GRAPHIC NOVEL AMERICAN BORN CHINESE: HYBRID IDENTITY IN HYBRID TEXT

Christy Tisnawijaya, M.Hum.
Pamulang University
(christy.tisnawijaya@gmail.com)

Abstract
American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang (2006) was the first graphic novel to be nominated for the National Book Award and won the Michael L. Printz Award 2007 for the best graphic novel category. It was considered successfully representing the hybrid identity of Chinese American. This article briefly discusses the rise of the graphic novel as part of the prose genre in the world literature. American Born Chinese is reviewed as an example of graphic novels; the narrative composed of visual and verbal languages makes the graphic novel a hybrid text.

Keywords: American Born Chinese, graphic novel, hybrid identity, hybrid text

1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2000), *American Born Chinese* (2006) was considered effectively introducing the world's cultural diversity. While *Persepolis* represents the Iranian culture based on Satrapi's childhood memoir, the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* represents the hybrid identity of Chinese American. The term graphic novel in the world literature is still being debated not only in regard to its position as a genre but also the naming of the graphic novel itself. Its similarity to comic book format makes a graphic novel being regarded as a mere comic book. Who invented the term graphic novel and on whose work the term was firstly used? Goldsmith stated that the rise of graphic novels is a part of comic book's development in America (2005). The term graphic novel was first used by Will Eisner on his own work titled *Contract with God* published by Baronet Books in 1978; his work was considered a comic book and therefore it was classified as a part of children literature which was not worth reading by adults (Goldsmith, 2005). At that point, comic books had a negative connotation, as a type of book that "too many pictures, too few words, and lack too much quality to ever be seriously considered as literature, or even books" (Spear, Benjamin, and Copeland, 2005: 37). Moreover, the comic book was regarded as "not real art" and the story was "unsophisticated"; since the graphic novel format was similar to the comic book format, graphic novel then was considered "not quite art" (Dafis, 2007: 7). Therefore, its appearance as the *Booker Prize* nominee was criticized; the word 'novel' in the term 'graphic novel' was only an illusion to make the value seemed higher than the comic book; the graphic novel was just a comic book, it was not being regarded as literature let alone received an award (Coren, 2012). Such views on the comic books, according to Goldsmith, caused the comic books to not be found in American libraries at that time (2005). Meanwhile, Eisner affirmed that the graphic novel has the same format as the comic book; "graphic novel is storytelling through, ..., sequential art" (in Goldsmith, 2005: 17). However, according to Eisner, a graphic novel has its own characteristic that distinguishes it from the comic book; the narrative in the graphic novel is similar to the narrative in the novel (in Goldsmith, 2005). However, Eisner's concept was not accepted by the American public, especially by librarians who played a significant role in the circulation of literary works from the writers to the readers.

Eisner's idea that the comic book format could be used as literature's medium was then developed by Art Spiegelman. He published his work, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986), about his father's life story of the Holocaust. Spiegelman's work, *Maus,* later won a *Pulitzer Prize* award in 1992 though not classified as a graphic novel (Goldsmith, 2005). Nevertheless, the term graphic novel was still not known and widely accepted by the literary community; the graphic novel has been synonymous with the comic book. Goldsmith, a senior librarian at the Public Library California, then collected similar works that could be categorized as graphic

novels in accordance with Eisner's theory. In 2002, Goldsmith and his colleagues worked together to hold a YALSA (*Young Adult Library Services Association*) conference to introduce the term graphic novel formally as a part of world literature. In its development, the graphic novel is considered an effective material for learning English as a second language. Schwarz (2002) stated that graphic novel, as a new literature's medium, could be used to introduce literature to children such as graphic novel *Give It Up! And Other Stories* (1995) by Peter Kuper, an adaptation of Kafka's work. Martin (2011) said that it is the reason why many literary works have been republished in graphic novel format, such as Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (Stanislas Brezet, 2003); Kafka's *The Trial* (Chantal Montellier and David Zane Mairowitz 2008); and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (Nancy Butler and Hugo Petrus, 2009). Therefore, what is a graphic novel and to what extend a literary work can be regarded as a graphic novel?

As was mentioned earlier, the graphic novel format is similar to comic book format so the term graphic novel has been questioned. The graphic novel is "[a] definition used by librarians refers to them as book-length narratives told using a combination of words and sequential art, … presented in comic book style" (Spear, Benjamin, and Copeland, 2005: 37). Moreover, Campbell stated that the graphic novel is "a comic-book narrative that is equivalent in form and dimensions to the prose novel" (2007: 13). Thus, there are two aspects to consider in reading the graphic novel: words (verbal language) and pictures (visual language).

The verbal language is the words presented in the graphic novel, the words that build the story; they are dialogues or narration of the story. The word *novel* in graphic novel refers to the narrative style of prose; a complete beginning-middle-end plot, which is not shown in comic books. "A graphic novel presents a narrative that has a clear-cut beginning and end, but a comic book presents one episode in a limitless series and, as a result, the beginning and end of the series' universe are immaterial to the story at hand" (Goldsmith, 2005: 25). Furthermore, the main characteristic in the graphic novel is the character's transformation at the end of the story (Howerton, 2010). Meanwhile, the visual language, the word *graphic* in the graphic novel, refers to pictures presented in a graphic novel which has the same concept with pictures in comic books. Goldsmith (2005) mentioned some of the anatomies of the comic book contained in the graphic novel, namely: *page layout*, *panel*, *gutter* (distance between panels); *balloon* (speech balloons); *bubble* (speech bubble); *caption* (box narrative); *iconography*; *onomatopoeia*; *visual hyperbole*. Moreover, Goldsmith stated that the pictures in the graphic novel represent the things that are not expressed in words, but still relate to the words themselves, so the reader must see the relationship between words and pictures (2010). Satrapi stated that drawing, in the graphic novel, is equal to writing, which is a way of communicating (in Julia Campbell 2004). Thus, a graphic novel is a hybrid text which is a combination of visual language and verbal language; the meaning of the text can be grasped by observing both languages. In that case, is graphic novel a classification of literary works or a genre?

Genre, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, is a "stratification" based on "[c]ertain features of language ... with the intentional aim" (2004: 675). In this case, there is a concept of literature classification based on the characteristics of the language used in the literary works which are related to the point of views or what kind of narrator(s) present(s) the story. "The theory of genre is a principle of order: literature and history of literature ... are classified by type of literature's structure [thus] [g]enre is not fixed, but corresponded to the literature's development" (Wellek and Warren, 1995: 299). In this case, the graphic novel itself is a derived term from the comic book. The term graphic novel has slowly been accepted in the world literature along with the discovery of the works that have similar characteristics, which are classified based on a certain characteristic that distinguishes it from the comic books. Keep in mind that the rise of a genre itself is not preceded by any collective writers' agreement to produce certain kind of works which then named a particular genre. The term graphic novel was indeed first applied by Will Eisner in his own work titled *Contract with God* (1978). However, works with similar format had appeared previously in the early twentieth century in parts of the world such as: *Tintin* in Belgium, which is similar to *Nancy Drew* or *Hardy Boys* in America, as well as *Buddha*, a biography of Siddhartha Gautama created by Osamu Tezuka, in

Japan (Goldsmith, 2010). Although its status as a genre is still being debated, the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang had won the *Michael L. Printz Award 2007.*

The following discussion is about how does the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* make use of its format as a hybrid text to present the hybrid identity issue?

2. AMERICAN BORN CHINESE: HYBRID IDENTITY IN HYBRID TEXT

The graphic novel is a sub-genre derived from the comic book, it consists of short narratives like a short story or novella; the graphic novel is "a genre that represents the creative interplay between text and image" (Martin, 2011). *American Born Chinese*, an example of the graphic novels, though, uses the same format as a common comic book; its narrative complexity is equal to the narrative in the novels in general. In this case, *American Born Chinese* as a graphic novel is a "multimodal literature," a narrative fiction using a comic format that combines words and pictures (Hammond, 2012). Thus, the graphic novel as a narrative text is a combination of visual language and verbal language. Definition of text as a communication tool is now has been expanded so that the text can be a combination of text and images in the print media or text can also be in a digital form such as film, music, television, drama (Arizpe and Styles in Hammond, 2012). As well as comic books, graphic novels provide a recurring image that is a symbol of ideas; when this symbol appears more frequently, the pictures or symbols are recognized as a language (Will Eisner in Hammond, 2012). Pictures in the graphic novel, thus, serve to support the narrative story, not just to illustrate the written words.

Therefore, a graphic novel is a *hybrid text*, a mix of verbal and visual language; its meaning can only be obtained by involving the two elements. The *verbal language* in the graphic novel includes dialogue sentences in the characters' speech balloons and the narrator's description about characterizations or settings related to the story in the caption boxes. The *visual language* includes the drawing style (some elements that commonly found in comic books that were mentioned in the previous chapter) and the coloring techniques.

In terms of narrative, there are three main stories in *American Born Chinese*, namely: the story of Monkey King, the story of Jin Wang and the story of Chin-Kee. Each story is shown partially and alternately with both chronological and flashback orders of 226 pages. At the beginning, all of the three stories seemed to not be related, but the plot of each story makes sense in a way that all three stories are interrelated. Monkey King, one of the gods, suffers discrimination. Despite having the extraordinary kung-fu ability, he is considered a common monkey which is not equal to the other gods. Elsewhere, Jin Wang, a Chinese American boy, is alienated by his school friends. Jin Wang is considered physically odd and has disgusting eating habits. Jin Wang becomes a timid teenager. Jin Wang then changes his hairstyle to be the same as a white American boy, Greg, his classmate. Meanwhile, Chin-Kee, Jin Wang's cousin, comes to visit and study in Jin Wang's school. Chin-Kee is a representation of ancient Chinese men. Just like the Monkey King, Chin-Kee's academic skills are not appreciated because his appearance is different from the majority in his class. *American Born Chinese* brings racism issues in relation to Chinese American hybrid identity. This is especially shown in the story of Jin Wang. As a Chinese American boy, Jin Wang must fit in; he has to find a way to mix his Chinese heritage along with his American community, both at the same time.

In *American Born Chinese* (2006), verbal language and visual language are used to establish the hybrid identity of Chinese American which is the main topic of the story narrative. Here are some elements of comic book anatomies which are parts of visual language:

1. Page Layout and Panel
The panels within each page can vary in size and number, depends on the picture's significance in the narrative. The narration (right picture) is read from the top left panel to the bottom, then move to the top right panel and the next; ending in the bottom right panel

(Gene, 2006: 8)

2. Balloon
Each balloon speech shows character's dialogue; each character has his/ her own balloon speech. Through the characters' sentences, the reader can map the characterization of each character (left picture).
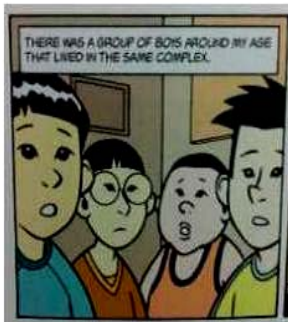

(Gene, 2006: 94)

3. Bubble
The unspoken of a character's thoughts is described with bubbles. In the right panel, Wei-Chen (right) thinks that Jin Wang (left) is a coward, like a turtle hiding in a shell.

(Gene, 2006: 93)

4. Caption
Narrator's voice, description about characters and setting (time or place) is placed in the caption box (left picture).

(Gene, 2006: 26)

5. Iconography
A picture or a symbol around a character's face, to describe his/her feelings, is called iconography.
In the right panel, the picture resembling a lightning bolt around the character's head describes Jin Wang's emotion when he is thinking about Amelia, a girl he likes.

(Gene, 2006: 105)

6. Visual hyperbole
Symbols or combination of letters that do not refer to specific words, used as an affirmation of a character's emotion, is called visual hyperbole. In the right panel, BLAAAARGFFF! is used to describe that Steve feels disgusted upon learning that he just drank some soda that mixed with Chin-Kee's urine.

7. Onomatopoeia

(Gene, 2006: 29)

The sound of a particular activity is

called Onomatopoeia. In the left panel, the word CLICK CLICK Clack Clack is the sound of abacus beads used by an old woman, a seller of herbal medicine.

Some characteristics of the comic book above have their own significance as a narrative text to convey the particular issue. Next, I will discuss the picture's function as a visual language in *American Born Chinese*.

As was mentioned earlier*, American Born Chinese* consists of three stories: the story of the Monkey King, the story of Jin Wang and the story of Chin-Kee. The three stories are displayed separately and alternately. Each character's image in a frame at the top center of the pages is used as a sign of the beginning of a story; every story begins with the main character image that once marked the end of the previous story.

This image always appears as a sign of the beginning of the story of the Monkey King.

This image always appears as a sign of the beginning of the story of Jin Wang.

This image always appears as a sign of the beginning of the story of Chin-Kee.

Coloring, as an aspect of visual language, is used to describe the identity of the characters in *American Born Chinese*. The characters, mainly divided into two types: Asian Americans and white Americans. In this manner, pictures, as a visual text, have a significant role in marking the differences of every character's physical identities. Therefore, the Asian American characters such as Jing Wang, Wei-Cen, and Suzy Nakamura are described with slanted eyes and given a slightly yellowish color, which

(Gene, 2006: 31)

shows the distinct physical characteristic of the Mongoloid race.

In the left panel, there is a visible difference drawing style between Asian American character and white American characters. Suzy, the girl in the middle, got a slightly yellowish coloring, with small eyes. In the right panel, Chin-Kee, a Chinese character who visited Jin Wang in America, got even a brighter yellow coloring than the other Asian

(Gene, 2006: 48)

Americans. Chin-Kee is also presented as a character that has slanted eyes, with buckteeth and long braided hair just like the hair of men of ancient China, and given the attributes of traditional Chinese clothes. Chin-Kee is a stereotypical representation of Chinese Americans.

The coloring technique as an aspect of visual language implies the discrimination of Chinese Americans as the identification of *the Self* as opposed to *the Other*. Therefore, the visual language is used to describe the racism issue, mainly about physical features, in this case especially skin color.

The visual language is not only manifested in drawing style and coloring technique of the characters but also in panel technique. There are some panels made as if they were sitcom scenes, which marked by words like HA HA HA HA as laughter and CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP as the applause that frequently appear in the sitcom. This panel technique is specifically used whenever Chin-Kee appears in the story. It represents the stereotype of Chinese Americans appearance as a joke in a sitcom.

(Gene, 2006: 49)

In the aspect of verbal language, there are two languages used in *American Born Chinese*: English and Chinese. These two languages are used to emphasize the hybrid id entity of Chinese American. English is used mostly in the narration of the story and in characters' dialogues. Chinese characters[17], on the other hand, appear at the top center on every page. The Chinese characters are different in each chapter so fro m its position, the reader can conclude that the Chinese characters are titles of the chapters (right picture). In the fight scenes (left picture), the dialogue in the speech balloons uses Chinese characters, which appear several times so that the reader can assume that they represent the names of Chinese martial stance.

(Gene, 2006: 7)

The Chinese characters (right picture) also appear as the seal on the rock where Monkey King is buried.

Chinese characters displayed are not accompanied by the author's

(Gene, 2006: 18)

English translation. However, certain that the presence of Chinese characters has helped enrich the text particularly in aspect of verbal language; characters appear on each language as one element of the hybrid identity, dialogues of Asian American characters are performed in brackets (<…>).

(Gene, 2006: 23)

it is the though small in size, Chinese page. In addition to verbal the

(Gene, 2006: 145)

(Gene, 2006: 39)

The readers can assume that the sentences between the brackets are dialogues in Chinese translated into English by the narrator; every time the character' dialogue appears in brackets, the character is considered currently using Chinese.
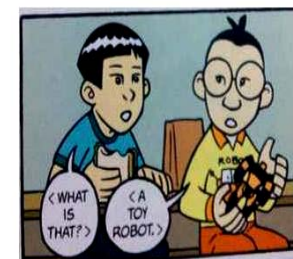
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[17] Every time the phrase *Chinese characters* appear, the word *characters* refer to letters; it doesn't mean characters in a sense of persons in the story narrative.

The use of English and Chinese in every page thus indicates the hybrid identity of Chinese American. Chinese American characters often use Chinese every time they meet other characters who can speak Chinese as well. However, this does not imply that these characters are not able to speak American English. Chinese and English are languages that used daily by Chinese Americans; English is used as being part of the American community, while Chinese is used as a cultural heritage. It does not necessary mean that one language is better than the other.

The main narrative characteristic of a graphic novel is the clear beginning-middle-end plot (Goldsmith, 2005). In this case, there is a transformation of the main character, from the beginning to the end of the story (Howerton, 2010). This transformation is especially seen in Jin Wang, both in his visual appearance and in his characterization.

Jin Wang's Transformation

1. Jin Wang's original appearance is straight black hairstyle (left picture).
2. Jin Wang imitates Greg's hairstyle; curly hair is styled to be more "American" (right picture).

(Gene, 2006: 93)

(Gene, 2006: 98)

3. Jin Wang is not satisfied with his new curly hairstyle. He feels that he needs a complete transformation to be a "real American," by changing his name into Danny; along with it he has a totally different look (left picture).
4. Jin Wang then re-transforms himself from Danny into the original Jin Wang.

(Gene, 2006: 198)

(Gene, 2006: 214)

At the beginning of the story, Jin Wang as a representation of a Chinese American character has straight black hair. Experiencing an alienated childhood because of his physical appearance which is considered "different" by his classmates, Jin Wang is not confident to approach Amelia, a white American girl. Jin Wang thinks that he would be able to approach Amelia if he had the same hairstyle as Greg, the American white boy who is close to Amelia. Jin Wang then changes his hair style into the dark curly hair. However, after changing his hairstyle, Jin Wang is still mocked by the other white Americans in his class. Jin Wang decides to have a complete transformation. Jin Wang changes his name to Danny. In the visual language, this transformation is shown as if Jin Wang and Danny were two different characters. Danny appears as a common white American character in the story. The transformation of Jin

Wang's characterization into Danny is shown at the end of the story. At first, Jin Wang did not like his physical appearances; he needed to get rid of his "Chinese-ness" and pursue the "American-ness" shown in his hairstyle. At the end of the story, thanks to the help of the Monkey King, Jin Wang realizes the artificiality of his identity as Danny is not important. Jin Wang accepted his hybrid identity as a Chinese American; his physical features do not diminish his identity as an American citizen.

3. CONCLUSION

The graphic novel, based on the discussion above, is a text that uses the comic book format and the novel's plot narrative style which consists of visual and verbal language; the complexity of pictures along with the narrative story makes it a hybrid text in which the narrative meaning depends on the relation between these two aspects. *American Born Chinese*, as an example of graphic novels, utilizes those aspects in accordance with its topic, the hybrid identity of Chinese American. This hybrid identity is constructed in several ways. First, the narrative includes the Chinese legend story of The Monkey King. The story is used as an example of the Chinese storytelling culture as the Chinese trait of being a Chinese American. Second, as part of the verbal language, English language and Chinese characters appear on every page. These languages are used by Chinese Americans in their daily life, as they live both in the American community and Asian American community. Third, in term of visual language, the drawing and coloring styles show the diversity of the characters, mainly in their physical appearance. The transformation of the main character, Jin Wang, can be seen as the characteristic of a graphic novel, which is different from the narrative style of a comic book.

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