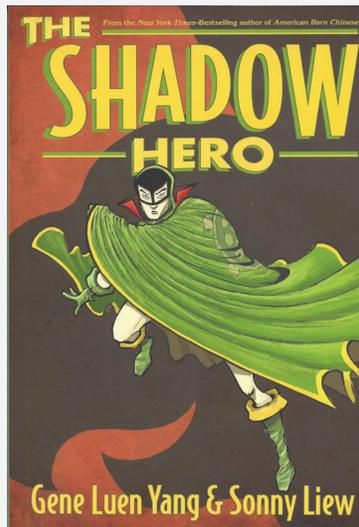


Second Reaction: Becoming a Hero: *The Shadow Hero* and Cultural Identity

Yang, Gene Luen. *The Shadow Hero*. Illus. Sonny Liew.
Lettering by Janice Chiang. New York: First Second Books, 2014. Print.

Mindy Tomasevich



Everyone needs heroes. During World War II, Americans certainly did. To provide diversion for soldiers on the battlefield and for those left to worry on the home front, publishers of comics introduced superheroes that battled against the Axis powers. In 1944, Asian American cartoonist Chu Hing created *The Green Turtle*, who fought the Japanese alongside American troops in China. Chu never showed the Green Turtle's face, and some believe it was Hing's way of making his hero Chinese during a time of prejudice against all Asians. The comic lasted only a few issues and left readers wondering: Who is the Green Turtle? Author Gene Yang and artist Sonny Liew, paying homage to *The Green Turtle's* war adventures, finally answer this question in their graphic novel, *The Shadow Hero*.

In a fictitious 1940s American Chinatown, Hank, a first-generation Chinese American teen, happily works in his father's quiet grocery. A reluctant hero, Hank's demanding mother pushes him to put on a homemade costume and begin fighting crime. For years, Hank's father has made protection payments to Mock Beak, the strong-arm minion of a Chinese underworld leader. While collecting a payment, Mock Beak takes a jade tortoise necklace from Hank's father. Hank, of course, dons his costume and retrieves the necklace. In retribution, Mock Beak

shoots and kills Hank's father, and the police—corrupt and prejudiced against Asians—provide little help. Hank is determined to avenge his father's death and become the hero his mother wants him to be: the Green Turtle. At first, Hank has no superpowers. When his father dies, he inherits his father's shadow, the Tortoise, a Chinese celestial spirit, who promises Hank that he, unlike his father, will never get shot. Now invulnerable to bullets, Hank outsmarts the bad guys and must choose between revenge and working within the law. When asked later if the Green Turtle will fight alongside American forces in the conflict brewing in China, Hank agrees to help his country, despite the prejudice he has faced as an Asian in America.

Superhero graphic novels have been popular for decades, but Yang and Liew add new layers of meaning to their tale. Like all of Yang's books, *The Shadow Hero* contains deeper insights meaningful to all children and teens who struggle with cultural identity, fitting in, and standing up for what is right. Yang and Liew incorporate issues of race, prejudice, and diversity both into the story line and through Yang's clever references to Asian stereotypes.

I read this book with a group of 30 sixth-grade students. Language arts teacher Jill Zappia had developed an earlier unit about belonging and cultural identity around Yang's Printz Award-winning graphic novel, *American Born Chinese (ABC)*. The same students later read *The Shadow Hero* as part of a unit on survival and heroes. Zappia designed stations that helped build prior knowledge about the 1911 Chinese revolution, the hero cycle, and Chinese celestial spirits. Students also read Chu's original *The Green Turtle* comics, compared and contrasted Yang's two novels, and participated in a Socratic seminar.

Students' written responses clearly show their ability to make inferences about each book and connections between the two novels (spelling and punctuation have been corrected):

Both main characters (of *Shadow Hero* and *ABC*) faced a lot of racism and discrimination because they were Chinese. Both Jin Wang and The Green Turtle (Hank) tried to change themselves to be someone else so they could belong.

Don't let anybody's opinion discourage you from what you want to do. Hank wasn't always taken seriously all the time, but he kept getting back up on his feet. One quote was, "You're no superhero . . . You're just that one Chinese kid."

Shadow Hero and *ABC* both have many negative stereotypes, so both protagonists do their best to change these things, but it's something you can't do without giving up something else. Jin changed into Danny, and Hank decided to become a superhero.

At first, Hank didn't want to be a superhero because he had no reason and he had his life planned out. But when he had a reason, motivation, to find Mock Beak and bring him to trial, he did everything he could, including taking multiple risks.

Yang presents topics such as racism against Asian Americans, although he shows this lesson in a way throughout the book that will make you pay more attention than if an adult would tell you.

I liked the idea of a Chinese American superhero because I am also an American-born Chinese.

The Shadow Hero, a funny, exciting graphic novel, contains thought-provoking themes that will resonate with middle and high school readers. Loaded with action and humor, it will appeal to students who enjoy reading graphic novels and anyone who likes a good adventure story.

Works Cited

"Green Turtle Archive." *The Digital Comic Museum*. 2013. Web. 23 Feb. 2015.

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About the Author

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