

# Teaching Chinese History with Graphic Novels

By Jennifer Hanson and Peter Gilmartin

Over the past few years, comics and graphic novels have seen a rise in popularity and adoption among secondary and higher education instructors. For the first half of 2014, sales of comics and graphic novels was approximately US \$250 million.<sup>1</sup> A seemingly simple type of reading material, graphic novels can be complex works of literature requiring students to engage critically with text and images.

## What is a graphic novel, and why are we using that term?

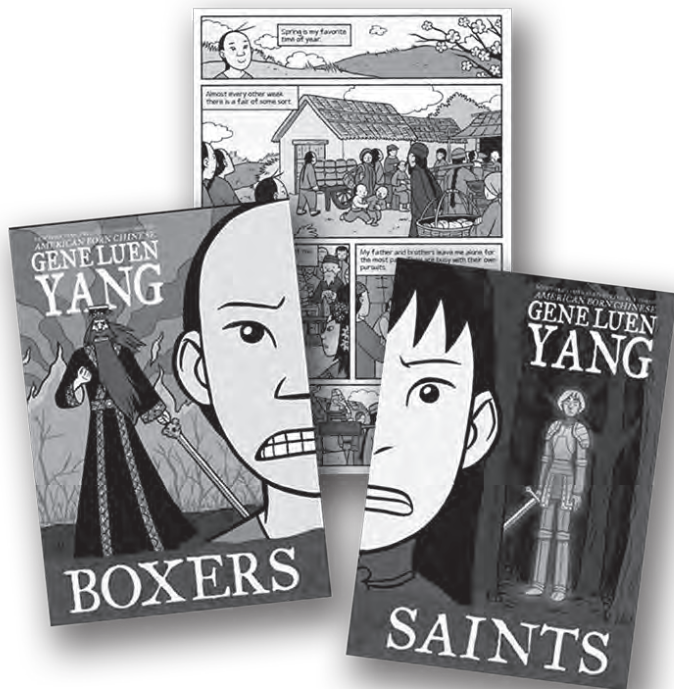
There is much debate about the phrase “graphic novel” and how it is different from “comic book.” For the purposes of this article, a graphic novel is defined as a book written in comic form that is not part of a periodical series. When we think of the Marvel comics like *Spider-Man* and *Superman*, we envision glossy, magazine-like serial publications. A graphic novel stands alone as a story, like any other novel. Price and length also distinguish graphic novels from comic books—a *Justice League* comic book retails for \$3.99 and is approximately thirty pages long, while *American Born Chinese* retails for \$9.99 and is 240 pages long. The term “novel,” though, is confusing. A graphic novel can be fiction, memoir, biography, or nonfiction. In fact, three of the titles discussed below are memoirs.

**In recent years, a number of graphic novels about China have been published in the United States. Below, we highlight five that can be used to teach about Chinese history.**

## Why teach with graphic novels?

Storytelling elements (faces, speech balloons, caption boxes, etc.) in graphic novels provide opportunities to build visual literacy skills, as readers must read both text and image to discern all aspects of the story being told. Graphic novel panels can vary in size and spatial arrangement, allowing students to read in nonlinear patterns as opposed to reading text only. In addition, readers must pay close attention to color, the use of shading, and special lettering to detect visual cues in the story.

In recent years, a number of graphic novels about China have been published in the United States. Below, we highlight five that can be used to teach about Chinese history.



## *Boxers & Saints*

By GENE LUEN YANG

COLOR BY LARK PIEN

NEW YORK: FIRST SECOND, 2013

336 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1596433595, PAPERBACK (BOXERS)

176 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1596436893, PAPERBACK (SAINTS)

Yang's two-volume 2013 National Book Award Finalist graphic novels examine the Boxer Rebellion from two perspectives—a Boxer (or member of The Righteous and Harmonious Fists) and a Chinese Christian convert.

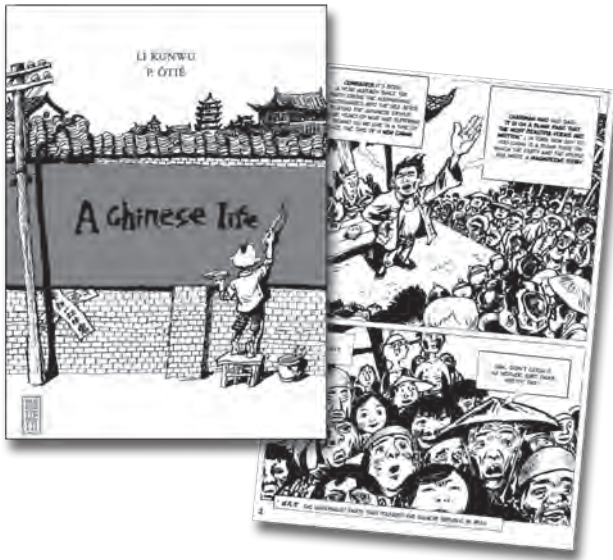
In *Boxers*, Little Bao, a young boy from Shan-tung Province, witnesses foreigners beat up his father. As tensions rise among Chinese and foreigners in the late 1890s, Little Bao and his brothers join the Big Sword Society and begin traveling the Chinese countryside, training other fighters. When their leader is killed, Little Bao succeeds him and changes the group's name to The Righteous and Harmonious Fists, leading them to Peking to confront the “foreign devils.”

*Saints* examines the experiences of Chinese Christian converts in the nineteenth century from the perspective of Four-Girl, a young village girl outcast by her family. After being called “devil” by her grandfather when she accidentally breaks the family's Tu Di Gong statue, she misunderstands the villagers' term of “devil” for the missionaries and decides to “become the greatest devil.” After converting to Christianity, Four-Girl takes the name Vibiana and moves to Peking with the local priest.

*Boxers & Saints* examines the late nineteenth-century unrest and conflict in China as Europeans, especially missionaries, arrived following the Opium Wars. While Little Bao's story depicts rising tension among Chinese villagers and the “foreign devils,” Vibiana's story explores motivations of Chinese Christian converts and their struggles of faith versus nation and family. When Vibiana's path crosses Little Bao's in each book, the reader witnesses her demise from each perspective.

*Boxers & Saints* is an expertly woven story providing opportunities to compare and contrast not just Chinese perspectives of the Boxer Rebellion but also the use of color and visual storytelling through the graphic novel format. In *Boxers*, vivid colors are used, most notably when the Boxers fight foreigners. *Saints*, on the other hand, is colored primarily in shades of grays and browns. Why might the artist choose certain shading and coloring in each book? How does color symbolize meaning when reading a graphic novel?

As an often-difficult moment of Chinese history for students to understand, these graphic novels of the Boxer Rebellion allow for a complexity of perspectives while providing a visually appealing and readable text for students.



***A Chinese Life***

BY LI KUNWU AND P. OTIE

NEW YORK: ABRAMS, 2012

704 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1906838553, PAPERBACK

*A Chinese Life* by Li Kunwu and P. Otie is a graphic memoir encompassing 1955 to today. Li provides a personal perspective of his life and the experiences of his family and friends in Yunnan. He traces his own development as an artist in a political environment. Though unapologetic about his past, he does choose to avoid saying much about a few political minefields. This is not a comprehensive history of the period but rather a particular human story that sheds light on the national drama. In addition, *A Chinese Life*, with its lively black and white drawings, opens up questions about daily life in China.

This book is a rich source about life on the ground away from the political center for those interested in learning about modern China. Li provides honest reflections that are not overly distorted by hindsight or intentional manipulation. Thus, when he draws propaganda posters as a youth or participates in the Cultural Revolution, the reader understands why Li did so at the time. While the national context may be hard to follow for those not familiar with Chinese history, the book provides captions that facilitate large explorations of important historical events.



***Forget Sorrow***

BY BELLE YANG

NEW YORK: W. W. NORTON & Co., 2011

250 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0393339963, PAPERBACK

Belle Yang in *Forget Sorrow* primarily tells the story of her father's family before and after the 1949 revolution, while also intertwining her own experience as a Chinese-American woman who was threatened by a boyfriend, went to China to escape, and returned to spend time learning from her father about family. Yang recounts what she learned about her family that was upwardly mobile in Chinese society before the chaos of the civil war and the victory of the Communists. Adept at showing interpersonal relationships and the process of family decision-making, Yang reveals much about traditional Chinese philosophy and how it interacts with modernity.



***Little White Duck***

***A Childhood in China***

BY NA LIU AND ANDRÉS VERA MARTÍNEZ

NEW YORK: GRAPHIC UNIVERSE, 2012

96 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0761381150, PAPERBACK

Na Liu's graphic memoir *Little White Duck* chronicles her childhood in the late 1970s in Wuhan. Through eight vignettes, we learn about Da Qin's (Na Liu's nickname) home and school life, Lei Feng Day (honoring a selfless PRC soldier), New Year's celebrations, and life in urban and rural China. Beginning in 1976 at the time of Mao's death, *Little White Duck* uses brightly colored panels to depict the promise of a new generation in China.

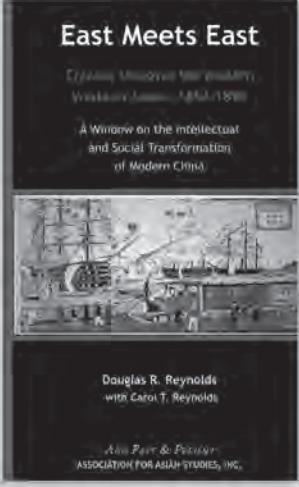
In the vignette "A Sad, Sad Day," Da Qin is told that Mao Ye Ye (grandpa Mao) has died, and as the country mourns, Da Qin recounts how her parents benefited from opportunities provided by Mao Zedong's government. In "Don't Waste Your Food—Children Are Starving in China," Da Qin's mother remembers hardships during the Great Famine. Both

*Asia Past and Present*

**New!**

**East Meets East**

**Chinese Discover the Modern World in Japan, 1854-1898**  
A Window on the Intellectual and Social Transformation of Modern Japan



**Douglas R. Reynolds with Carol T. Reynolds**

Asia Past & Present  
ASSOCIATION FOR ASIAN STUDIES, INC.

**Douglas R. Reynolds with Carol T. Reynolds**

Through the backdoor of Chinese diplomats and their careers, *East Meets East* explores three important dimensions of modern Chinese history: Chinese discovery of the modern world in Japan; reports on Japan suppressed by higher authorities because of their insistent objectivity and non-Sinocentric perspective; and state sponsored innovations to meet crises which opened the gates to intellectual and social transformations at the grassroots. Meaty reports on Japan directly informed the Hundred Days Reforms of 1898 while, inside China since 1861, extrabureaucratic *Ju* (Bureaus)—new industrial arsenals, navy yards, translation bureaus and schools, mines, shipping, textiles, telegraphy, and railroads—welcomed “irregular path” (*yitu*) persons having modern knowledge distinct from “regular path” (*zhengtu*) bureaucrats. Against this background it becomes much clearer why the Xinzheng modernization reforms took hold after 1901 and why after 1912 elites old and new rejected Yuan Shikai’s bid to restore the imperial order in 1915–16. After 1916, there was no going back. The old order and era were truly “gone with the wind.”

ISBN 978-0-924304-76-7. Pb: 730 pages approx.  
List Price: \$38 (AAS Member Price: \$30)

**Association for Asian Studies, Inc.**  
www.asian-studies.org

flashbacks about Da Qin’s parents use darker colors and shading to convey the mood of a different, more challenging time period in Chinese history. The panels about the Great Famine use dark blue shades, reminiscent of the unisex army uniform common in 1960s China.

While the text is rather straightforward in *Little White Duck*, vignettes vary in style. Using “The Four Pests” and “My New Year Feast,” readers can examine how a storyteller chooses to use narration and dialogue in a graphic novel and consider how each method of storytelling is effective. Facial expressions are also used to great effect in *Little White Duck*, providing readers with visual cues as to when the main character is excited or sad.

While students might draw parallels between their childhood experiences and Da Qin’s, this is very much a Chinese childhood experience of the late 1970s. Students will need some knowledge of China’s history of the 1950s–70s to understand some of the nuances of Na Liu’s stories. The glossary and timeline provided at the end of the book help contextualize the time period and content.

### Chinese History with Graphic Novels

Graphic novels require that students engage critically with both text and images, inferring transitions and constructing meaning from storytelling elements such as panel layout, shading, and facial expressions. Using graphic novels to teach about the Boxer Rebellion, post-1949 era, and Cultural Revolution, Chinese experiences and perspectives come to life through the visual aspects of each story. These selections provide accessible material for thinking critically about China’s changes over the last century and serve as valuable supplements to writings by historians.

For more on reading and teaching with graphic novels, see our recommended resources listed below. ■

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

“Graphic Novels for the Global Classroom,” *Primary Source*, <http://tinyurl.com/men9ovv>.

“Graphic Novel Terms and Concepts,” *ReadWriteThink*, <http://tinyurl.com/mkzyjoz>.

“Using Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom,” *National Council of Teachers of English*, <http://tinyurl.com/yk8r3e3>.

Andrew Miller, “Using Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom,” *EduTopia*, <http://tinyurl.com/brkagjx>.

### NOTE

1. John Jackson Miller, “Comic Sales Recover From Winter to Finish First Half of 2014 Flat,” *Comichron*, last modified July 11, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/o4zod6y>.

JENNIFER HANSON is the Librarian at Primary Source, a nonprofit educational organization in Massachusetts. She earned a Master’s Degree in Library Science from Indiana University.

PETER GILMARTIN’s passion for Asia was ignited by his grandfather who worked at the Institute of Pacific Relations. He brings both preschool and secondary social studies teaching experience to his work at Primary Source. In addition to having lived and studied in Africa and China, Peter has taught in China, and led numerous study tours to Asia for museums, alumni associations, and Primary Source. A graduate of Antioch College, Peter is on the editorial board of the magazine *Education About Asia*.