



BOXERS & SAINTS

by GENE LUEN YANG

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INTRODUCTION

Gene Luen Yang's diptych, *Boxers & Saints*, collects two pieces of historical fantasy set in China during the Boxer Rebellion. The Boxer Rebellion was not only an important moment in Chinese and British history, but it is also significant because of its effect on world history generally. Very seldom is the Boxer Rebellion discussed at length in high school or even introductory world history courses at the college/university level given the emphasis on studying the development and trajectory of "Western" civilization. However, helping students to understand the Boxer Rebellion can create great insight into the philosophical issues at play in wars for independence, including the United States' own fight for independence from Britain. Literary characters help us to make important affective connections with texts, and we can come to understand a great deal more about how wars affect everyday people by engaging with historical fiction—whether in the realm of the fantastic or the mundane.

Further, historical fiction allows us to contemplate the ethical and moral decisions and the extreme actions that characters make in times of war, allowing us to consider and evaluate their behavior. *Boxers & Saints* helps readers understand the Boxer Rebellion and its importance to history, and Yang also encourages us to think more deeply about the nature of war, rebellion, and the decisions we make in such times of crisis.

OBJECTIVE

This teachers' guide showcases the value of using *Boxers & Saints* as a core text in the curriculum for high school English and history teachers, AP English literature teachers, and college professors. This book, though in the non-traditional realm of magical realism, is of exceptional literary value and fits in with other "great" books or works of art that many teachers at these grades use for instruction. While it is historical fiction and is thus not an accounting of the Boxer Rebellion by someone who lived it, the central points of obsession and betrayal (which will be discussed further) are found in much of the literary canon. The collection is also a tragedy (also discussed further), much like the Oedipal or Orestia trilogies of Ancient Greece, allowing the books to be easily integrated into curricula at these grade levels. Further, and as will be discussed, this teachers' guide illustrates that these texts are also strong for use in developing students' critical literacy skills while encouraging them to engage deeply with moral questions, thus helping us to connect these texts to the ever-increasing need for character education.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Boxers & Saints keeps alive a tradition of literature that has been known to us for centuries: the tragedy. *Boxers* details the life of Lee Bao, a young man who is determined to rid his country of foreign influence. *Saints* concentrates on the life of Four-Girl/Vibiana, a character to whom we are introduced in *Boxers* and from whose viewpoint we see another side of the Boxer Rebellion. Four-Girl/Vibiana is not necessarily convinced that the colonization and missionary work of the foreigners in China is the best thing for her country; but she is also lonely and finds with the foreigners a community and even love. Through both protagonists' eyes, readers are treated to stories about belief and love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gene Luen Yang is one of the most noted authors of graphic novels to come along since Art Spiegelman, and his graphic novels are some of the most literary examples of the format available to teachers for use in the classroom. He has written and illustrated the first graphic novel Printz winner, *American Born Chinese*, as well as written *The Eternal Smile* (illustrated by Derek Kirk Kim) and *Level Up* (illustrated by Thien Pham). He also wrote and illustrated *Animal Crackers* (a collection of two earlier graphic novellas) and a kids graphic novel, *Prime Baby*. He is also currently working on a series of graphic novels that follow Ang and Team Avatar's journey after the series finale of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

PLACEMENT AND TEXT COMPLEXITY

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.10)

Though they do not list graphic novels on the list of suggested texts, the Common Core State Standards do suggest that graphic novels, like films, can be used to teach students narrative (or "stories," according to the Standards), allowing teachers to advocate for graphic novel use in the high school English curriculum. *Boxers & Saints* is suggested for use with 11th-12th grade English classes, AP English Literature classes, and college level introduction to literature classes. Because this text is a graphic novel, it may be difficult to determine text complexity, and it is suggested that you rely on qualitative elements of text complexity to determine placement. This book is mature in its scope, not because of the violence, but because of the deep philosophical questions that are asked by Yang through his text. These questions are not easy for many adults to wrestle with, and the level of sophistication about the complexity of morality in times of war, as well as the developmental readiness necessary to discuss these issues, are not usually found among middle and junior high school students.

Further, students should have familiarity with the Boxer Rebellion, which gives us a historical context for the story told in *Boxers & Saints*, and many students are not exposed to enough world history to understand the issues that underlie the Boxer Rebellion and thus the text.

As argued in the teachers' guide, it is suggested that educators think about this text as a piece of tragic literature. Though freshmen and sophomores may be familiar with *Romeo and Juliet*, the form of tragedy itself is seldom studied until 11th or 12th grade when students can be expected to be familiar with some of the basic ideas. These texts, with foci on obsession, betrayal, and justice, are excellent for pairing with other important tragic pieces like *Macbeth*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Medea*. Further still, when studying these texts as important hallmarks of the literary tradition, familiarity with texts like *Frankenstein* can help students to explore more deeply some of the central ideas and themes of *Boxers & Saints*. It is highly suggested that students read Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* as a paired text alongside *Boxers & Saints* to explore some common themes that Yang touches on; however, *Saint Joan* is a work that also would seldom be taught under 11th grade, if found in high school curricula at all.

An ability to understand and discuss religion maturely also matters to a study of *Boxers & Saints*. While *Boxers* presents a set of characters who believe sincerely in the traditional Chinese gods, *Saints* presents a world

where the characters instead embrace the Christian religion. In these books, Christian beliefs exist alongside Chinese spirituality, and neither is shown to be superior.

While the text is a graphic novel, and while it has violence, the sophistication of the work—like any piece of literature—is in the questions with which students must wrestle. They must consider the genuine and real complexities of war as they work to unravel and make sense of these texts, and they must come to understand why it is that belief and religion are so important to the individual without dismissing that belief as fanaticism. At the same time, the books also explicitly deal with the path a person can take to fanaticism and extremism, depicting their consequences in a relatable, understandable way. It is essential that students look at the deeper values at work in Yang's text as they consider how to situate the work in a literary tradition.

FOCUS ON OBSESSION

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11-12.3; 11-12.9)

Many great pieces of literature like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Goethe's *Sufferings of Young Werther*, or Melville's *Moby Dick* focus on protagonists who are obsessed to the point of mania. In *Boxers*, Bao is obsessed with cleansing his country of foreign invaders, seeking to establish a pure China. Because of experiences he has with foreigners and traitors (Chinese natives who align themselves with foreigners), he invests his energy and life in learning how to combat this foreign contamination, and then wages a campaign against it. In *Saints*, Four-Girl/Vibiana's Christian beliefs lead her to sacrifice her own life so as to maintain her faith. The point at which obsession turns to mania and fanaticism can lead students to lively and important discussions that encourage them to think about the role their beliefs play in determining their actions.

Q: Why is it that we categorize certain actions based on beliefs as fanatical or manic while we see others as more justifiable or pure?

FOCUS ON JUSTICE

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11-12.6)

Many classical tragedies deal with the role that divine justice plays in the lives of the protagonists. In *Medea*, for instance, Jason breaks an oath of loyalty to Medea and to suffers immensely for it. In *Oedipus Rex*, the town is punished because Oedipus has defied the gods' will. Even in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Faustus' unwillingness to repent allows an audience to feel that his inevitable suffering is justifiable. While each of these plays allows for catharsis—spiritual cleansing—our sense of catharsis also ties closely to our sense of justice. We walk away from tragedy feeling that the tragic end of characters was not only plausible but also the only way to achieve justice.

In *Boxers*, Bao makes multiple promises throughout the text that allow him to gain the support of the spirits or gods of China, though none more strongly professed than his vow to save China at all costs. However, as the book unfolds, he has to consider the value of each of the promises he has made and how they might be integral to his goal of saving the purity of China. He considers abandoning his oath to Ch'in Shih-huang/Qin Shi Huang while he simultaneously makes a promise to Mei-Wen, his love, that he will not destroy the library. The library, however, is an obstacle to fully ridding China of the foreign colonists and missionaries. Caught between two oaths, he ends up burning the library, only for his militia to be ambushed and assassinated. As the spirits—both noble and deceitful—turn away from the dying mortals, he realizes that his actions were in error.

Q: Was Little Bao's (seeming) death at the end of *Boxers* the only way to achieve justice?

Simultaneously, justice can be found when a character is "rewarded" in some way for maintaining his/her beliefs. In *Antigone*, the close to the Oedipal cycle, Antigone's defiance of Creon to follow the righteous law of the gods ends in her imprisonment and suicide (though, like *Medea*, we can question if the female is the tragic hero or if it is not instead Creon, like Jason). Because she has died in defiance of the law of man that contradicts the laws of the gods, Antigone's death is nobler and is a final step to show that Creon has defied the gods. In *Saints*, Four-Girl/Vibiana allows herself to be executed by Bao because she will not surrender her

loyalty to the Christian religion. Like Antigone, she has become a martyr to her cause. Readers may be upset by her death; however, her death is justifiable as she dies to preserve her faith in her actions.

While Bao executes Four-Girl/Vibiana, her death at his hands is more complicated than “right or wrong.” Bao has sworn an oath to rid China of the influence of the British and the Christian missionaries whom he feels have defiled the land. He does not see Four-Girl as merely a traitor and does recognize her as a human being, offering her a chance to relinquish her faith before he must follow through on his oath. However, we are also shown, earlier in *Boxers*, that Bao had a crush on Four-Girl/Vibiana as a child. Further, Bao stops Second Brother from manhandling Four-Girl/Vibiana, illustrating that his desire to rid the country of foreign influence is not uncivil. There is a code that the militia follows, and he will not allow that code to be violated. However, he believes that what he is doing is in the best interest of the country. Were Four-Girl/Vibiana to survive, she would work as a missionary and bring others to her cause. We can see—and sympathize—with both characters, tragic because they both seek to maintain their beliefs. It is these nuances that illustrate how complicated war can be and how we can rarely ever find simple answers to questions of morality and justice.

Q: We have a tendency to sympathize with people who feel strongly enough about their beliefs to die for them. But in *Boxers & Saints*, both Little Bao and Vibiana die (or, in Little Bao’s case, seems to die). For whom do you feel most strongly for, and why?

Saints subverts Bao’s “tragic story” by revealing that he didn’t tidily die for his cause/die for his crimes. Bao ultimately can claim neither the role of tragic hero (martyr) or tragic villain (with a death justified by his infractions)—he survives, and, what’s worse, survives by betraying his own cause—and his oaths—utterly. The theme of oaths reoccurs when Little Bao’s brother cites their long-ago oath as he helps Bao escape and survive.

Q: Why did one of Little Bao’s oaths survive, but not the others?

Another area to concentrate your discussions of justice is in considering Father Bey. This secondary character is an important catalyst in both *Boxers* and *Saints*, and he most represents the betrayal that Bao feels when seeing Chinese people who have come to have Christian beliefs, lured away from their traditional religion by people like Father Bey. While he is a religious man, he has no respect for non-Christian beliefs. He desecrates and then destroys, in front of Bao, a figure of a local spirit as an idol that blasphemes Christian belief.

Q: Does Bey’s willingness to insult the religion of others while trying to promote and convert others to his his own religion may make his execution more justifiable than the death of Four-Girl/Vibiana or the seeming death of Little Bao? What justice is expressed in this death?

FOCUS ON TRAGEDY

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4-11-12.6)

While the above section focuses on justice and its importance to tragedy, there are other tragic elements that are evident in *Boxers & Saints* that help us to anchor this collection in the curriculum. First, because the text is presented visually, we can teach it as if it were a stage production and not just a literary text to be read. There is much visual action throughout the text that can help students to appreciate the text’s complex nature.

Boxers, when read alone, functions as a classical tragedy—the book ends with Little Bao’s death. However, upon reading *Saints*, you find that *Boxers* has two readings, as Little Bao is revealed to be alive at the conclusion of *Saints*. This elevates *Boxers & Saints* beyond a single story into a true diptych, where the second book radically reframes the first one. In this section on tragedy, we’ll focus on reading *Boxers* without the influence of *Saints*.

Further still, three central elements to tragedy—hamartia (tragic flaw), peripeteia (epiphany), and anagnorisis (turning point)—are important for discussion with *Boxers & Saints*. (As a note, the use of irony is discussed under critical literacy.) While both Bao and Four-Girl are peasants, unlike most characters in tragedy, perhaps

this is an adjustment to modern sensibilities: the common man is a powerful figure in modern literature—and in modern tragedy.

Q: Discuss Bao's and Four-Girl's tragic flaws—what is it that makes each tragic according to the events in the story? Are there moments where they have epiphanies and come to realize that they may need to adjust their actions or thoughts in light of new information? Are there turning points to their fortunes? Are there moments where they could act differently with a different outcome than that which is anticipated?

Another key element of tragedy is the foil—that character against whom the protagonist's most human qualities become evident. While reading *Saints*, we can ask students to consider foils against the protagonists. For instance, Father Bey serves as a foil to Four-Girl and we can ask students to detail how his personality is distinct from Four-Girl's/Vibiana's personality. Even though they are both religious, students may note that Father Bey is more extreme in his views than Four-Girl. You can also compare Bao to Second Brother while reading both *Boxers* and *Saints*, helping students to see Bao's approach to revolution as more purposeful than Second Brother's as the latter approaches the situation more chaotically. Of course, you can also compare Four-Girl against Saint Joan, especially if your students have additional knowledge about Saint Joan's history and family life. Further, there are moments in *Saints* where we see Four-Girl/Vibiana wrestle with her faith against her cultural traditions, especially the scene involving orphans (p. 218-219).

Q: Who is the foil for Little Bao? For Vibiana?

Resurrection, in *Boxers & Saints*, is associated with Christian mythology. Ironically, of the two central characters, Bao is the one who experiences something like a resurrection, not Vibiana—though the text in *Saints* hints subtly at an afterlife of some sort for her.

Q: How does Bao's resurrection at the end of *Saints* change his story? Can his story still be a tragedy?

Q: What would change about Vibiana's story if she had also escaped death?

FOCUS ON WHAT'S IN A NAME

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11-12.4)

Yang names *Saints* protagonist Four-Girl because she is the fourth daughter and her family cannot be bothered to even give her a name. While she tries to show herself to have value, her family is quick to dismiss her, and Four-Girl finds community, worth, and a name in the Catholic faith. The protagonist of *Boxers*, Bao, on the other hand, is given a name that means treasure. Many adolescents are fascinated with the meaning of their own names and how that might relate to their destinies.

Q: How are these names important to the roles each character plays in the text?

In allegorical drama, specifically the highly religious Medieval morality plays, characters were given names to connect them to the population as a whole, or to the ideas related to faith or the context of the society in which the plays were produced. We can encourage students to explore both Four-Girl and Bao as allegorical characters who represent the struggles of humanity in the face of war. While reducing the collection to an allegory—there is much power in seeing it rather as historical fantasy (see below)—can reduce the overall power of the texts, it may be helpful for students to explore the characters as representing people in any number of contexts of war.

Q: If Little Bao and Four-Girl are allegorical characters who represent the struggles of humanity, what do each of them represent? And how do their names play into this representation?

Further, Bao is strongly attracted to Four-Girl during their initial encounter, amazed by the way her face resembles an opera mask. Not knowing who she is, Bao initially gives her a name based on her face. While we need to be cautious about the potential for exoticizing the role women play in Chinese culture, the lack of love that Four-Girl has in her life is certainly evident in her expression, and this may be part of why Bao is attracted to her when he first sees her.

Q: Explore Chinese opera masks, and Ancient Greek masks used for drama (which relate to the idea of tragedy again), in terms of Four-Girl's existence as a tragic heroine.

Four-Girl is also given a Christian name that she accepts, the name Vibiana.

Q: Research the name Vibiana. Is it an appropriate name for the character?

Q: Consider whether Bao's name is appropriate to his character based on his actions.

FOCUS ON ISOLATION AND LOVE

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11-12.3; 11-12.5-11-12.6)

Bao's initial actions are driven mostly by love—not only his love for China, but also for his father, his mentors, and his fellow countrymen. Much of Four-Girl's life is about trying to find love. In *Boxers & Saints*, the protagonists are confronted by death—a moment of life illustrated by whether you stand alone when you die and the investment you place in love.

In *Boxers*, whenever a militia member dies, the spirit occupying his or her body leaves. Earlier in *Boxers*, Bao is about to die when he is pulled back by the spirit Ch'in Shih-Huang/Qin Shi Huang who makes him swear to rid China of foreign defilers. However, Bao also falls in love with Mei-Wen, and his love makes him also promise to protect China, not just rid the country of the foreigners. But he abandons his oath to Mei-Wen to protect China (by not destroying its history and knowledge), and their love is broken. She leaves him, unknowingly, to face an ambush. His loneliness is compounded by the image of the spirits abandoning the militia after the ambush, and we know (based on information that will come in *Saints*) that their bodies will be burned and never returned to their families.

Q: What do you feel is more important, love for another person, or love for your country? Do you feel differently about this at the end of *Boxers* than you did at the end of *Saints*?

In *Saints*, we see that Four-Girl spends most of her life alone, seeking community and love, and she sees parallels between herself and Saint Joan. However, when Four-Girl prepares to die, she has a vision of Saint Joan on the pyre and then a vision of Jesus, telling her to think of others. At the end of her life, she has found love because she has been true to herself in ways that Bao could not be. Bao was given the name of treasure, and her name was a non-name. In the end, though, she earns and embraces a name she gains through her faith, and she learns that her savior loves her.

Q: Just as Saint Joan was seen as a fanatic for her beliefs, what is the degree to which Vibiana's beliefs are faith, obsession, or fanaticism? What about Little Bao's?

The text illustrates that both Bao and Four-Girl/Vibiana have the potential for love. Bao abandons his love to fulfill his promise to his god while Four-Girl/Vibiana embraces her love and surrenders her life.

FOCUS ON CHARACTER EVOLUTION

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11-12.3; 11-12.5)

Students can keep track of how characters evolve through the texts. Unlike traditional tragic texts, we get to see the characters age, and we see the outcomes of particular decisions that the characters make at various points in their lives. There is certainly a sense of fatalism to the texts—the characters must make the decisions they make because the text is rooted in real historical events. However, Yang also allows us to see that the characters may have some element of free will. Students should be encouraged to think about how the situation of war might limit the decisions that we make as human beings.

Q: Do we act differently than we might normally when we are confronted with the loss of that in which we believe? Ask students to keep a character chart in which they trace the protagonists' lives, the decisions they make, and how these decisions are influenced by the context of war.

FOCUS ON CRITICAL LITERACY

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11-12.7)

A central element of critical literacy is considering multiple points-of-view and perspectives about a particular situation. Historical fiction, the genre to which *Boxers & Saints* belongs (as well as magical realism/fantasy), places fictional characters in the context of major historical events, helping readers to understand the human experience. Literature is different from historical treatise in that historical fiction a) often focuses on the common man and b) focuses on how historical moments interact with our natures as human beings. While many pieces of historical fiction offer the reader an understanding of wars or revolutions, Yang presents two perspectives—that of Lee Bao and Four-Girl/Vibiana. By doing so, Yang allows us to see the historical moment even more complexly through the eyes of two human beings whose lives are effected by conflict. While there are even more perspectives or points-of-view that can be expanded upon through activities like fan-fiction, Yang illustrates how perhaps the most central elements of human experience—love and belief—are handled in times of war. Further, *Boxers* and *Saints*' protagonists are male and female respectively, allowing us to not privilege one particular gendered way of seeing in the classroom.

Q: What are some other perspectives through which you could see the Boxer Rebellion? Name three options, and describe briefly what historical people might embody these perspectives.

Critical literacy also suggests that we ask students to think about whose information they trust, how that information may be biased, and how they can look for biases in information. We also look for privilege that is evident in the information that is presented, looking to see how people are positioned in relation to each other in each discourse moment. In *Boxers*, Bao implicitly trusts the spirit of the emperor Ch'in Shih-huang/Qin Shi Huang, whom he does not initially recognize and with whom he becomes fascinated. Even when Ch'in Shih-huang/Qin Shi Huang reveals his own identity and provides the backstory of his rise to Emperor—deceit, murder—Bao trusts him because of his role as both spirit and emperor. It may help that he appears in the context of other spirits whom Bao knows to be honorable. Chinese folklore, of course, allows for spirits to be deceitful in ways that the mythology of Christianity does not; however, Bao believes that Huang's role as emperor in building the Great Wall complements his own desires to rid the country of foreign defilers who taint China and its culture.

Huang's aggressive mannerisms and tone eventually cause Bao to rethink his allegiance with him; however he also knows that he has sworn an oath to make China pure, and fears retaliation from Huang. The other spirits appear to nobly help the militia, not expecting anything in return for their assistance, and yet Bao does not question Huang's missives, accepting them to be truths for ridding the country of the British colonialists and missionaries. Uneducated, Bao does not understand Huang's history of brutality; even though he had helped to secure the boundaries of China and to repel foreign invaders, Huang was also exceptionally concerned about his ultimate authority. He destroyed access to knowledge—burning books, libraries, and even assassinating scholars—before dying. His own legacy was of course questionable; however, Bao blindly obeys his spirit, showing the blind obedience the living Huang would have expected of his people.

The burning of the library that ends up being an ambush for the militia is significant because it is clear that Huang has misled Bao all along. As Mei-Wen questions Bao about whether he should burn the library (because doing so would be akin to destroying China,) Bao does not understand the significance of his undertaking. Western students may not be aware that many religions allow for spirits to be deceitful or tricksters. They may understand the idea of the Devil's silver tongue, but at the same time, Huang is not the embodiment of evil like the Devil. As such, students are left to make their own choices about whether Huang is acting in the best interest of the country rather than for his own purposes.

Q: When was the point that you stopped believing that Huang was a positive spirit? What actions indicated his self-interest?

That emperors (and leaders generally) should take care of the interests of their people may also be a belief of many students. They may not believe that leaders would be self-interested, although by 11th or 12th grade,

they may have been exposed to enough historical and literary figures or modern politics to begin questioning this assumption. However, Huang clearly represents a more totalitarian government where it is his beliefs that decide the will of the people. Huang really thinks his merciless, library-burning, scholar-burying mode of rulership is the right way to preserve China's greatness, and in *Boxers* he's urging Bao to follow in his footsteps. The end goal, for him, is still China's greatness. Mei-Wen presents a more egalitarian, cooperative model of patriotism.

In *Boxers*, Bao clearly acts with what he believes is the best interests of China and the people in mind. This could lead students to believe that because Bao trusts Huang he must be trustworthy. However, Yang provides many moments of irony where the trust that Bao places in Huang may be worth reconsideration. Further, we see the irony of Bao's trust if we have extratextual knowledge of who Huang was in history and why burning the library might not be in the country's best interests.

- Q:** What form of government would you choose, Huang's or Mei-Wen's? Why? Would your answer still be the same if you were living back in the 1900s?
- Q:** Why might Bao trust Huang and his help, even after questioning his allegiance? Find three reasons—with textual evidence—why Bao might believe Huang.
- Q:** Think critically about the violence in the text. When is it that violence seems justified, and when is it gratuitous? When is one group seen as more extreme or violent than another? Do our perceptions of violence vary depending on the perspective from which they are presented to us?

FOCUS ON SEMIOTICS: WHAT IS CHINA? AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF WAR

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11-12.4)

China's restrictive immigration policies have long been known, and the country has long been seen as seeking purity of culture and history. Many people still argue that China is xenophobic in its approach to much of the world and that the idea of China as the "Middle Kingdom," or center of the world, illustrates a belief of superiority within China. It is important for students to consider their biases and perceptions of China before reading this work and to unpack the narratives around China that they have come to believe, especially as this may influence their comprehension of the title.

- Q:** Brainstorm ideas of what China is. Do any of your ideas contradict each other?

However, it is also important to the whole of the collection—*Boxers & Saints*—to help students to think about how the idea of China is given meaning. As with any country, we need students to think critically about how countries come to exist and then to define what it is that makes a country. As we adults know, borders are not tangible, even with China's Great Wall constructed to set parameters to the country. This collection encourages students to consider not only what a country is but also why it is that different perceptions of what a country is may cause conflict amongst the people of that country. For instance, Mei-Wen tells Bao that what makes China a reality is the cumulative knowledge of the Chinese people. However, Bao continues to fight for the purity of China, believing in the borders and land mass that is China. Further, we see in Huang a belief that China belongs to him.

- Q:** Brainstorm some other ideas of what a country could be besides knowledge, people, and land.

This question of purity as it relates to the identity of China is also important because it raises significant questions about whether purity can even be attained. While Bao is fighting against colonists and missionaries that he feels are destroying the heritage and culture of the country, Four-Girl/Vibiana is trying to find her own identity in the country. Nationalistic movements that spring up in times of war and crisis do not often allow for the needs of the individual.

- Q:** Should Four-Girl/Vibiana subsume her individuality to keep herself pure and be seen as part of the country? While Bao may sacrifice his personal life for the cause of ridding the country of defilers, should that be everyone's goal? Further, is one a traitor just because one tries to find knowledge and belonging outside of oneself and one's culture? While answering this question, consider your brainstorming of

ideas about what China is. Is the culture in the US different enough from in China that we would have different answers to these questions than someone in China?

What makes China a country, and what unifies people as Chinese, is a complex question that cannot be easily answered. History is fraught with difficult questions like these where issues of justice are not easy to address.

Q: Should the people of the country not have the right to fight against corruption of their leaders and the potential loss of their traditions, values, and beliefs? Should colonized people surrender their identities and allow themselves to be regarded as inferior on the lands of their ancestors? How far should one go in one's beliefs to restore what one believes is order and justice and to rid the country of colonists?

Both *Boxers* and *Saints* have graphic violence, though the simple, clean-line illustrations provide a stylized, rather than realistic, depiction of the violence. However, war is violent, and real lives are at stake—and real death can occur—when engaging in war. The Boxer Rebellion was a stand against the colonization of China by many common people who often relied on simpler weapons than were possessed by the British. It is not necessarily that violence should be avoided, but we should engage students in deep critical discussions about violence, war, and peace. Violence is often seen as justifiable in the context of war. Bao has a moment with Mei-Wen when she is found to be taking care of foreigners and he has to wrestle with whether or not to complete the task of executing those already injured. Bao's execution of Four-Girl/Vibiana is also a powerful moment where students have to wrestle with whether the execution was in the best interest of Bao's cause. Often, violence is seen as reprehensible; however, students do need to question how it is that those without power—the colonized in this instance—can ever take power and regain their countries without resorting to violence.

Q: Note moments in the texts when you feel the violence is justifiable compared to moments when it is not. What changes your opinion?

There is a touching moment when Bao and Mei-Wen spend time in the library and Mei-Wen reads him a folktale about the compassionate princess (p. 277-280) that will be paralleled in the moment in *Saints* when Four-Girl/Vibiana meets Jesus. In both situations, readers are confronted with the question of compassion during times of war. While he will question Mei-Wen's actions later when she cares for the injured foreigners as well as Chinese, the story she reads Bao, as well as the story told by Jesus to Four-Girl/Vibiana both deal with tolerance and compassion.

Q: With both Jesus and the princess crucified for their beliefs, both brought to heaven, and both signs of compassion, consider whether the ways in which we go about wars—without compassion—can be changed. Can compassion be had in times of war? Or do we need to be in moments of leisure to be compassionate?

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1-11-12.3; 11-12.9)

You should encourage students to research as much as possible about the Boxer Rebellion and many of the historical moments within the text. Unfortunately, the Boxer Rebellion is often not taught in many high school history curricula given the focus on Western civilization. Students should be encouraged to build as much background knowledge as possible as they wrestle with many of the philosophical questions we introduce through the collection.

Q: Research Qin Shih Huang/Chin Shih-huang. What does his life tell you about the relationship that he forms with Bao?

Q: Research information about Joan of Arc. What are some of the parallels that connect her life to that of Four-Girl/Vibiana?

Q: Research the Saint Vibiana. Why might that name fit the character of Four-Girl/Vibiana?

Q: Research the Crusades. Are there parallels between the Crusades and the Boxer Rebellion, specifically Little Bao's fight for purity?

FOCUS ON AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR STUDY

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11.12.9)

You can also situate this text in a unit that studies Yang's style as a writer and helps engage students in deep questions about writing (and illustration) style. Yang's *American Born Chinese* has a central theme of "more than meets the eye" that is evident in everything Yang does with the text, from the title, to the style of illustration, to the intertwining narratives, to the humor. Yang often uses this idea of the text being deeper than it appears in his other narratives, and this is certainly evident in the *Boxers & Saints* collection. Yang's seemingly simplistic style of illustration may be a reason some scholars of literature shut out the text as a possible tool for teaching; however, anyone who discredits the text on the basis of illustrations does the text a great disservice.

Yang's style is entertaining and inviting, and as we know from shows like *The Daily Show* or even *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update," entertaining and inviting texts can sometimes give us deeper cause to think about and reflect on issues. Readers may believe the narratives are not sophisticated, but once they engage with the text, they'll find themselves wrestling with deep ideas. While some students may find it discomforting to see a cartoonish depiction of the violence at play in the conflict, we can have engaging conversations with students about violence and its role in social justice. We can also help students to critically read violence. However, more deeply than that, we can ask students to explore Yang's style across texts and see how he employs similar techniques to give us a sense of style and voice.

- Q:** How can entertaining, seemingly simplistic texts deliver messages more effectively than more serious tomes?
- Q:** What might make an author choose this style for artwork in contrast to something like photography or a more realistic style similar to oil painting?
- Q:** Why do you think Yang chooses to have his characters speak colloquially, using modern idioms, even though they live in the past?

FOCUS ON NOBILITY OF WOMEN

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-11.12.3; 11-12.6; 11-12.9; 11-12.10; ELA-Literacy.W.13 (a-e); 11-12.4-11-12.6)

Throughout literature, especially romantic literature, the love of a good woman was often the opposing force to a male protagonist's obsession. We see evidence of nobility of women in Goethe's *Sufferings of Young Werther*, in Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, and in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (among others). The nobility of women lies not in the pursuit of glory but in their ability to anchor the protagonist in reality, to domesticate, and to nurture. Asking students, had they read literature with women portrayed nobly previously, to compare Yang's portrayal of Mei-Wen against another female character may help students to consider our current consciousness around women.

- Q:** Is the archetype of the noble woman as savior evident in mass media with which we interact today? Why do we position women as saviors?

Contrasts of Mei-Wen against Four-Girl/Vibiana can also help us to illuminate the idea of nobility in women. Is Four-Girl/Vibiana as noble in her pursuits/endeavors as Mei-Wen? Students may see Four-Girl/Vibiana as more complex a character than Mei-Wen, and we can encourage them to think about whether the role the female character plays—as foil or as protagonist—might carry with it the connotation of nobility. Is Mei-Wen noble because she's a strong character, or is she noble because she serves as a foil to Bao? Similarly, is she inherently less complex as a character than Vibiana, or is it just that we are seeing her from Bao's—male—perspective? We can encourage students to investigate literary trends and help them to think about what happens to our understandings of women when they shift from cursory, ancillary, supporting characters, like Mei-Wen, to focal characters/protagonists like Four-Girl/Vibiana.

- Q:** Does making a female character more human and complex make her less innocent, pure, and noble? Think about how women are portrayed in texts based on the roles to which they are assigned.
- Q:** To help students further explore this idea, encourage them to engage in fan-fiction writing that, while using the evidence from the text, presents Mei-Wen's story to the readers. Yang nicely illustrates

competing perspectives through *Boxers & Saints*; however, we can add additional storylines to encourage students to dig deeply into and linger longer in text. Fan-fiction, with a requirement that students must stay true to the events and information in the text, can help them to more deeply explore characterization of Mei-Wen, her views on Lee Bao and the movement, and their eventual separation, thus affording Mei-Wen movement from supporting character to focal character.

FOCUS ON VISUAL LITERACY

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3; ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5; ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.6)

Q: Find one illustrated moment that you think is the most compelling in the text. Study that image closely by exploring what is in that image to make it the most compelling.

If we want students to close-read sequential art, we need to first give them the language to engage in such analysis. Numerous terms related to visual design can give us access to visual literacy and can be studied in-depth through *Boxers & Saints*. Many of these design elements (e.g., centering, gaze, placement, perspective, point of view, coloring) can also be joined with techniques related to comics (e.g., panel, gutter) as well as those techniques more often studied in film (e.g., panning, zooming, cuts). Many excellent resources exist to help students to unpack how the illustrations help the narrative, including *Adventures in Cartooning* series by James Sturm, Andrew Arnold, and Alexis Frederick-Frost (for students looking for a rudimentary introduction) or *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* and *Mastering Comics* both by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden (for those students looking for a more sophisticated understanding) and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. Having resources like these in either your classroom or in the school library can help support your instruction in *Boxers & Saints*, and they may also help you to learn some language important to analysis of sequential art.

To teach students the language of visual design necessary to engage in visual literacy, make sure that it is actively taught throughout your unit on *Boxers & Saints*. Using clear examples to help define terminology helps students to connect language and concept; thus, when they have to engage in analysis, they have a working definition of the term and better understand how to apply it. Use of conceptual word walls for the unit might also be useful to ensure student understanding. Conceptual word walls are specifically designed to showcase content area words (e.g., perspective) important to the unit. To construct a conceptual word wall, the class composes a class-made definition for each term and also agrees to a specific example (e.g., from their experiences with *Boxers & Saints*) to which they can refer throughout the unit. When engaged in class discussion, make certain that you are referring students back to the wall so that they are continually using the language.

Q: (To create the word wall): What might be a good definition for (e.g., perspective)? Where did we see an example of this in our practice story? Is this a good example that helps us to remember the definition of the term?

Q: (As you discuss particular scenes) Point to a particular strategy for visual design in this image. Why might this strategy work to help focus the viewer's attention?

Apart from good vocabulary instruction, make sure you are identifying strategies to help students to practice skills related to visual literacy. Having knowledge of the language of visual design is certainly important; however, more important is the practice of engaging in visual literacy and developing the skills to explore design decisions. Understanding comes from action; begin thinking about some good strategies for helping students to practice those aspects of visual literacy on which you choose to focus. For instance, if you are discussing panels and gutters with students, you can use a mirror strategy in which students also create panels with gutters. Because they are practicing varieties of panels and gutters themselves, students will better understand decisions that illustrators make. You can also have them play with a panel from *Boxers & Saints* and explore what would happen if the panel was enlarged or reduced; if another character in the panel became central to the panel. By engaging students in authors'/illustrators' craft, you are encouraging to think about how the decisions authors make impact their audiences' reception.

- Q:** Select a panel. What would happen if we were to take this panel and change our readers' focus? Why might the illustrator have designed the panel as he did?

Introducing strategies that you would like students to practice through mini-lessons can also be powerful for instruction. Through mini-lessons, students see the teacher practice the strategy, using the language of visual literacy, and making deeper meaning from the text. Choose one key element of visual literacy on which you would like to focus for each mini-lesson and choose a good strategy for each element. Next, find an illustration from *Boxers & Saints* that you can use to teach the strategy. Introduce, through modeling, how you apply the strategy and how it helps you to uncover deeper meaning from the text. As you build student knowledge, each mini-lesson should make reference back to strategies and language previously introduced.

- Q:** Engaging in panel mirroring, create a think-aloud as he/she shows the students the process of creating such a panel. To engage in the think-aloud, explore—vocally—the decisions you are making.
- Q:** Now that we have reviewed a key strategy for building visual literacy, with a partner or in small groups, close read the illustrations you selected. Apply the strategy we have just learned about through the mini-lesson.

You might also look to create a reading guide for *Boxers & Saints* that helps students to apply language related to visual design and strategies related to visual literacy as they are reading independently, with partners, or in small groups. Reading guides, like mini-lessons and shared/guided practice, help students to practice and internalize teacher voice, helping them to apply knowledge and understandings they have learned in the classroom. Reading guides also allow you to see how students are performing with visual literacy analysis as they go through the text, allowing you to stop and reteach particular points or ideas as it becomes necessary. Reading guides require students to slow down their reading, stop and monitor comprehension, and linger in text for deeper consideration of ideas, all valuable practices under the CCSS.

Assessing student acquisition of visual literacy and their understandings of concepts, strategies, and skills is very important, and this should be conducted as both formative (on-going) and summative (close-of-unit) assessment. Successful assessment of strategies often asks students to apply knowledge gained through the unit. Formatively, you can monitor students' reading logs, group discussions, whole-class discussions to assess students' awareness of the language and strategies you are teaching. As a summative assessment, you can ask students to close read particular visual panels you have selected from *Boxers & Saints*, asking them to use the language of visual literacy and the strategies they learned to apply that knowledge. Transference is also an important skill for students to practice, and you can assess students' understanding and acquisition of the language and strategies related to visual literacy by asking them to make apply their understandings to another text they had not previously encountered. As an example, if students have not yet read Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, you can use particular images from this text and ask students to close read these images.

- Q:** (As you discuss particular scenes) Point to a particular strategy for visual design in this image. Why might this strategy work to help focus the viewer's attention?
- Q:** Under the sample tasks for the CCSS, teachers see that, while there are skills students must demonstrate, the tasks themselves are less constrained, allowing for teachers to be creative in how they ask students to apply skills. As one type of summative assessment, you might ask students to prepare a presentation. Ask students to find one comic book each that they might enjoy reading. What elements of visual literacy can you apply to reading this comic book? Ask the students to read the book independently while engaging in a close reading, applying the strategies and using language related to visual literacy. Next, ask students to present their close-reading analyses to the class while grading them on their acquisition and application of visual literacy terminology. (Note: Asking students to apply literacy knowledge [e.g., locating irony, exploring centering] to texts they encounter in everyday life not only allows for transference; students tend to remember more those ideas, practices, and terms directly related to their real lives.)

FOCUS ON VISUAL SYMBOLISM

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1-3; 12.5-12.6)

Helping students to explore visual symbolism in Gene Yang's *Boxers & Saints* can also help them to more deeply understand the text and consider central themes present in the text. One key symbol that appears throughout both *Boxers & Saints* is Yang's use of Hamsa, a symbol that has been used throughout centuries for both religious and non-religious purposes to ward off evil spirits. While the Hamsa generally means the same thing across religions, each religion bestows upon the Hamsa its own name and its own derivation. Asking students to research the Hamsa and different cultural opinions about it can help them to explore how the Hamsa is used by Yang.

Q: The Hamsa plays a more central role in *Saints* than in *Boxers*; however, we see in *Boxers*, when Mei-Wen is taking care of invalids in the final battle of the Boxer Rebellion, she has Hamsa. What might the Hamsa mean for Mei-Wen? Why might Mei-Wen's Hamsa serve a similar purpose to and yet have a different meaning from the Hamsas in *Saints*? How does this symbol relate to the over-arching theme for *Boxers* and *Saints*?

Yang's illustrations also nicely contrast Four-Girl/Vibiana's visions of Saint Joan and Jesus from the reality she is living. However, the Chinese spirits are not contrasted from reality and instead merge with reality.

Q: Why might Yang use different colors to show Vibiana's visions as distinct from her reality? Do you think these colors have particular significance? Why might Yang not show the Chinese spirits as distinct from reality? Is the purpose of vision or presence of the spirits different for the Chinese spirits than for Jesus or Saint Joan? Does the difference in color add any understanding to the theme or central ideas present in *Boxers & Saints*?

The use of the Chinese opera masks is also a significant visual symbol in Yang's *Boxers & Saints*. The first time Four-Girl is introduced to Lee Bao, he is struck by the mask-like emotion of her face. Further, the spirit of Qin Shih-Huang/Ch'in Shih-Huang is also presented as an opera mask. While you could introduce students to the opera masks before reading *Boxers & Saints*, you may instead want them to arrive at the question of whether or not there is a symbolic relationship between characters' faces and opera masks. The CCSS suggests that teachers not lead students to interpretations, but that we instead guide them back into the text, continually asking them to explore it more deeply. Whether or not we choose to front-load information about Chinese opera masks, we should encourage students to think about the relationship between symbol, characterization, and theme.

- Q:** Is there something telling about Qin Shih-Huang's/Ch'in Shih-Huang's face that warrants investigation? How about Four-Girl's face? Once students have explored Chinese opera masks, you can ask them to draw connections between the opera masks and what they know about the particular characters.
- Q:** Should Lee Bao have been suspicious of Huang from his first encounter? Why might Bao not have known that Huang was untrustworthy, even though it is literally written on his face? Why might Bao's character suggest he has a hard time distinguishing deceitfulness, even when it is visually represented?
- Q:** Consider the text as a tragic opera. Why might Bao have been drawn to Huang based on his sense of presence? What might this tell us about opera characters?

Ask students to create a Chinese opera masks for the following characters: Lee Bao, Second Brother, Mei-Wen, Father Bey, Vibiana, Saint Joan, Jesus. Allow students to dive into understanding Chinese opera and considering color, lines, and other features of mask creation (and its relationship to Greek drama and the masks of Ancient Greek tragedy; they might come to understand that much of Western civilization has been influenced by Eastern civilization). They can present their masks to the class, discussing their reasons for creating the masks they did, demonstrating, with textual evidence, why they selected the features for the masks and how these features relate to their understandings of those characters as well as text structure. As the CCSS promote, this type of assessment encourages students to linger in text and close read the text to justify their decisions. Further, they can be asked to perform a scene from *Boxers & Saints* while using

the masks they create (or filming a scene), allowing them to think about other performance elements (voice, placement). Because they have to make numerous considerations about the character to bring it to life through voice, body language, and placement on scene, students will have to linger in text and justify these decisions.

- Q:** What information about the character do we need in order to create our masks? Where might we find this information? In dialog? In action? In images?
- Q:** Encourage students to find their own symbols throughout the book, looking to both images and text. However, also give students cause for caution that something that appears symbolic may not always been symbolic. Because symbols are useful in helping us to explore theme, ask students to always connect symbols they find back to the theme.
- Q:** Locate at least one visual symbol in the text. What makes this symbolic? How does it relate to the theme for *Boxers* and/or *Saints*?

AREAS OF CONCERN:

Because you are teaching a very complex text, it is easy for students to miss some key aspects of the text. Yang is not showing the Christian faith as better than or more important than the faith of the Chinese people whose spirituality may be less understood by many students (and even adults). Four-Girl/Vibiana's story is not only about religion, but also about becoming and belonging—finding love, acceptance, community, as well as self-love. Lee Bao does not begin his life or his mission being fanatical in his desire to see that his country is kept pure; it is with a true love for his country and his people—and witnessing the atrocity and disrespect served by colonists—that leads him to seek to defend his belief in his country. Neither does Four-Girl/Vibiana start out her life fanatical in her devotion to her religion, for history has shown us that many people are willing to die for their faith because it is so integral to their identity and understanding of the world. Both have obsessions in their lives, both deal with (and perpetrate) betrayal, and both are questioning how to fulfill their oaths. We must avoid letting our students see the militia and its purpose as pure senseless violence while simultaneously having dialog with them about other ways of achieving goals like defending their country. And we must be careful that they not exoticize what it is that happens in either text (including the discussion of “Four-Girl’s” identity as unwanted) without thinking critically about these issues.

GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Each of these questions asks students to return to the book, to linger in the book, and to do a close reading of the book (the latter of which is essential to the Common Core State Standards). While some of the questions may appear closed, to arrive at these answers, students will have to think backwardly, an important skill to developing critical awareness. It is hoped that these questions will spark meaningful debate that will allow adolescents to consider their moral code, an important aspect to development. Further, these questions may also help teachers to engage students more philosophically in questions of justice, ethics, and morality, the skills for which are important for future citizens on the cusp of adulthood to build as they prepare to engage in civics (e.g., voting, jury duty). While language is mentioned directly in question four, it is also hoped that each question will engage students in thinking critically about the language they use as they work to answer these questions, thus making important decisions about the rhetorical effects of word choice and syntax (also promoted by the CCSS).

1. Bao engages in violence as a means to rid his country of foreign influence. Are there occasions in which engaging in violence is appropriate to achieving your goals? Would we see Bao differently if he were not the protagonist of *Boxers*? For instance, if we looked at the story from the point-of-view of the colonists and missionaries, would Bao's violence be seen as unprovoked and unnecessary? Would the colonists' violence be seen solely as self-defense and thus more justifiable than Bao's? When that opposite story is told in *Saints*, what did you then think of Little Bao?

2. Four-Girl/Vibiana begins on a quest to find meaning and value—in essence, to feel loved. If we compare her quest in *Saints* against Bao's quest in *Boxers*, is one quest seen as nobler than the other? As you consider this question, consider that Four-Girl/Vibiana's quest is more inwardly driven than Bao's quest; he seeks to serve what he sees as a greater cause for China while she initially seeks to find community.
3. Before reading *Saints*: Consider Bao's final scene in *Boxers* in the context of tragedy. Is this ending justifiable based on what we know about Bao and his actions? Do we arrive at catharsis and find that a just world order has been re-established at the end of *Boxers*? As you consider these ideas, think about the role that oaths or promises play in this text. What flaw might Bao's inability to keep competing oaths illustrate? Why does he make these oaths to begin with, and why do they set him up for failure?
After reading *Saints*: Now that we see that Bao is actually still alive, do we lose our sense of catharsis, or has justice still been achieved? In what ways might we still return to a sense of a just world even though he has not died? While he prays to save his life, the reader knows that Bao has not actually converted; why might the need for survival allow us to violate our most compelling beliefs? Despite his condemnation of Second Brother's actions, how does Second Brother have a chance to redeem himself in the eyes of the reader? How does Second Brother's statement about oaths tie to the stories found in *Boxers* and *Saints*? In what ways have our perceptions of Bao changed now that he has survived the assault, and are these changes in our perception reflective of changes in character?
4. Four-Girl/Vibiana's life ends when she is unwilling to relinquish her faith. In Bao's quest to rid his country of foreign infestation, he feels that she has surrendered herself to the filth of the colonists and missionaries and betrayed her people. Throughout history, traitors have been sentenced to death. Is Four-Girl/Vibiana's death a noble death? Would she be seen as a martyr? Is Bao wrong in executing Four-Girl/Vibiana? To arrive at your answer, consider the following ways language may influence your answer: Is Four-Girl/Vibiana's death a murder or an execution? Does she die a traitor or does she die a martyr?
5. It can be argued that Qin Shih Huang/Chin Shih-huang uses Bao to fulfill his own cause; however, it can also be argued that Bao uses Huang to fulfill his own desires. In fact, it can be argued that much of *Boxers & Saints* is about whether or not we use religious beliefs appropriately, or whether or not we are manipulated by our beliefs. Are there examples in which both Bao and Four-Girl/Vibiana manipulate their respective religious beliefs and use them to their advantage? Are there times when their religious beliefs or deities manipulate them? While Four-Girl/Vibiana embraces her religion and is not abandoned, Bao is abandoned on the battlefield. Are there differences in their deaths that illustrate how/why they use religion and how/why they are used by their religions/deities? This question becomes even more fruitful if one considers that Bao betrays his principles and fakes being Christian to survive at the end of *Saints*.
6. Throughout the two books, numerous characters serve as foils for our two protagonists. The most obvious foil to Bao may be Huang in *Boxers*. For Four-Girl/Vibiana, the most obvious foil, in both *Saints* and *Boxers*, would be Father Bey. What do these foils demonstrate about our protagonists' character traits? Why do we see Bao and Four-Girl/Vibiana as nobler characters when they are contrasted against these foils? If we were to use Mei-Wen as a foil for either protagonist, would they still be seen as nobler characters? Consider what it is about their actions that speaks to each of their respective characters and how similar actions might be seen differently when enacted by different characters. For instance, both Bao and Huang argue for freeing China, and both are violent; however, is Huang's violence different because of his character than Bao's? Is Mei-Wen's work healing seen as more noble than Four-Girl/Vibiana's because the latter is seen as a traitor?
7. Bao and Huang are both discomforted by the thought that China will no longer be pure because of the influence of missionaries and colonists. While the history of colonial occupation—as tied to missionary endeavors—shows that their fears may be well placed, can purity ever really exist in any country? Consider that borders ultimately are ideas and not physical objects, and that people migrate both within and between countries. However, we are also looking at the question through a lens influenced by twenty-first century

knowledge and the influence of globalization. Is it right to want to fight for purity in the form of nationalism? Would it have been more justifiable to do so in the 1800s than in today's world? What is it that purity means anyway, and when can someone become impure (or even become a traitor)?

8. Another central idea that a reader might consider while reading this book is fear of knowledge. As we explored purity in question seven, we might wonder if a desire to be pure might not be a fear of knowledge and new ideas. Huang is a notorious figure in world history because of his desire to cleanse China of all scholars and knowledge that did not suit his own purposes, thus Bao's burning of the library housing centuries of knowledge is his ultimate victory. Four-Girl/Vibiana embraces new knowledge, it can be said, because she is unhappy with what she learns about Chinese culture (and how she is treated). Is it ever acceptable to turn your back on knowing more about one's own culture in order to learn more about another? Should we ever fear exposure to new ideas that challenge our existing beliefs, even if these beliefs are the foundation of our national ideology? Is there ever an occasion when destroying knowledge—even if to help us destroy an enemy—is acceptable? Should leaders determine what knowledge people in their country have access to?

This Teacher's Guide was created by Brian Kelley, a Ph.D. candidate in the Language, Literacy, and Learning Program at Fordham University. His areas of research are sequential art (comics/graphic novels) and the connection between affect and literary reading.