assert his dominance through violence.

Because Yang's version of the Monkey King begins by emphasising themes of identity, self-definition, exclusion, and transformation, linking his story directly to that of Jin/Danny, critics have understandably seen the Monkey King as a figure for the human character, and for Asian American bicultural identity more generally. Binbin Fu points out that 'the most fascinating transformer in the novel is none other than the Monkey King himself. . . [as Yang transforms] the proverbial monkey's tale into one of self-search and self-acceptance, [and] provides an illuminating parallel to Jin Wang's/Danny's coming-of-age narrative'.<sup>27</sup> And as Lan Dong argues, quoting Yang in the process, the Monkey King is:

a character struggling with self-doubt, propelling him to use his transforming abilities as a coping mechanism. The author perceives the Monkey King's struggle as 'a stand-in for Asian Americans and anyone else who has been on the minority side of a minority-majority dynamic'. The exclusion that the Monkey King receives from deity hierarchy in heaven and his ability to transform into different shapes metaphorically echoes the difficulties that Yang's second protagonist, Jin Wang, encounters at school as well as his attempts to solve his identity problem.<sup>28</sup>

Such echoing—and Yang's comment embedded in the quotation from Dong's article—nonwithstanding, Yang's remarks from the interviews quoted earlier, as well as the way in which the Monkey King's saga continues from this point on, suggest that the character figures the bicultural subject in more, and in more insistently theological, ways than may appear at first. This becomes clear, and the Monkey King character becomes more complex, once the gods and goddesses, desperate for relief from the Monkey King's outbursts, appeal to 'the Lion, the Ox, the Human, and the Eagle, emissaries of Tze-Yo-Tzuh', hoping they will persuade Tze-Yo-Tzuh to act to resolve these on-going disputes.<sup>29</sup> The 'emissaries' in question, of course, are themselves figures adopted from heavenly beings giving glory to God in the Book of Revelation (4: 6–11), figures that also have been, since at least the time of Jerome,

associated with the four canonical evangelists (Mark, Luke, Matthew and John, respectively, to use the order given both in Revelation and in Yang).<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the name 'Tze-Yo-Tzuh' is glossed in the very panel in which his name is introduced as 'He Who Is', an obvious allusion, particularly in this context, to the Divine Name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3: 14.<sup>31</sup> The verbal allusion is expanded visually when the Monkey King meets Tze-Yo-Tzuh, who is Asian as well as distinctly biblical in appearance, with a long, white beard, carrying a shepherd's crook and dressed in a robe that billows at the hem as if he is riding on clouds. Tze-Yo-Tzuh identifies himself as 'Monkey's' creator—he consistently refers to him simply as 'Monkey'—but Monkey protests: 'You are mistaken. I was born of a rock, created by no one.'<sup>32</sup> Tze-Yo-Tzuh merely replies that it was he who formed Monkey in the rock. Tze-Yo-Tzuh's self-description is worth quoting at length, inasmuch as it weaves in a range of biblical allusions related to Yahweh:

I am Tze-Yo-Tzuh. I was, I am, and I shall forever be. I have searched your soul, little monkey. I know your most hidden thoughts. I know when you sit and when you stand, when you journey and when you rest. Even before a word is upon your tongue, I have known it. My eyes have seen all your days. Where did you think you could hide from me? Where can you flee from my presence? I am in the heights of heaven and the depths of the underworld. Even at the end of all that is, my hand is there, holding you fast. It was I who formed your inmost being, I who knit you together in the womb of that rock. I made you with awe and wonder, for wonderful are all of my works.<sup>33</sup>

The spiritual struggles of Job and Jonah with God, not to mention voices from the Psalms, all find echoes here, in a scene in which Monkey himself continues to resist and struggle with the divine, seeking to define his identity by denying his dependence upon Tze-Yo-Tzuh ('I don't care who you say you are, old man, I can still take you').<sup>34</sup> At this point the ground literally crumbles beneath Monkey's feet, and he finds himself trapped under an enormous pile of rocks, where, the narrator tells us, he remains for five-hundred years. Significantly, Tze-Yo-Tzuh sets a 'seal over him to prevent him from exercising kung-fu': Monkey's self-acquired and ostensibly self-defining powers are rendered useless by his defiance of the divine.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, having been born from a rock and now buried beneath rocks, he is positioned for what might be understood as a (spiritual) rebirth. Indeed, Yang draws Monkey at the base of the rock pile, trapped from the waist down, but with head, arms and torso visible, suggesting a birth interrupted and incomplete, one which can only be completed by (as we shall see) Monkey's acceptance of, and willingness to live in harmonious relationship with, the divine will.<sup>36</sup>



When Yang's book next returns to the Monkey King's saga, the reader is introduced to a new character, the monk Wong Lai-Tsao. Marked by a lightly comedic humility, he is all but inept at spiritual practices such as meditating and fasting, but utterly dedicated to feeding, and providing medical care for, the local poor. When asked by one of them to explain his dedication, he replies: 'I am no more worthy of love than you, yet Tze-Yo-Tzuh loves me deeply and faithfully, providing for my daily needs. How can I not respond in kind?'<sup>37</sup> Suddenly, the poor vagrants' appearances change, and they reveal themselves to be, in fact, the Lion, Ox, Human, and Eagle, the emissaries of Tze-Yo-Tzuh. They explain to Wong Lai-Tsao that he has been chosen by Tze-Yo-Tzuh to 'deliver three packages to the West', and they assure him: 'A star shall guide your way.'<sup>38</sup> Wong Lai-Tsao immediately embraces the divine will—'I accept whatever plans Tze-Yo-Tzuh has for me'—quite in contrast to the earlier obstinacy of the Monkey King, who, he is told, will be one of three 'disciples' who are to accompany Wong Lai-Tsao on this journey to the West.<sup>39</sup> The three packages and guiding star already hint at the gospel overtones of the journey to come, and these become explicit and undeniable later in the book, when the Monkey King recounts his experience of his journey, portrayed in flashback, for Jin Wang (in a crucial passage which will be discussed below). Soon Wong Lai-Tsao finds the Monkey King, still trapped under the pile of rocks, still arrogantly insistent on his own greatness. When told that he is to accompany Wong Lai-Tsao on his journey, he complains he is unable to exercise his kung-fu powers in order to change form and free himself, but, as the monk tells Monkey, returning to his true form 'is not an exercise of kung-fu, but a release of it'.<sup>40</sup> He continues to resist, and continues to be trapped, when Wong Lai-Tsao tells him—in words reminiscent of several of Gene Yang's own comments about his experience and understanding of the Asian-inflected, kenotically-oriented Christianity in which he was raised—'To find your true identity within the will of Tze-Yo-Tzuh, that is the highest of all freedoms.'<sup>41</sup> The Monkey King finally surrenders, transforming to his smaller, more humbly monkey-like form which allows him to crawl easily out from under the rocks, completing his implied 'rebirth'. Importantly, however, he then does not lose his kung-fu abilities but rather regains them, physically routing a small cohort of variously-sized demons who have attacked Wong Lai-Tsao before he and the monk resume their 'journey to the West' together, with the Monkey King in the role of faithful servant, literally supporting his wounded master. In other words, the Monkey King's self-constructing and self-defining kung-fu abilities are not denied, but rather enhanced and put to a just use, once he has placed himself within, and as servant to, the will of Tze-Yo-Tzuh. In sum, Yang represents the Monkey King's understanding of his true identity as inherently relational, and even vocational, *vis-à-vis* a Christian conception of God.

Once one takes seriously the explicitly theological, and implicitly Christian, dimensions of the Monkey King's story in *American Born Chinese*, it cannot but inform a reading of Jin Wang and his quest to understand and shape his own bicultural identity. The middle-school aged Jin, as mentioned earlier, transforms himself into Danny. He does so in the wake of a fight with his friend Wei-Chen, in which Jin (who is of Chinese descent) cruelly tells him he does not think Wei-Chen (who is of Taiwanese descent) is worthy of having as his girlfriend Suzy (who is of Japanese descent) because he is an 'F.O.B.' ('Fresh Off the Boat'), which in the immediate context is an accusation that Wei-Chen, in appearance, demeanour, and values, is insufficiently 'American'.<sup>42</sup> This 'truth' as Jin insists it is, becomes something that Jin unwittingly internalises about himself as well, as he falls asleep to dream of his long-ago conversation with the herbalist's wife. In the dream she tells him, 'You've done it. Now what would you like to become?'—'it' being, presumably, forfeited his soul. Jin wakes to find himself with a 'new face', a new, blond-haired, blue-eyed appearance, and in need of a new name: 'Danny'.<sup>43</sup>

This leads to the final section of the book, the climax of which is a slapstick fight between Danny and Chin-Kee. The battle plays out as a bicultural psychomachia, between Jin's 'American' self-image Danny and Chin-Kee, the living embodiment of Jin's shame and even self-loathing with regard to his Chinese heritage, a shame shaped by the very cultural stereotypes which have been foisted upon him and which he has come to internalise. The fight ends when Danny quite literally knocks off Chin-Kee's head, revealing it to have been all along merely a mask for the Monkey King. The Monkey King then reverts to his true form, and Danny does the same, and Jin and the Monkey King begin a conversation that for the first-time reader invites a reconsideration of the entire book.<sup>44</sup>

The Monkey King identifies himself as an 'emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzuh', and goes on to say: 'I have stood in His holy presence—since the completion of my test of virtue, my journey to the West.'<sup>45</sup> A flashback panel depicts the Monkey King 'standing in His holy presence' in a posture of prayer, as are simultaneously (from left to right) Tze-Yo-Tzuh's Lion emissary, Human emissary, Wong Lai-Tsao, and another of Wong's three companions, with Tze-Yo-Tzuh at the centre. All of the figures gaze out from the panel directly toward the viewer, in iconographic fashion, seeming to invite the reader's entrance into an extra-temporal moment of being in the presence of the divine. Indeed, the Monkey King's own words in his account of his experiences emphasise the transcendence of time and place. He implies that he has never left Tze-Yo-Tzuh's presence, including, presumably, during the entire time of his visits with Jin/Danny: 'I have stood in his holy presence since the completion of my test of virtue, my journey to the West.'<sup>46</sup> The Monkey King's evident ability to be in the constant, continuous presence of God

regardless of his physical location began after a journey that had culminated in no less than an encounter with the Christ-child. In a flashback rendered in the bottom panel of page 215, Yang draws the Holy Family, with Mary in traditional blue garb and the infant Jesus reaching his hand out to the Monkey King, who reverently bows his head. A comet-like image in the sky suggests the star signalling Jesus' birth, and gifts are being offered to the family by the Monkey King and others. The Monkey King seems positioned as one of the *μάγοι* from Matthew's Gospel (2: 1), and whether one imagines these figures who have come from the East as 'kings' (as tradition has come to characterise them) or 'wise men' (as *μάγοι* is most often rendered in English Bible translations), visualising the 'Monkey King/Great Sage' as one of them lends a somewhat ironically fulfilled dimension to his self-proclaimed and heretofore unfulfilled identity.<sup>47</sup>

The Monkey King then reveals to Jin that Jin's friend, Wei-Chen, is in fact his eldest son, who had wished to follow in his father's footsteps and become an emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzuh himself.<sup>48</sup> Wei-Chen's task was to transform his appearance from monkey to human, and live among and serve human beings for forty years. In another flashback, the Monkey King explains to Wei-Chen that the duties of an emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzuh are to 'serve Him and all that He loves', particularly human beings, whom 'Tze-Yo-Tzuh considers... the pinnacle of his creation'.<sup>49</sup> Eventually frustrated by human insensitivity and pettiness, however, Wei-Chen refused to continue in his task and rejected his father, because in his view 'anything is better than a lifetime of servitude to humans'.<sup>50</sup> It was then, the Monkey King tells Jin, that the Monkey King (appearing as Chin-Kee) began instead to visit Jin (as Danny), 'to serve as [Jin's] conscience—as a signpost to [his] soul'.<sup>51</sup> It is not precisely clear how the Monkey King was serving in this way while appearing as Chin-Kee unless we understand the latter figure to be a manifestation of how Jin perceives his own Chinese heritage, in the 'visual vocabulary' of how he imagines others will perceive him as a Chinese person—in hatefully stereotypical ways. As one critic puts it: 'Yang uses the comic form to draw (or draw out) his Asian American character's most secret fear: the classification into a stereotype.'<sup>52</sup> Relentlessly embarrassing to Jin, Chin-Kee's demeanour and behaviour—from speaking with a thick accent to lusting after a 'pletty Amellican girl' whose feet he 'must bind', to being a model student who seems to know every answer in every class—in effect had been Jin's demeanour and behaviour as he *imagined them to have been perceived by others*.<sup>53</sup> But that projection of his own sense of, and insecurities surrounding, his Chinese identity—Chin-Kee as the externalised and embodied view Jin takes of himself, thinking others have already taken it of him—acquires a distinctly theological dimension once the Monkey King identifies himself not merely in terms of Jin's ethnicity, but of his 'conscience'.<sup>54</sup> What exactly might be meant by that

word is left unexplained in the book, but since Yang has already taken pains to depict the Monkey King's development and identity through biblical phrases and imagery, Paul's ideas regarding conscience, or to use his word, *syneidesis*, are certainly of interest. Consider the following passage from Romans (2: 14–16):

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience (*συνειδήσεως*) also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.<sup>55</sup>

One might argue the struggle with Chin-Kee is a struggle between Jin and his own conscience, the witness within himself to God's law written in his heart, a struggle not unlike the resistance to Tze-Yo-Tzuh shown by the Monkey King early in his own narrative. And like the Monkey King—but unlike Wei-chen—Jin finally acquiesces to the divine will.<sup>56</sup> Jin's wrestling with his bicultural identity is also a struggle with his theological identity, his selfhood depicted as in necessary and inevitable relation with God. Jin asks the Monkey King before his departure: 'So what am I supposed to do now?' Yang draws two wordless panels to indicate the pregnant pause, as the Monkey King and Jin regard each other in momentary silence, and then the Monkey King answers: 'You know, Jin, I would have saved myself from five hundred years' imprisonment beneath a mountain of rock had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey.'<sup>57</sup> If Jin's difficulties with Chin-Kee parallel the Monkey King's difficulties with Tze-Yo-Tzuh, then, conversely, his apparent acceptance of the Monkey King's lesson, which amounts to an acceptance of his 'true self', is also framed as parallel to the Monkey King's 'rebirth' as his true self, and in the end is a kind of allegory of his acceptance of his 'true self', and authentically bicultural identity, as a self that exists always already in relationship with God. As Yang remarks, in words quoted earlier: 'For people who grow up in between cultures, we often don't feel at home in either one. . . so you find a home in the divine will.'

Yang's theological comment, when brought to bear on *American Born Chinese*, suggests something of how his graphic novel does its own theological work, functioning as a kind of literary and artistic site for the construction and articulation of several contemporary principles of Asian American theology. Peter C. Phan, for instance, in his summary of the Christology of the Chinese theologian Choan-Seng Song, discusses the intersection of narrative and theological imagination. Phan quotes Song regarding the need to 'perceive in human history "a theological feast of stories—the story of Jesus, stories in

Asia, stories in Hebrew scripture, stories from the Christian community, and stories from the rest of the world, told as stories of God's dealing with humanity".<sup>58</sup> Phan continues: 'Another fertile source for Song's theology is Chinese proverbs and folktales, events of Chinese history, and stories of real people. To do Asian theology, says Song, theologians must 'turn to the most indigenous, most authentic and most abundant resource of all Asian resources—folktales, the stories of people—old and new'.<sup>59</sup> It is just this sort of multicultural narrative theology that one finds in the varied but ultimately integrated narratives of *American Born Chinese*. Yang's text even enacts exactly what Song seems to have in mind when suggesting that Christian theology can rise out of specifically Asian American folktale tradition, when it roots Jin Wang's conscience and spiritual self-awakening in the story and presence of the Monkey King. Indeed, *American Born Chinese* fairly ends with Jin finding what theologian Sang Hyun Lee describes as 'the courage to face the bewildering space of liminality and to do the work of constructing a hybrid identity without relying upon the false security of an essentialized finite principle', which, according to Lee, is precisely what faith provides in identity construction for Asian American Christians.<sup>60</sup>

Gene Luen Yang is not only a Chinese American author but also a Roman Catholic one, who has made no secret in interviews of his Catholic faith. Moreover, Yang works Christian scenes, imagery, and ideas subtly but clearly into *American Born Chinese*, placing them in dialogue, as it were, with Chinese folklore, especially the ancient story of the Monkey King. This evocative and transformative amalgamation of Western and Eastern theological and mythological traditions and concepts becomes a fundamental discursive matrix within which the main characters' respective senses of identity take shape, and out of which they are able to continue to develop and grow. Yang's Monkey King's journey to the West is nothing less than a journey to Christ, with the pivotal moments of his growth in self-understanding framed in Christian terms and images. Consequently, Jin Wang's struggle with his cultural heritage is not only a struggle with ethnicity but also with religious inheritance and understanding. Insofar as Jin's journey toward bicultural identity is deeply shaped by his encounter with the Monkey King, and insofar as the Monkey King's spiritual journey does serve, as so many critics have shown, as a parallel for Jin's, then we cannot but think we are to read Jin's encounter with the Monkey King, and his sense of identity, as inherently spiritual and theologically Christian.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research and writing of this article was supported by a Summer Research Stipend from the Niagara University Research Council.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> In addition to being a National Book Award finalist, *American Born Chinese* won the 2007 Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, the 2007 Eisner Award, the *San Francisco Chronicle's* Best Book of the Year, *School Library Journal's* Best Book of the Year, as well as other honours. As the Printz award suggests, *American Born Chinese* appeals to young adult readers, but like many works of children's/young adult literature, it is ultimately a 'cross-written' text often read by adults, not least in college and university courses.
- <sup>2</sup> J. Doughty, 'More than Meets the "I": Chinese Transnationality in Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*', *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* 1 (2010) 54–60, p. 56.
- <sup>3</sup> A complete translation of the novel is A.C. Yu, trans. *The Journey to the West*, 4 vols (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977).
- <sup>4</sup> G.L. Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second, 2006), p. 221. All references to *American Born Chinese* are from this edition.
- <sup>5</sup> J. Gardner, 'Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim', in F.L. Aldama (ed.), *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), pp. 132–47, p. 138. On comics theory and the distinctive demands of reading comics, see also (from a varied and ever-growing list): J. Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); T. Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, trans. A. Miller (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011); and H. Miodrag, *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).
- <sup>6</sup> M.H. Song, "'How Good It Is to Be a Monkey": Comics, Racial Formation, and *American Born Chinese*', *Mosaic* 43 (2010) 73–92, p. 74.
- <sup>7</sup> L. Dong, 'Reimagining the Monkey King in Comics: Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*', in L. Vallone and J. Mickenberg (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 231–51, p. 232. Dong's article gives a summary of *The Journey to the West* and the Monkey King character in traditional Chinese literature, as well as citing other, more contemporary literary adaptations, for both adults and children. Dong notes that in his particular adaptation Yang innovates by 'target[ing] a young adult (rather than child) audience and foreground[ing] issues of race and ethnicity' (Dong, 'Reimagining the Monkey King in Comics', p. 235).
- <sup>8</sup> Doughty, 'More than Meets the "I"', pp. 59–60.
- <sup>9</sup> There is also a growing body of work on the pedagogical possibilities of *American Born Chinese*. See, for example, H. Hammond, 'Graphic Novels and Multi-Modal Literacy: A High School Study with *American Born Chinese*', *Bookbird* 50 (2012) 22–32.
- <sup>10</sup> R.V. Hathaway, "'More Than Meets the Eye": Transformative Intertextuality in Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*', *ALAN Review* 37 (2009) 41–7, p. 43.
- <sup>11</sup> Gardner, 'Same Difference', p. 139.
- <sup>12</sup> A.D. Lewis and C.H. Kraemer (eds), *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (New York: Continuum, 2010); B. Saunders, *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).
- <sup>13</sup> D. Rushkoff, 'Foreword', in Lewis and Kraemer, *Graven Images*, p. x.

- <sup>14</sup> G.L. Yang, *Boxers and Saints*, 2 vols (New York: First Second, 2013).
- <sup>15</sup> 'If You're Going to Fail, Just Make Sure You Fail Big: An Interview with Gene Luen Yang', *The Comics Journal*, 27 Nov. 2013. <http://www.tcj.com/if-youre-going-to-fail-just-make-sure-you-fail-big-an-interview-with-gene-luen-yang/>.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Boxers & Saints' & Compassion: Questions for Gene Luen Yang', NPR.org, 27 Oct. 2013. <http://www.npr.org/2013/10/22/234824741/boxers-saints-compassion-questions-for-gene-luen-yang>.
- <sup>17</sup> 'If You're Going to Fail', *The Comics Journal*, 27 Nov. 2013.
- <sup>18</sup> 'The Millions Interview: Gene Luen Yang', 8 Jul. 2010. <http://www.themillions.com/2010/07/the-millions-interview-gene-luen-yang.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> 'Write Your Life, Live Your Faith', *Sojourners*, Sept.–Oct. 2013. <https://sojo.net/magazine/september-october-2013/write-your-life-live-your-faith>. See also C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 54.
- <sup>20</sup> N. Liao, 'Gene Luen Yang's Comic Consciousness', *US Catholic* 79 (Sept. 2014). <http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201408/gene-luen-yangs-comic-consciousness-29309>.
- <sup>21</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, pp. 23–4.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27–8.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- <sup>27</sup> B. Fu, review, *American Born Chinese*, MELUS 32 (2007) 274–6, p. 275.
- <sup>28</sup> Dong, 'Reimagining the Monkey King in Comics', pp. 237–8.
- <sup>29</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, p. 67.
- <sup>30</sup> 'Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come".' (Revelation 4: 6b–8; NRSV. All other biblical quotations are from this translation.)
- <sup>31</sup> In a blog post dated 21 Apr. 2010, Yang responds to a question about Tze-Yo-Tzuh by saying that "'Tze-Yo-Tzuh" is actually a transliteration of "I AM" in Chinese. The Chinese phrase has connotations of...uh... "self-existence" is the best way I can describe it. An existence independent of any other. The original Monkey King tale, first written down in a novel called Journey To The West [sic], was Buddhist at its core...I wanted to do an Asian-American retelling of the tale, so I added Western, Judeo-Christian elements to my version.' See <http://humblecomics.com/blog/comments.php?y=10&m=04&entry=entry100415-011419>. Cf. Exodus 3: 14–15: 'God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM".' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you".'
- <sup>32</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, p. 69.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- <sup>34</sup> *American Born Chinese*, p. 82. Cf. Job 11: 7–8, 'Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven...Deeper than Sheol...'; Jonah 1: 3, 'But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD'; Ps. 139: 4, 'Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely', and 139: 14, 'I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works.' Dong notes that in the original *Journey to the West*, it is the Buddha who

- confines Monkey 'under Wuxing Mountain' (Dong, 'Reimagining the Monkey King in Comics', p. 233). In his jacket art for the 2006 edition of his graphic novel, Yang tellingly includes the image of the Monkey King buried beneath the rocks as a lightly sketched background to the full-colour, foreground image of young Jin Wang holding his Transformer toy—Jin and his physical signifier of transformation superimposed on a 'ghostly' image of spiritual transformation.
- <sup>35</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, p. 84.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136–7.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193–4, p. 198.
- <sup>44</sup> See Gardner, 'Same Difference', p. 140: 'The Chin-Kee we read the second time is a very different character from the gross spectacle we encountered... the first time.'
- <sup>45</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, p. 215.
- <sup>46</sup> Somewhat inexplicably, Dong takes the Monkey King's successful completion of his journey as an indication that he 'achieves Buddhahood' (Dong, 'Reimagining the Monkey King in Comics', p. 237).
- <sup>47</sup> Cf. Matthew 2: 1: 'In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."'
- <sup>48</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, p. 216.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- <sup>52</sup> R.G. Davis, 'Childhood and Ethnic Visibility in Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese*', *Prose Studies* 35 (2013) 7–15, p. 14.
- <sup>53</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, p. 50.
- <sup>54</sup> Song notes ('How Good It Is to Be a Monkey', p. 90) that Yang's book represents the process of racial formation occurring just beyond the eye's ability to perceive, a point relevant to the conscience formation, and theological relationship, we find to have been occurring for Jin throughout the book as well.
- <sup>55</sup> Also relevant is the Vatican II document, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 16, available in A. Flannery, OP (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1975), pp. 916–17. See also R.B. Connors and P.T. McCormick, *Character, Choices and Community: The Three Faces of Christian Ethics* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), pp. 117–19.
- <sup>56</sup> For a fascinating discussion of how Yang, in the novel's epilogue, represents Wei-chen's ongoing quest to transform his identity in the context of what she describes as the 'Japanese import car scene', see Song, 'How Good It Is to Be a Monkey'.
- <sup>57</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, p. 223.
- <sup>58</sup> P.C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), p. 152.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- <sup>60</sup> S.H. Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 117. Lee also mentions Rita Nakashima Brock's notion of 'interstitial integrity', 'the ability to construct one's hybrid identity in a liminal space in which the dominance of any of the factors is not tolerated', thereby 'without abolishing the ambiguity and openness of the liminal situation of a hybrid identity' (p. 118). Lee's entire Chapter 6, 'Asian American Identity and Christian Faith' (pp. 109–22) is relevant.