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# Spiritual Formation of Young Adults in China: A Case Study of Protagonists in *Boxers and Saints*

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**Spiritual Formation of Young Adults in China: A Case Study of Protagonists in  
*Boxers and Saints***

**Xu Bian**

**Seattle Pacific University**

Spiritual Formation of Young Adults in China: A Case Study of Protagonists in *Boxers and Saints*

By Xu Bian

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for the degree of

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Seattle Pacific University

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**Abstract**

The thesis examines the spiritual development of young adult protagonists depicted in *Boxers and Saints* by Gen Luen Yang using the framework of six spiritual components and the approach of critical content analysis. It shows that the six elements, journey, transcendence, community, religion, mystery of creation, and transformation, are involved regardless of different religions people are converted to. In addition, religions provide an avenue for spirituality to mature given that spirituality is an intrinsic and universal characteristic of human beings regardless of their religious beliefs or lack of them. Finally, spirituality is not superior to religions because of the two types of spirituality, pathological and mature.

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## Introduction

Young adult (YA) literature is a powerful means for young people to learn about the life of their peers dwelling in different parts of the world and their religious cultures. Over the past years there have been a great many YA books published about protagonists' spiritual pursuits—quests for identity, belief, vocation and relationships and connectedness. Meanwhile, research in this field is eclipsed by literature. A thorough study exploring spiritual themes in YA books by Mendt (1996) has documented belief systems and characters seeking spiritual knowledge and integrating it into their emerging adult identities. However, very little scholarship of spirituality in YA literature has been published.

Eckersley (2007) states that humans are creatures who feel a deep spiritual bond to the natural world in which they live. Spirituality like cognitive, physical, and emotional development may be a universal developmental process (Zakrzewski, 2013). Only limited research has investigated the spiritual themes in YA literature (e.g., Mendt, 1996; Posey, 2014; Radley, 2001). To my knowledge, spiritual development of protagonists is not included in the previous research with the exception of the two dissertations, documented in Kaplan's (2006) study, investigating protagonists' developmental experiences of religions and faiths. Unsurprisingly, spiritual formation of Chinese adolescents portrayed in literature has not garnered scholars' attention (e.g., Cai, 1984; Chen, 2009; Liu, 1993; Liu, 1998).

*Boxers and Saints*, two novels in a boxed set written by Gene Luen Yang and illustrated in full color by Lark Pien, is a graphic novel of historical fiction. It details the life of two adolescent protagonists in times of war against the Eight-Nation Alliance from

1899 to 1901. Little Bao and Vibiana, the protagonists, search for self and a sense of purpose and derive meaning in the context they live in. Their spiritual development may be representative of contemporary Chinese adolescents who have been exposed to culture replete with spiritual resources regardless of different eras in history.

Although the theme of spirituality struck me when I read the set of books, there is little literary scholarship examining the spiritual formation of these protagonists. This seems strange to me given the fact that scholars and teachers have explored themes such as justice, isolation, love and so on in this set of graphic novels according to the teachers' guide by Yang (<http://www.geneyang.com/docs/BoxersSaintsTeachersGuide.pdf>). "These texts, with foci on obsession, betrayal, justice, and religion, are excellent for pairing up with other important tragic pieces... and an ability to understand and discuss these themes maturely matters to a study of *Boxers & Saints*" (p. 2). Hence, the purpose of this research is to offer a descriptive analysis of protagonists' spiritual development through employing the methodology of critical content analysis within a theoretical framework of spirituality and spiritual development.



## Literature Review

### Adolescence

Adolescence, the age range of 10 through 19, is a critical age period in life, during which young people hunger for ideology, strive for meaning and purpose, and desire for relationships and connectedness (Erikson, 1968). The two terms, adolescence and young adults, are generally interchangeable in the field of literature. The paper falls into the category of literature, so adolescence and young adults are used as synonyms.

The most influential theory of cognitive development proposed by Piaget states that adolescence is the stage of formal operations which begins in early adolescence with the development of the ability to think logically about abstractions. This theory has stimulated scholars to translate it to the other fields, such as theology, religious growth and spirituality. Existing research in the field of spirituality has provided substantial evidence supporting that adolescence is a sensitive period for spiritual development (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2005).

Two capacities emerging during adolescence account for the salience of the time period in development of spirituality. One is the adolescents' increased capacity for abstract thought, and the other is metacognitive orientation (Good & Willoughby, 2008). The former enables adolescents to think about various ideas about spiritual concepts and the latter allows for their reflecting upon and evaluating one's own ideas and the ideas presented by other people.

In addition, adolescence is characterized by the young adult encountering negative emotions and stressful life events. Adolescents have difficulty fully regulating

and handling these events so that they become more susceptible to experiencing a spiritual conversion (Good & Willoughby, 2008). Finally, adolescence is a stage during which identity may be formed by means of adherence to a belief system (Schwartz, 2001). Built on Theory of Identity achievement proposed by Marcia, Schwartz points out that religion is one of domains in which a young adult has explored and committed to an identity. They may reexamine old values or choices and commit to a certain value or role. Who adolescents think they are and will be is impacted by the spiritual belief they embrace and clothe.

Findings in a worldwide study (Zakrzewski, 2013) regarding the universal developmental process of spirituality demonstrate that the majority of 7,000 participants aging from 12-25 are enthusiastic to discuss their ideas about spirituality and religion, and the role they play in their lives, with a mindful person regardless of their culture and religion. Meanwhile, adolescents have hard time articulating their thoughts about spirituality and religion.

### **Spirituality**

The word “spirituality” originates from the Latin root *spiritus* meaning breath or life, with the Latin *spiritualis* denoting a person of the spirit. The high frequency of the word in the Old Testament and the New Testament indicates the link between spirituality and religion and faith. The short history of its divorce from religion and faith yields three categories of spirituality: 1) a *God-oriented* spirituality with thoughts and practices rooted in theologies; 2) a *world-oriented* spirituality highlighting the individual’s relationship with ecology or nature; 3) a humanistic spirituality emphasizing human achievement or potential (Spilka, 1993). Nevertheless, the multidimensional framework

of spirituality does not negate the contribution of religion and faith which are either religious or secular systems defining and supporting the good life.

An overview of literature demonstrates that working definitions of spirituality have varied from research to research. For example, Hay and his colleagues (2005) posited that spirituality is an inbuilt feature of the human species that develops from the beginning of an individual's life (or not) (p.47); Posey (2014) defined spirituality as a universal tendency in humans to desire deep connection with something greater than themselves, being potentially aware there is something beyond the physical real (p. 59). Researchers' views regarding the relation of spirituality, religiosity and faith account for the differences in the operationalizing of spirituality. Generally speaking, researchers of spirituality in literature hold three stances on the issue (Table 1).

Table 1

*Three Stances Regarding the Relationship between Spirituality and Religiosity and Faith*

Exclusiveness	Separation of spirituality from religiosity and faith
Inclusiveness	Spirituality cannot be defined in other than religious or faith terms.
Correlation	Spirituality is distinguished from religion and faith, but highly correlated with them.

One school of researchers highlights the separation of spirituality from religiosity and faith. Sinnott (1998) stated that spirituality reflects individual and inner experience, whereas a religion and faith tradition entails observance of outward dictates or customs.

Its dichotomous view is that spirituality cannot be defined in other than religious or faith terms. Faith can be either a religious or a secular symbol system which defines and supports the good life (Scarlett, 2005). The leading figures in religions and founders of the world's faith traditions exemplify the combination of spirituality and religion and

faith, such as Gandhi, Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Blake (1996) pointed out that spirituality cannot be experienced or developed without religiosity.

Other than the two polarizing views, another prevalent one is that spirituality is distinguished from religion and faith, but highly correlated with them (e.g., Good & Willoughby, 2008; King & Boyatzis, 2004; Love, 2001). Scholars in the third camp believe that the boundaries among the constructs are fuzzy. Spirituality is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices. Benson and his colleagues' (2012) empirical study provides evidence supporting that spiritual development does not necessarily require engagement in religious practices. In the meantime, religion and faith do provide avenues for spirituality to become mature, which has been expounded from different religious perspectives, such as Christianity (Attfield, 1994), Buddhism (Clark, 1995), and Judaism (Shire, 1998).

In regard to the definition of spirituality, however, some commonalities emerge among the differing ones constructed from the aforementioned three perspectives. The consensus achieved among scholars includes that spirituality is universal (Hay, Reich, & Utsch, 2005; Posey, 2014), innate (Hay et al., 2005; King & Boyatzis, 2004), self-transcendent (King & Boyatzis, 2004; Love, 2001), and relational (Buber, 1958; Conn, 1993; Mata, 2014; Hay & Nye, 1998; Oser & Gmunder, 1991). For this paper, I defined spirituality as:

an intrinsic and universal characteristic of human beings regardless of their religious beliefs or lack of them. Its development is based on self-

transcendence and its outcome is the relationship with self, others, and the High Power.

The stance for this analysis is that spirituality and religion and faith cannot be separated and religion and faith are one of the milieus where spirituality is fostered and nurtured.

With regard to what spirituality includes, the review of literature in this field shows both lack of agreement and overlap among scholars. Lapierre (1994) identified six fundamental variables of spirituality based on their frequency in the literature: the journey, transcendence, community, religion, the mystery of creation, and transformation.

The spiritual journey embarks with protagonist in search for meaning, purpose or direction in life, coming from either the person of God or an ideal of truth. The journey may not be smooth but rather be replete with pain and torture. Nevertheless, it continues regardless of the obstacles. Mendt's (1996) study has documented diverse protagonists in *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssey*, *Siddhartha* and so on journey in search of knowledge of good and evil, of the self, and of the meaning and mysteries of life.

The transcendent dimension of spirituality denotes the experience of a level of reality that exceeds the limits of ordinary human experience. Jarvis's (2008) research examines how teenage girls' spiritual growth is interweaved with transcendence. Morgan, a teenage girl in Tiernan's *Wicca* series, possesses telepathic powers which are used in epic struggles with evil forces. Her spiritual and personal growth is robustly linked to her magical process.

Community, the connection with other like-minded people, is a vital setting for spirituality to grow because the relation to others keeps individuals functioning. Posey (2014) analyzed the spiritual dimension of two protagonists in *the Magician's Elephant* and the *Invention of Hugo Cabret* and found that life-changing connections can develop compassion and a renewed sense of purpose.

Religion is the visible practice of and participation in rituals, rules and patterns of life stipulated by specific beliefs about a divine being or beings. It is recognized that it has such a tremendous impact on spirituality that the relationship of religion and spirituality is ambiguous. The spiritual quest of characters in YA literature investigated in Radley's (2001) study is robustly linked with religions. For example, Stephen, a young Chinese protagonist in *The Samurai's Garden* by Gail Tsukiyama, becomes spiritually mature by practicing a Japanese religion taught by Matsu, a Japanese caregiver of Stephen's house. Driven by the recognition that the spirituality inherent in every religion is not opposing the religion itself, Matsu endeavors to awaken and comfort Stephen rather than convert. Consequently, the interconnection between Stephen and Matsu is cemented regardless of tension between Japanese and Chinese caused by World War II.

The mystery of creation including the natural world and its creator provides human beings an avenue to build a relationship with the High power. The spiritual pursuit of the protagonist, Wil in *The Island* takes place on an uninhabited island in Wisconsin (Mendt, 1996). His connection to the island is significant in identifying or fostering spiritual experience.

Finally, transformation suggests that spirituality is a dynamic and on-going process of becoming and it is achieved through interaction with others. The protagonist in

*Jacob Have I Loved* strives to build herself a soul and a life of her own while dealing with the bitter relationship of a beautiful twin sister, and the jealousy is caused by being a lesser favored sibling (Mendt, 1996). Her transformation is neither completed within a day nor by herself.

Spiritual formation/development is thus defined by Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude (2003) as the “process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices” (p. 207). This definition is aligned with the fundamental six factors of spirituality. A profile analysis focusing on the each element involved in the developmental process may be a fruitful way to approach the study of spirituality.

### **YA literature**

Recent research indicates that literature has potential for contributing to children’s spiritual growth (Trousdale, 2005). Protagonists in fiction are normally based on figures in real life, so readers generally relate to them. That said, characters’ spiritual formation in YA literature not only mirrors the process occurring in real world but also may give insights to young readers who are experiencing spirituality. Nevertheless, scholars have conducted little research on spirituality of protagonists depicted in adolescent literature given the fact a few studies examining protagonists’ characteristics and religious developmental experience (e.g., Goodson, 2004; Mattson, 2001). Schwarz (2014) has noted that a critical lens is glaringly absent when deriving deep meaning from best-

selling YA texts. Hence, how to use the literature to support the spiritual quest deserves scholarly attention.

Young adult literature provides an avenue for youth to taste a foreign culture and caters to their need for information about another ethnicity. Chinese characters have been included in multiple novels created for English-speaking young people. Thus, they have been a focus in a few previous studies. For example, Liu (1993) and Liu (1998) examined the treatment of Chinese characters portrayed in U.S. children's fiction written by non-Chinese-American authors and Chinese-American authors and published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their thorough analyses center on various facets of Chinese culture, such as food, clothes, ritual customs, festivals, religious beliefs, philosophy, and values. Subsequently, Chen (2009, 2011) pointed out the absence of teenage characters living during the Sino-Japanese War in the U.S. YA literature, which may fail to present readers a holistic view about their Chinese peers. Likewise, spiritual formation of Chinese adolescents depicted in YA literature hasn't garnered scholars' attention

### **Christianity in China during the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901**

*Boxers and Saints* unfolds against the backdrop of the Boxer Rebellion and Christianity, to an extent, is an impetus to the spiritual formation of Little Bao and Vibiana despite their conversion to different religions, so it is necessary to give a historical overview of Christianity during the specific era. The review focuses on two facts depicted in the set of books and critical to the spiritual development of the two protagonists: a) the conflict between Christianity and Chinese culture; b) Christians, both foreign and local, become victims of the rebellion.



Evangelism of Christianity in non-European countries is often featured with opposition due to the differences between a particular culture and Christianity. It is apparent that Christianity has confronted obstacles since it was first introduced to China in the 600s. Latourette (1929) did a thorough analysis regarding Chinese religious life and opposition Christianity encounters in China. He summarized seven features of Chinese religions:

- Chinese religions involve a mixture of objects of worship such as spirits of ancestors and special gods.
- Animistic beliefs and practices are prevalent in Chinese religious life.
- Chinese are polytheists.
- Theism is traced in philosophies, popular belief and practices of the Empire.
- Chinese religions highlight the ethics and morality.
- Chinese are not as mystical as Indians and Hebrews.
- Religions of China are incorporated into the intellectual life and the political and social institutions of the nation.

In contrast, Christianity scarcely tolerates either animism or polytheism. Rather, it stresses monotheism, asking people to worship one God with the full body, heart, mind and soul. During its development among various peoples and various ages the inflexibility has been present in its doctrine, ritual, and organization because missionaries are controlled by ecclesiastical authorities outside the foreign country “who conscientiously insist upon the maintenance of the traditional system” (Latourette, 1929, p. 43). “The debate about how much or how little a religious faith dares to adapt itself to

terms and cultures shaped by other religions” (Moffett, 1998, p. 120) can be traced back to the Early Church Era.

In China the rites controversy dominated the history of Catholic mission for two centuries from 1636 through the Opium Wars breaking out in the 1840s. On this issue missionaries with the background of different denominations had divergence. On the one hand, Ricci, the Jesuit missionary, advocated for similarities between Christianity and Confucianism. His method, “contextualization” called today, allowed Chinese Christians to participate in certain secondary non-Christian Chinese customs, such as funeral ceremonies and reverence toward ancestors because they distinguished between reverence and worship. This approach turned to be very effective among Chinese imperial officials and converted them into Christianity. Most Chinese Christians favored accommodation to their own national customs. On the other hand, the Jesuit practice of missionary accommodation to Chinese customs was deemed as a weak and unchristian compromise with “heathenism” by missionaries of the Franciscans and the Dominicans since they held a severe missionary policy of eradication of non-Christian influence in the national culture. Undoubtedly, the view accounts for how foreign missionaries dealt with Chinese customs and religions, which in turn caused Chinese’s hostility toward Christians, foreign and Chinese.

Hatred usually leads to catastrophes which involve innocent death. A large number of foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians were chief sufferers during the Boxer Rebellion although it “was basically antforeign and only tangentially antimissionary” (Moffett, 1998, p.484). Letters written by Eva Jane Price, a British missionary’s wife, has documented that Boxers intended to overthrow the Protestant

religion in China and persecuted the Catholics as well. Moffett (1998) gave detailed figures concerning Christian victims all over China. Latourette (1929) pointed out a few reasons for the tremendous tragedy. First of all, missionaries were called to proclaim the gospel from one place to another, that is, they often traveled outside, so they were more prone to be targeted by Boxers than other foreigners. Second, Chinese Christians were deemed “secondary devils”. To the non-Christian Chinese, they were traitors to their country and its culture, and the protection that the treaties of 1858 granted Chinese Christians made others identify them with the Westerner. The year 1900 has been marked by the most severe persecution Christians had yet encountered in China.

The inter-cultural religious conflicts and relationship between non-Christian Chinese and Christians create an avenue for people to engage in spiritual pursuit. Both Little Bao and Vibiana are affected by the historical events. Their opposing perspectives concerning the social situation contribute to their spiritual development which eventually yields two types of spiritual fruit, pathology and sacrifice.

## Methodology

The method deployed in the paper is the critical content analysis. Prior to explaining why the method is used in the study, it is necessary to briefly review content analysis. Krippendorff (2004) defined it as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). It is a conceptual approach to examine what a text is about, analyzing content from a particular theoretical perspective, such as sociohistorical, gender, cultural, or thematic studies (Beach et al., 2009). Content analysis has been used primarily as a quantitative research method in the past three decades although initially researchers used it as either a qualitative or quantitative method in their studies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Hsieh and Shannon offered a definition of qualitative content analysis, that is, it is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Directed content analysis, one of the three distinct approaches to qualitative content analysis, denotes that analysis generally begins with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes or predetermined codes are used to begin coding immediately.

Critical content analysis, the method in the study, belongs with directed content analysis. It occurs when researchers have chosen a specific theoretical framework used to think within, through, and beyond the text and code the text for the content analysis under its guidance (Beach et al., 2009).

The key question that informs the analysis is that how Chinese adolescent protagonists’ spirituality develops in their cultural setting. The underpinning theory

guiding my reading of *Boxers and Saints* is theory of spirituality and its formation. I coded the text according to the six components of spirituality—journey, transcendence, community, religion, mystery of creation, and transformation. Each element is defined based on previous research.

### **Synopsis**

The lives of two protagonists, Little Bao and Vibiana, in *Boxers and Saints* convey their spiritual journeys during a tumultuous period of time, the Boxer Rebellion. The former joins the Boxers, a violent, mystically-inspired fighting society dedicated to wiping out foreign influences in China at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the latter, on the other side of the divide, is converted to Christianity and renounces her family religion when she is rejected by family. Both must quest for questions of faith and identity: What does it mean to be Chinese? To be Christian? Can you be both?

Both Little Bao and Vibiana embark on the spiritual journey because of rejection. Little Bao witnesses that Chinese god is denied by a foreign priest and Chinese people are consequently bullied by Christians and foreign soldiers. Vibiana is not welcomed and accepted by her family because of her ominous date of birth. Both deliberate over the existential issues and embrace different values and beliefs. The subsequent association with like-minded people shapes their spiritual development. The experience of the transcendent and mysterious gives them strength to engage the pursuit. Finally, the two Chinese adolescents bring their cultural experience to their spiritual experiences which in turn may be altered.

### **Gene Lune Yang's spirituality**

Yang to some degree is related to the two protagonists with regard to spiritual development. He, growing up in both a Chinese American household and the Catholic church, experienced the most virulent racism in junior high. The phenomenon of Chinese embracing a Western faith and turning their back on Eastern culture drew his attention when he became older. Once one of his acquaintances discussed with him what made an Eastern descent convert to Christianity rather than walk in the Eastern faith filled with wisdom and beauty (<http://blogs.slj.com/goodcomicsforkids/2013/09/19/interview-gene-luen-yang-on-boxers-saints/>). He struggled with his place in the world, his vocation in life and the relation of his Chinese cultural heritage and Western religion. Faith, especially in college, became a critical part of how he saw himself in the world (Polter, 2013). Gradually, he matured spiritually and continues to hold both his faith and culture dear.

### Analysis

This section focuses on an analysis of spiritual development of Little Bao and Vibiana based on the six factors—journey, transcendence, community, religion, the mystery of creation, and transformation (See table 2). *Boxers and Saints*, a diptych, collects two pieces of historical stories, so they were treated and coded as two separate texts.

#### *Boxers*

**Journey.** Little Bao is stimulated to explore the purpose and mission of his life when he witnesses conflicts between his Chinese fellowmen and foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians. Conflicts occur during the annual spring fairs where Little Bao, villagers have Tu Di Gong, a Chinese god, present in order to honor the god. A gangster bullies an old lady, so he is punished by other villagers. A couple of weeks later, the gangster comes back to the village, accompanied by a crowd, including a foreign missionary. The crosses they wear are eye-catching to Little Bao. What impresses Bao most is that the foreign missionary smashes Tu Di Gong, the Chinese god whom villagers worship and value, and steals some of the produce his father sold to compensate the gangster for the sake of justice. These affairs ignite Little Bao's fury and hostility against foreigners and Christians, Chinese or foreign. In addition, his father and the Constable are beaten by foreign soldiers when they protest at the magistrate's residence. Thus, Little Bao becomes aware that China and Chinese are threatened by foreigners' incursion and perpetuate an enormous crisis. Patriotic organizations, the Big Sword Society and the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fist, inspire him and he seeks unity of the country. Thereby, he finds the direction in his life and strives to keep the country from

being invaded and claimed by different countries. While fighting for the noble goal, he encounters some obstacles and gains insights, such as having compassion for the weak. He discovers that the majority of Christians belong to the weak and innocent who shouldn't be blamed for the division of the country. Nevertheless, Little Bao and his comrades slaughter them to rescue the country. The sparkle of humanity is quenched by a strong sense of nationalism. His spiritual pursuit continues regardless of his wrestling with life and unity of a country.

**Transcendence.** Little Bao's spiritual development is replete with transcendence, a sense of connection with gods. For example, The Gods of the Opera stay with him when he works, walks and even drifts to sleep. During the battles he and the other soldiers fight to no avail so that they transform to gods. The constant conversations between Little Bao and Chin Shih-huang, the first emperor of a united China, are the convincing evidence of his transcendence since Emperor Chin, like many a powerful leader in history, is regarded as a god. Emperor Chin unites seven kingdoms into one entity in a brutal, bloody and tragic way by burying people alive and burning books. Little Bao is guided by him. Unsurprisingly, the effect of transcendence is that Little Bao becomes deeply dedicated and committed to his mission of maintaining the unity of the country by means of violence. The hatred against foreigners and Christians is escalated until more heinous things are involved in order to accomplish his mission to unite his country.

**Community.** Little Bao is born and raised up in a small village in Shandong Province in China. The village is a tight-knit community which observes the same traditions and stands up for each other when injustice takes place. For instance, Little



Bao's father and the constable are delegates of the village who visit the magistrate to sue the foreign missionary and the "Christians" who broke the statue of Tu Di Gong. In addition, the strong bond Little Bao builds with Red Lantern Chu, Master Big Belly, the Big Sword Society, and the Society of Righteous Fist plays a vital role on his spiritual journey. These people and organizations cement the thought that foreigners and Christians are the root cause of chaos and turbulence in China, and it is justified to use every means to drive them out and keep the country united. Little Bao and the like-minded people are supportive of each other while endeavoring to achieve a primary goal. In the meantime, the community is not open to various voices pertaining to China's situation so that they hold a partial and biased truth dear and firm. Such a community cultivates a strong in-group mentality and fails to promote thriving in individuals or society.

**Religion.** Little Bao like the majority of Chinese characters in the text reveres forces of nature and ancestors, cultural heroes, deities of the kinship, folk religions. These gods are codified into the body of Chinese mythology and operas. Practices of the religion include ceremonies, veneration, legends, festivals and various devotions associated with different folk gods/deities and goddesses, which are not mandatory to followers. The core value of the religion is community. These features are displayed in Little Bao's life. For example, he worships Tu Di Gong in annual spring fairs, but he does not conduct daily devotionals, prayers, meditations, and reading the scripture. The village he inhabits in is a tightly-knit community which cares for and supports every villager. The religion takes account of his commitment to an ideology and his active

involvement in unifying China, a large community, at any cost and by any means. Therefore, his spiritual development is molded by the local religion.

**The mystery of creation.** The mystery of creation includes both the natural world and the creator. A specific locale in the natural world and different aspects of their environment, sunsets, mountains, waterfalls, may be salient in identifying or fostering spiritual experience. Little Bao encounters gods when he works in the field, falls asleep at home, and battles foreigners and Christians. These moments draw him closer to his own religion, but do not provoke his reverence to life and nature.

**Transformation.** The novel from the beginning to the end shows the dynamic process of Little Bao's spirituality. It spans six years from 1894 through 1900 during which Little Bao becomes increasingly involved with others including like-minded people and gods. His spirituality enables him to think about the meaning of his actions, the complexity of his motives and the impact he has on the world around him. Spirituality is his capacity to experience passion for a cause and compassion for his non-Christian fellowmen. Even when life comes to its end and all Gods of the Opera vanish, his reflection on his path of redeeming the country never ceases.

### *Saints*

**Journey.** Four Girl (Vibiana) embarks on her spiritual journey because of the domestic prejudice and discrimination against her. She, who was born on the fourth day of the fourth month, has survived death of the other three siblings. However, it is this reality that makes her unwelcome and unwanted since four in Chinese is a homophone of death. Given the fact that she is merely eight years old, the sufferings and pain in her life

and the void in her heart stir her to quest for the meaning and purpose of her existence. Observing a raccoon eating a rat, she is aware that everyone has a position in life and the world; learning that Christians are termed as “devils”, she feels related to them and becomes determined to be a Christian. Nevertheless, the journey is not smooth. She is excluded and beaten by her family because of her conversion to a western religion, a betrayal to her cultural heritage. Her unswerving heart enables her to endure the tortured paths of spirituality development. The life long journey culminates when she encounters God who in turn sustains and empowers her along the journey. A case in point is her blatant love to her Chinese people the moment she is to be executed. The presence of God and martyrs enables her to forgive the foe and remain loyal to her faith.

**Transcendence.** Vibiana’s spiritual formation echoes S. L. Granstrom’s statement that the experience of the transcendent is a vital element in spirituality. She draws personal power through contact with this dimension. Her unexpected encounters and conversations with Joan, a holy woman living over some centuries ago, yield critical changes, such as her baptism and reflection upon her unique destiny and vocation. In addition, her connection and relationship with Jesus Christ enables her to hold her faith dear and live out a core value—be mindful of others like Jesus even when threatened and killed because of the hate. The moment Vibiana is imperiled by a Boxer holding a sword and commanding her to renounce her faith, Joan and Jesus come to her mind and Jesus encourages her to care for others by using the parable of the Good Samaritan. The conversation with Jesus eventually gives her strength to teach the Boxer how to pray before he stabs her in the back.

**Community.** Being in community with like-minded believers is vital to spirituality in religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Vibiana, a Christian, has joined a Christian community during each stage of her pilgrimage. The first community involves Dr. Won, his wife, and Vibiana. The next community is located in another village and consists of more people including the priest, a seminarian, and the other Christians working with Vibiana in the orphanage together. Thus she forms a strong bond with various members of the community. For example, Dr. Won and his wife are her first mentors when she embarks on her spiritual journey. Their help, support, care for her not only triggers her enthusiasm toward the faith but also molds her mind. Father Bey, a priest, is another Christian who influences and guides Vibiana during her spiritual development. When she is abandoned by her own family, Father Bey accepts her and takes her to another village. While confused about her calling, she is inspired by the priest's testimony. Finally, her friendship with a seminarian, Kong, facilitates her quest for the vocation. When discerning God's will in her life, Vibiana learns the seminarian's testimony and is more determined to search for the divine calling in her life. In general, Vibiana has built a genuine relationship with like-minded people, which reciprocally benefits her spiritual formation in a tangible way. The church community is a spiritual family in which spiritual growth is encouraged.

**Religion.** Vibiana has been converted to a religion, Christianity, so her spirituality is expressed and developed through formal religious activities such as the catechism class, prayer, and worship services. Religion and spirituality overlap in her case. Christianity stresses the salience of being spiritual and provides different spiritual paths such as the role of the Holy Spirit, prayerful Bible reading, and church community. The

gospel is the foundation for spiritual growth, so the union with Jesus, the center of the gospel produces dynamic spiritual growth. Once people believe in this good news, the Spirit of God dwells within them and empowers them. It is the Holy Spirit that guides them into all truth and boosts spiritual growth. The primary project of Christian community is change. All these factors account for Vibiana's spiritual development because she is actively involved in the religion. The trajectory of her spiritual formation is in line with teachings from the religion.

**The mystery of creation.** "A specific locale in the natural world may be significant in identifying or fostering spiritual experience" (Lapierre, 1994, p. 158). Some inspirations in Vibiana's spiritual development take place in the natural setting—the forest. For instance, she receives a revelation that everyone has a specific place in the world while watching a raccoon eating a rat in the forest; in the same forest where Joan invites her to a meal, which implies that she is welcomed to the church. Vibiana encounters Jesus Christ who encourages her to be mindful for others before she is killed in the village. Vibiana is not alone on this aspect. Many people in the Bible experience God's presence in a particular environment such as the desert, the mountain, and the ground near the burning bush.

**Transformation.** The significance of transformation or change to spirituality is highlighted in and outside of organized religion. In Christianity transformed lives begin with the gospel message of Christ and continue through the association with the Holy Spirit and the Church. Vibiana's spiritual development manifests this dynamic and ongoing process. Her friendship with Dr. Won and his wife draws her near to the mysterious "other"; her relationship with Father Bey and Seminarian Kong gives her

momentum to seek her vocation; finally, the interaction between her and Joan, a holy woman living a few centuries ago, and the Lord Jesus Christ empowers her to experience passion for a cause and compassion for others. Jesus's sacrificial death is a way of expressing the forgiveness and love of the Father, which has profoundly transformed Vibiana. Thus, she becomes self-giving even when life is threatened by violent persecutors. In sum, Vibiana not only has the potential to be transformed but also been becoming like Christ who she trusts in and follows wholeheartedly until her death.

Table 2

*Spiritual development of Little Bao and Vibiana*

	<i>Boxers (Little Bao)</i>	<i>Saints (Four Girl—Vibiana)</i>
Journey	Religious conflicts p. 18 Equipping himself to strive for the goal p. 49 Joining patriotic organizations p. 285 Encountering moral obstacles p. 192 & 248	Bewilderment p. 9-10 Inspirations p. 12; 30 Excluded and beaten by family p. 71 Becoming a martyr p. 162
Transcendence	Tu Di Gong p. 3-6 Gods of the Opera p. 6, 7, 14, 113, 132; 291-4; 317-9 Chin Shih-huang p. 113-8; 128-133; 143; 157; 164-9; 183-193; 204-210; 224-230; 234-7; 244-250; 269-273; 306-9	Encounters and conversations with Joan p. 53; 55; 75; 85; 91; With Jesus Christ p. 154-8
Community	Villagers p. 4-5 Red Lantern Chu & the Big Sword Society p. 50-68 Master Big Belly p. 73-109 The Righteous and Harmonious Fist p. 177; 259	With Dr. Won and his wife p. 32-35; 37-8; 57; 119 With Father Bey p. 78; 82-3 With Seminarian Kong p. 93-5
Religion	Worshiping Tu Di Gong in the spring fair p. 3-6; 30	Catechism class p. 57 Baptism p. 64-69 Holy Communion p. 112-3 Prayer p. 152-3
The mystery of creation	Encountering Gods of the Operas in the fields and during sleep p. 7; 14	The forest p. 11; 49; The village p. 154-8

	During battles p. 113, 132; 291-4; 317-9; 113-8; 128-133; 143; 157; 164-9; 183-193; 204-210; 224-230; 234-7; 244-250; 269-273; 306-9	
Transformation	Studying Kong Fu with Red Lantern Chu p. 49 Gaining more power from Master Big Belly p. 109 Changes brought by Chin Shih-huang 184; 193; 309	Acknowledging Jesus Christ p. 67; 71; 151 Forgiving her family and fellowmen p. 127; 159

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## **Discussion**

Some common themes emerge from the analysis above of six components involved in spirituality of Bao and Vibiana. The following section explores the themes further.

### **Spirituality and religions**

The relationship between spirituality and religion distinguishes scholars into three different camps—exclusiveness, inclusiveness, and correlation. Spiritual development of Bao and Vibiana does not support the split between spirituality and religion. The two protagonists' spiritual formation involves religion despite the gap between their religious practices. Little Bao worships Tu Di Gong and prestigious ancestors from Chinese indigenous religion and observes religious traditions passed down from generations to generations. Folk religions account for Little Bao's spiritual formation, a strong sense of community and deep dedication to protecting his non-Christian fellowmen. C. K. Yang, a leading scholar in Chinese religious studies, points out that Chinese religion is deeply embedded in family and civic life rather than expressed in a separate organizational structure like a "church" as in the West (Fan & Chen, 2013). Neither conversion nor rituals are mandatory to be involved in religious activities given the fact that the religion entails deity associations, rituals, prayers and so on. Chinese folk religion highlights salience of belonging to the local unit of Chinese religiousness such as the village or the kinship with their gods and rituals rather than an official doctrine or dogma. Concrete humanity is the ground Chinese indigenous religion is rooted in.



In contrast, religion plays a vital role in Vibiana's spiritual development. She is converted to Christianity, a full-fledged religion replete with tenets, doctrines, liturgy, sacraments and so on. Christianity stresses the relationship with God and people, so Christians build communities in which Christians can relate to one another. The Scriptures regard a community relationship of love, commitment, and interdependence among Christians as normative, not optional. Prayer and worship is a critical part of how Christians live out their faith and strengthen their community. Vibiana has lived in a Christian community since her baptism and has participated in the religion constantly, so she develops a God-oriented spirituality which in turn guides her thoughts and behaviors. In her case spirituality and religion overlap and flourish.

More recently there has been a prevalent thought that spirituality is more positive than religion (Wagener & Malony, 2005). The analysis of spiritual formation of Little Bao and Vibiana does not provide evidence to support the point of view. Rather, in my opinion a central analysis of the protagonists of *Boxers and Saints* seems to indicate that spirituality and religion are intertwined and neither is superior.

### **Spirituality and deities' characters**

Transcendence, one of the six spiritual elements, denotes the experience of a level of reality that exceeds the limits of ordinary human experience. Both Bao and Vibiana have numerous interactions with the deity in their particular religion, so the High powers exert influences on them and transform them.

The primary goal to Little Bao is to purify the country from intrusion, which motivates him to engage spiritual pursuit. He worships Chinese ancestors, one of whom

is the first Emperor in Chinese history, Chin Shi-huang unifying seven countries into one. Emperor Chin waged numerous wars to conquer the other six countries, which he believed was the mere way to achieve the goal. It is justifiable that violence and cruelty are his characteristics. Little Bao, a follower of this ancestor god, lives in years of political tumult caused by foreign countries invading a politically-and-economically-underdeveloped country. The trauma he and his fellowmen have gone through compels him to imitate Emperor Chin and deploy similar tactics to expel all foreigners from China so that peace and dignity could be restored in the country and among its people. It is no surprise that brutality and violence are present in Little Bao as well, which is the impact of the High power he is connected with.

Little Bao has developed a strong bond with Emperor Chin according to the text. The emperor is present and interacts with Little Bao when the protagonist battles foreigners, wrestles with humanity and social justice, and even fantasies his bright future with his crush. The robust link between them results in an adamant Little Bao who is fanatic to erase the Western influence by any means but also prejudiced against Christians, foreign and Chinese. The stronger the relationship is, the more a follower is shaped by the High power s/he worships.

With regard to Vibiana's spiritual development, her spiritual priority is to purify human beings from sin. When she embarks on the spiritual journey, she has no idea about sin but is struggling with her identity at home and the meaning of life. She becomes interested in Christianity because she is related to Christians who are called as evil. Afterward the Christian community including both Chinese Christians and foreign missionaries gives her tangible love, care, and support, which plus what she has learned

about God in the catechism class gives her a panorama view about God and human beings. The triune God worshipped in Christianity is of love, power, humbleness, justice, sacrifice, and wisdom. The traits of God are present in some Christians whom Vibiana is close to. This loving God and the genuine exemplars navigate her through the domestic man-made chaos so that she is compassionate to the marginalized and the outrageous boxers. She has no hatred toward her family who shows contempt to her sex and religion, faithfully serves orphans in the orphanage and even delivers mercy to the boxer who kills her. The Christian God transforms Vibiana and gives an alternative lens to view the pain and sufferings she and the other Chinese are experiencing. Thus she does not practice “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”.

Vibiana, like Little Bao, is a passionate and strong believer of her religion, Christianity. The frequent interaction among her, God and the Christian community suggests that she develops a close relationship with the deity and the saint who give her guidance and insights. When she discerns God’s vision and is frustrated at life, the saint Joan of Arch soothes and inspires her. While her life is threatened by the boxer, Jesus Christ empowers her to forgive the enemy and extend kindness to him teaching him a prayer. In addition, some other facts give evidence supporting that she is an enthusiastic believer. For example, she takes the catechism class, is baptized at church, and announces her new identity at home. Her firm belief in and tight relationship with God are the key elements in her spiritual development.

### **Pathological spirituality vs. normal spirituality**

Little Bao and Vibiana present two opposing types of spiritual development, pathological and normal. “In the area of spirituality, normal development involves the

integration of experiences into a system of meaning that addresses questions of ultimate purpose, connectedness, good and evil, and transcendent reality” (Wagener & Malony, p. 140). Normal spiritual development provides people a new lens to view life, world, and people in a constructive way. Spiritual pathology reflects a distortion of reality or results in potential harm to self or others, such as delusion and terrorism.

Bao worships ancestors and has been influenced enormously by Chin Shih-Huang, a tyrant. Therefore, he gets involved into religious terrorism while witnessing incursion and humiliation during the disruptive period. A desire for revenge is the primary motivation for terrorism although he seems to have internalized very high and noble principles for living and fighting. He holds a steadfast belief in the radical kind of nationalism and patriotism, which is egocentric to an extreme, so his moral code and mission are to be dispassionate about killing for the sake of preserving the nation and hope for the country’s unity. As a result, his spirituality goes awry and becomes dysfunctional and destructive to the others.

In contrast to Little Bao’s pathological spirituality, Vibiana has fostered a mature and de-centered spirituality. The object of her religion makes a big difference. Christianity promotes a moral life and followers of the triune God are aligned with the Good which is the reality of Goodness and has power to support people in doing good and opposing evil. She, like the other Chinese Christians, is loathed by her fellowmen, and yet the spring of love in her life never runs dry so that she is able to forgive adversaries. Unlike Bao, hatred and violence does not take a grip on her when she defends herself and fights off doubts.

### **Spirituality in a particular context**

Spiritual development of Bao and Vibiana reveals that it is plausibly shaped by the historical, cultural, social and religious circumstances that people are facing. Nobody is isolated from what is taking place in their age. Historical events and social situation usually have significant impacts on young adults who hunger for ideology, strive for meaning and purpose, and desire for relationships and connectedness. Spirituality of Bao and Vibiana has been formed during the Boxer Rebellion while they face the trauma and tumult the country and people were suffering. Consequently, their spirituality leads to their opposing actions, Bao killing Christians regardless of their ethnicity and Vibiana supporting and assisting those in need despite their religious and racial identity. It is concordant with history documented by scholars.

In addition, spirituality of Bao and Vibiana, to a degree, is the fruit of Chinese culture and religions. Latourette (1929) stated that Chinese religions involve a mixture of objects of worship such as spirits of ancestors and special gods. Bao worships Tu Di Gong and Emperor Chin Shi Huang and his spirituality contains traces of Emperor Chin. Like Emperor Chin, Bao strives to unite China by using violence and blames Christians for the division of the country. Hence, Christians, regarded as devils, become victims in boxers' slaughter. In Vibiana's case, her conversion to a monotheism religion implies that she is compelled to give up her heritage religions. That meant, she is a traitor to Chinese culture and religions in her family's eyes. She, therefore, is driven out and endures the domestic harassment for the sake of her faith. Her spiritual formation undergoes crackdown, which does not restrain her from practicing her faith and maturing in her faith. The cultural and religious conflicts depicted in *Boxers and Saints* are not only true but also still existent in the contemporary era.

To sum up, the polytheism culture and social crisis are the factors contributing to the development of spirituality, either negative or positive.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Work**

This descriptive study details the process of spiritual development of young adults born and raised up in Chinese culture. The two protagonists in *Boxers and Saints*, to some extent, are prototypes of Chinese adolescents although the eras they live in are different. Commonalities between them are never eclipsed by time. Chinese have been religious since the beginning of the history and indigenous and imported religions coexist in China. Christianity has been developing very rapidly in the past three decades in China and converts include both adults and adolescents. Chinese young adults are enthusiastic in searching for a faith and a large number of them have been converted to Christianity abroad and at home (Yang, 1998; Li, 2013). Therefore, the current study sheds light on the comprehension of Chinese young adults' spirituality nowadays.

In addition, the study demonstrates that spirituality can be categorized into undeveloped and mature spirituality. The core images in the religion and values supported by the images draw a line between the two types of spirituality. Therefore, it is unjustifiable to think that spirituality is superior to religion, but the correlation between them should not be ignored.

The study has a couple of limitations. First, the critical content analysis has been conducted on two YA texts. The future research could examine more YA literature concerning spirituality of adolescents. Second, the current study gives a glimpse of spirituality of two young protagonists, so the research investigating young adults in real life is called for.

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