

The value of graphic novels in conveying historical events

How do graphic novels represent history?

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates how the graphic novel has been used to represent major historical events. Through the analysis of graphic novels such as: Li Kunwu's (2012) *A Chinese Life*, Liu Jing's (2011, 2016) *Understanding China through Comics*, Art Spiegelman's (1980) *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's (2003, 2004) *Persepolis*, this dissertation explores the format and conventions of graphic novels and shows how the combination of text, panels, and images powerfully represent major historical events. The research reveals that graphic novels provide an accessible way for readers to understand complex and conflict-ridden events in history.

Introduction

Graphic novels and comics are often used to present culture, history, and even literature in an artistic way that is easily understood by the audience (Schwarz, 2002, p. 264). In this essay, I will investigate both Western and Non-Western graphic novels, including Li Kunwu's (2012) *A Chinese Life*, Liu Jing's (2011, 2016) *Understanding China through Comics*, Art Spiegelman's (1980) *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's (2003, 2004) *Persepolis*, to discuss how these graphic novels represent major historical events.

Robin Brenner is editor-in-chief of a website reviewing graphic novels for teens. In her article *Graphic novels 101: FAQ* Brenner (2006) defines a graphic novel as sharing with comic books the use of text, images, and panels as a format; however the graphic novel is longer as it is not confined to a 30-page issue (p. 123). Schwarz (2002) states the graphic novel is a tool that explores "views of culture, history, and human life in an accessible way, giving voice to minorities and diverse viewpoints" (p. 264).

In this dissertation I explore how graphic novel conventions, such as the combination of text, panels, and images, can be used to represent historical events, and in particular, how despite the ideological differences between Western and Non-Western cultures, the graphic novel is still a compelling way of representing history. I argue that graphic novels as a format can be used by artists, media practitioners and historians to show the complexity, ambiguity and conflict of historical events within a visual framework,

which through graphic novel conventions allows the author to render a immersive and humanized representation of the trauma of historical events.

The examples I have selected reflect major historical events that have occurred. The first three graphic novels offer minimal authorial distance between the author and the event; the first graphic novel *Maus* depicts conversations with the author's father about his experience of the holocaust; the other two are autobiographical accounts of the author's life and history in relation to these events. The two autobiographic examples include depictions of the author's experience of the Cultural Revolution in China (*A Chinese Life*) and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the 1970s (*Persepolis*). In contrast to these examples, my final example *Understanding China through Comics*, places more distance between the author and the event, as it depicts a range of major Chinese events, such as the Qin Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty, and the Opium Wars. This final example, in relation to the other western and non-western examples, demonstrates the power of the graphic novel to represent historical events despite the ideology of the author and the narrative distance between the author and the event.

The major finding of this research is that the graphic novel has a specific format that enables a clear understanding of these historical events. Graphic novels are a valuable tool for artists to powerfully convey their personal experiences during these events. In his article: *Propaganda and Memory in Li Kunwu and Philippe Ôtié's A Chinese Life*, Jeffrey Mather (2016) summaries autobiography and personal accounts as a unique

opportunity for artists to convey their personal experiences and perspectives on historical events in an immersive way (p. 108). Despite this, I will also demonstrate that the graphic novel is a compelling format for showing a depersonalised overview of events, such as in *Understanding China through Comics*. I will show how the format of a graphic novel can be used as an tool for understanding history through the analysis of the above examples.

An Analysis of Graphic Novels

Maus

The graphic novel has become a popular genre for narrating historical narratives, including war and revolution. *Maus* is a good example of how the graphic novel reflects the Holocaust and World War II. *Maus* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel written by Art Spiegelman. He is its author, cartoonist and graphic novelist. *Maus* introduces the story of the experiences of Art Spiegelman's father, Vladek Spiegelman, during the Holocaust, while also exploring Art's struggles to come to terms with his own identity as the child of Holocaust survivors.

It is important to note that the extent to which representing such horrors as those of the Holocaust is appropriate in any form of media is a contentious topic. This means it is important to consider in relation to graphic novels that explore such topics that the format is often viewed as low brow. An example of resistance to the representation of such events comes from Theodor W. Adorno, a prominent German philosopher from the Frankfurt School, who famously wrote, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Kyriakides, 2005, p. 441)

A common interpretation of Adorno's phrase is that artistic expression is not suitable for representing events like the Holocaust from World War II. Is this to be understood as meaning that the graphic novel as an artistic tool is also not suitable for presenting

the Holocaust? I argue *Maus* is a suitable expression of the horrors of the Holocaust as the graphic novel supports readers' understanding of historical events through the lens of personal experience. This close narrative distance is also demonstrated by the graphic novels *A Chinese Life* and *Persepolis*, which depict the individual's experience of the cultural revolution and the Iranian revolution respectively. *Maus* is an autobiographical account of the dialogue between the author and his father who experienced the Holocaust, and describes the emotions and memories of the Holocaust as they are passed down from generation to generation, in a way that is easy and clear for audiences to read. I would argue that graphic novels that represent one's experiences at a personal level give the reader a kind of access to a historical event in a way that is appropriate, as Thomas Doherty (1996), Professor of American Studies at Brandeis University, argues in his article: *Art Spiegelman's Maus: Graphic Art and the Holocaust*.

“Unable to compete with the real life horror shows recorded in the newsreels and documentary meditations, artists facing the Holocaust seek to create a picture of reality that though not photographic is still a good likeness” (p. 77)

Thus, the graphic novel is a useful and artistic tool for representing the trauma of such events because of its stylized method of presenting historical events, On top of this it also functions as a bridge between the readers and historical events by presenting the author's experiences rather than by narrating the historical events in detail.

The story has multiple stylistic treatments that help represent the holocaust. One of the most noticeable is the use of personified animals to represent different nationalities or countries. For example, Jewish characters are portrayed as mice and Germans as cats. At the same time, *Maus* has two timelines to introduce the story about World War II: the first depicts Art interviewing his father, Vladek Spiegelman, a Holocaust survivor, about his experiences during World War II in the 1940s. The second timeline follows Vladek and his wife Anja's efforts to survive as Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe during the war.

Spiegelman's *Maus* provides a way of witnessing and understanding the history of World War II. For example, although Art did not live through World War II, he uses his father's experience to show history through this graphic novel. Hillary Chute is an American scholar and critic of comics and graphic novels and she also is a professor of English, Art, and Design at Northeastern University. Chute argues that comics provide a 'visual voice in the artist's hand' (D'Arcy, 2003, p. 2). The artist's hand is the 'visibility' link between the father, Vladek, and his son Artie. She states:

“One prominent example of the son battling his father's verbal testimony with his visual medium is Spiegelman's drawing of an only just visible orchestra playing as prisoners march out of the gates of Auschwitz, contradicting Vladek's firm vocal insistence that no orchestra was present” (Chute, 2006, p. 209).

As seen in Figure 1, Art uses the graphic novel to record the history that he wants to describe. However, this conflicts with his father's memory.

Figure 1

Maus



(Spiegelman, 1980)

Vladek doesn't want to remember the orchestra playing as prisoners march out of the gates of Auschwitz. As Chute (2006) says:

“Working with his father's slippery, strange, non-linear, incomplete testimony, Spiegelman is drawn to the concept of imposing formal order” (p. 210).

This example highlights the complexity of memory, with the illustrator wanting to find some order to the complex and ambiguous memories that his father narrates. Art achieves this by framing the graphic novel in a non-linear and linear way (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Maus



(Spiegelman, 1980)

In this example, “Artie uses frames that linearly run across the page and a timeline that runs down the page. This represents the layered histories that exist, that become ‘radically legible on the page’ ” (Chute, 2006, p. 212).

Maus is a graphic novel that enables a unique and effective representation of historical events. Chute (2006) argues that the medium of comics “can approach and express serious, even devastating, histories” (p. 200). *Maus* is a graphic novel that explores how the memories of the Holocaust are passed down through generations, affecting not only the survivors themselves but also their children or grandchildren. It emphasizes how the order of the memories between the generations is different. It highlights the difference and the complexity of memories and how they change over time, well still being a powerful reflection on the impact of the Holocaust and the importance of understanding history in shaping a better future.

Persepolis

Another example of a Western graphic novel is *Persepolis*, written by Marjane Satrapi, who is a famous graphic novelist, cartoonist, illustrator, and children's writer. *Persepolis* supports the idea that the graphic novel can not only present history but can also demonstrate to readers some social issues. In addition, *Persepolis* is similar to *Maus* in being an autobiographical graphic novel. It depicts Satrapi's emotions and memories during the political and social change in Iran through the lens of Satrapi's experience.

Persepolis tells the story of Satrapi's childhood and teenage years in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. As an autobiographical graphic novel, *Persepolis* explores themes of identity, politics, and culture based on Satrapi's own experiences. This

graphic novel depicts Satrapi's life in Iran during a time of significant political and social change, including the overthrow of the Shah, the rise of Islam, and the Iran-Iraq War. Through her personal experiences, Satrapi shows the challenges faced by women in Iranian society and highlights feminist themes throughout *Persepolis*. As Satrapi grows up, she becomes increasingly aware of the restrictions placed on women and the suppression of individual freedom under the new government. During this time, she wants her parents to send her to study abroad in Austria to rebel against the rules and expectations placed on her. So, *Persepolis* uses the graphic novel to convey political and social issues through Satrapi's personal experiences, providing readers with a unique perspective on Iranian history.

Hillary Chute (2003) discusses graphic narratives as a useful tool to reflect the key information in her article: *The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"*

“The comic form calls attention to what we as readers "see" and do not see of the subject: the legibility of the subject as a literal-that is to say, read able-issue to encounter” (p. 96).

As seen in Figure 3, Satrapi uses the “THE VEIL” as a verbal-visual form to express that “readers do not see of the subject” which shows the restrictions placed on women in Iran.

Figure 3

Persepolis



(Satrapi, 2003)

As an Iranian-born artist living in France, Satrapi not only uses the autobiographical graphic novel to research the difficulties that immigrants face in adapting to new surroundings but also reflects the history of Iran and the impact of political issues on its people. Chute (2003) says:

“The medium of comics can perform the enabling political and aesthetic work of bearing witness powerfully because of its rich narrative texture: its flexible page architecture; its sometimes consonant, sometimes dissonant visual and verbal narratives; and its structural threading of absence and presence” (p. 94).

Figure 4

Persepolis



(Satrapi, 2004)

In Figure 4, readers will find the pictures in the middle of this page different from those at the top and the bottom of the page, because this page uses not only a lot of “rich

narrative texture” and “visual and verbal narratives”, but also a “flexible page” which shows Satrapi feels horror as a child, and that Iran has serious social issues.

Persepolis is a powerful graphic novel that offers a nuanced description of Iranian society and culture. Through Satrapi's personal story and her viewpoint, readers can better understand the challenges faced by women and the impact of political and cultural change on individual lives. Thus, after reading *Persepolis* I think the graphic novel can be a powerful medium to convey political and social themes through a rich narrative structure and visual images.

A Chinese life

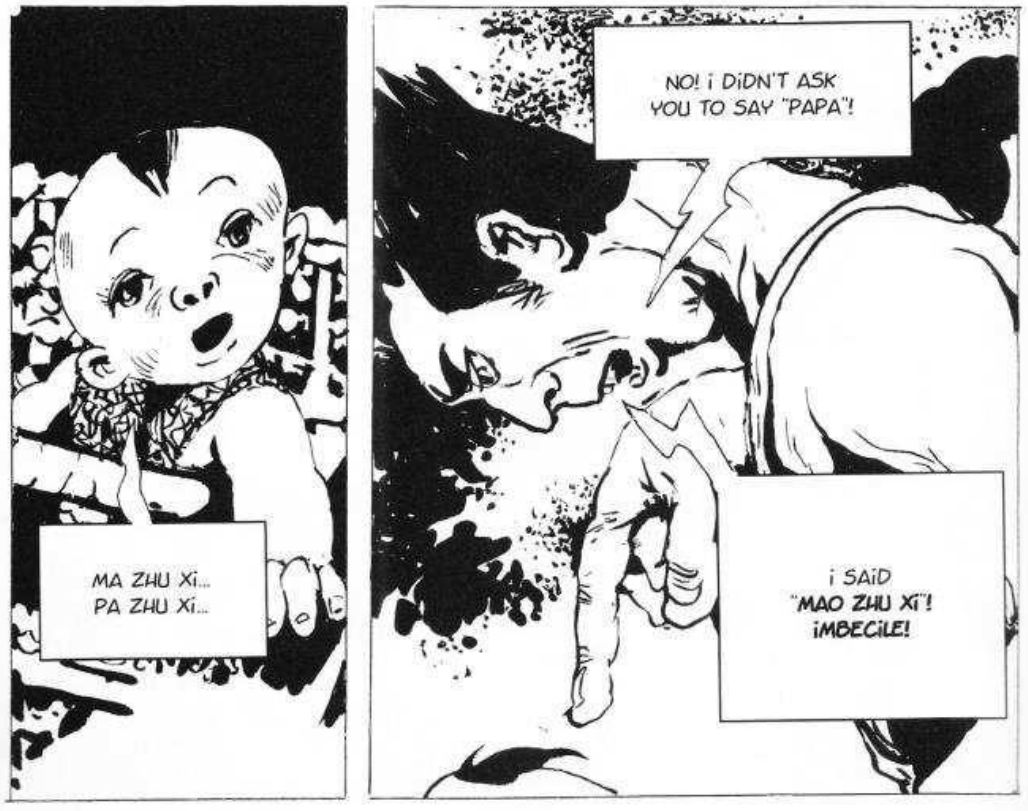
A Chinese Life is a typical Chinese graphic novel using illustration conventions which combine Chinese landscape painting with pop culture, such as cartoon and ink wash, to show traditional Chinese history. *A Chinese Life*, like *Maus*, is the autobiographical account of Li Kunwu’s experiences. It explores political and social changes, such as the cultural revolution in Chinese history, through the lens of personal experience.

Li Kunwu, a Chinese artist and illustrator, wrote *A Chinese Life* to introduce the author's life of around 55 years. This is an autobiographical graphic novel reflecting political and social changes that took place in China during the 20th century. *A Chinese Life* begins with Li Kunwu's birth in a small village in Yunnan province, and then this graphic novel uses his life to show political and social changes in China, such as the

experiences in his childhood, experiences in the Chinese army, and career as a propaganda artist when he was a member of the Chinese Communist Party. Readers can find many significant moments in Chinese history by reading this graphic novel. For example, audiences can find Li Kunwu's father is trying to ask Li to say “ ‘Mao Zhuxi Wansui’ (May Chairman Mao live 10,000 years) as his first words” at the start of *A Chinese Life*. The purpose of the behaviour is to show “love for Chairman Mao”, otherwise, the child would be considered an imbecile if he could not show love for Chairman Mao (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

A Chinese Life



(Kunwu, 2012)

Li Kunwu uses the graphic novel to show the difficult choices that people must make in order to survive and develop because people need to guarantee loyalty and compliance during some key societal and historical events. For example, all the Chinese people need to follow the thought of Chairman Mao to persecute “the ‘Four Olds’—Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, Old Ideas—and the ‘ox devil’ bourgeoisie” (Mather, 2016, p. 101), and some people have suffered during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, as shown in Figure 6. This is the reason why Mather (2016), who is Associate Head of the Department of English at the University of Kent, discusses the

significance of autobiographical graphic novels in his article: *Propaganda and Memory in Li Kunwu and Philippe Ôtié's A Chinese Life*.

“Autobiograph[y] ... can push readers to reconsider the fictive nature of life stories and their sociohistorical contexts in interesting ways” (Mather, 2016, p. 108).

Figure 6

A Chinese Life



(Kunwu, 2012)

Although *A Chinese Life* is an autobiographical graphic novel written by Chinese artist Li Kunwu and French author Phillipe Ôtié, it provides a distinctive perspective on Chinese recent history and development. *A Chinese Life* offers a unique view of Chinese society, history and politics in the different stages of Chinese history, such as: “catastrophe”, “excess,” and “prosperity”. It illustrates the importance of the graphic novel in helping readers comprehend the complexities of other cultures and social developments.

Understanding China through Comics

Understanding China through Comics is a series of graphic novels that offer an interesting and accessible introduction to Chinese history. However, the author needs to spend a long time doing research about Chinese history, because there is a long authorial distance between the author and Chinese historical events, for example, the Qin Dynasty in Chinese history is more than 2,225 years now. The author of *Understanding China through Comics* is Liu Jing, who was born and raised in Beijing during the period of economic reform and opening-up. These books are illustrated in a colourful and dynamic style to cover a wide range of historical events and periods in China. Liu Jing aims to help an increasing number of students easily learn about Chinese history through *Understanding China through Comics*. He also wants through this series of graphic novels to promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of Chinese history and culture to Western audiences. Thus, *Understanding China through Comics* provides an overview of Chinese history without the emotional and

historically traumatic events which *Maus* uses to convey the trauma of emotions and memories through the individual's lens.


Each book in the series focuses on a specific period or theme in Chinese history, such as the Qin Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty, or the Opium Wars. These books use “visual and verbal narratives” and “rich narrative texture” to convey key historical events and concepts for readers of all ages. Thus, this graphic novel can present complex historical events and ideas to easily understand and remember. For example, Liu Jing uses “rich narrative texture” and pictures to show the development of Chinese written history (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Understanding China through Comics

A wide range of divination texts left traces of the Shang society for archeologists.








These oracle bones talked about topics like weather, harvests, wars, rituals, and health.



150,000 oracle bones have been found so far.

We understand about 1/3 of 4,500 oracle bone characters.

Some modern Chinese characters can be traced back to the Shang.

Oracle bone script	Modern Chinese	Core meaning
	牛	ox
	羊	goat
	京	capital
	鼎	vessel
	田	field
	木	tree
	水	water

Copyrighted material

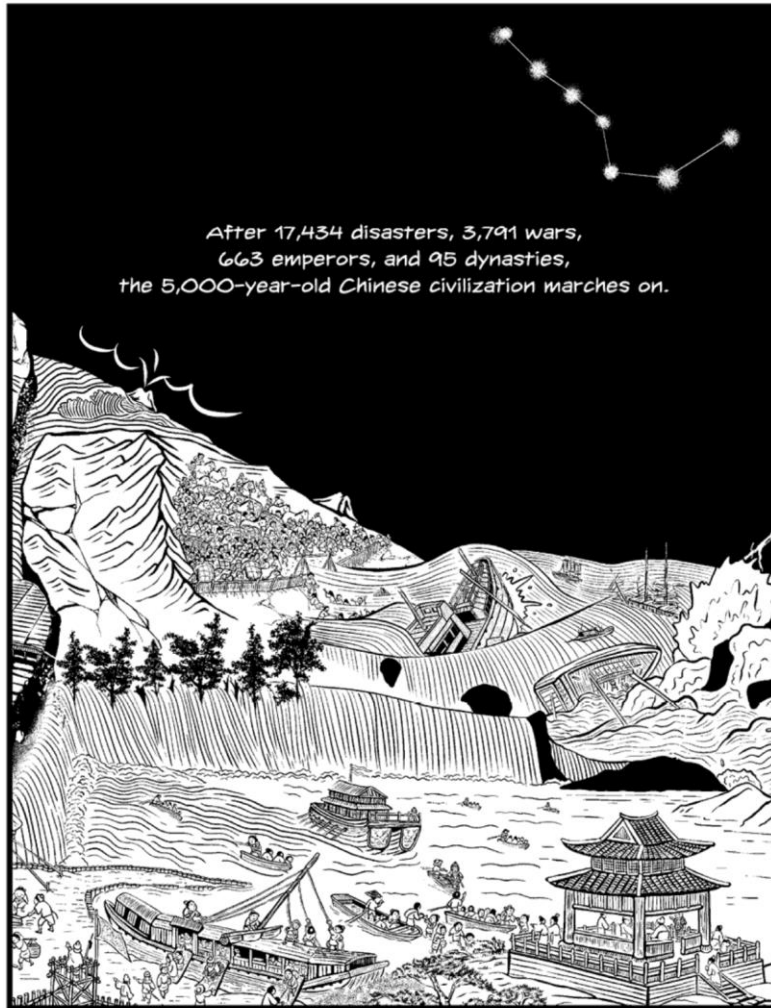
(Jing, 2011)

Understanding China through Comics presents a dialogue between infographic and narrative to provide access to historical data through engaging narrative sequences.

Even though the author has more distance from the history presented, and is not personally related to the stories, he is able to make it more relatable and memorable for the audience. For example, readers can find historical details between infographic and the narrative sequence in Figure 7. In addition, in Liu Jing's (2016) *Foundations of Chinese Civilization: The Yellow Emperor to the Han Dynasty*, readers can find a summation of Chinese history at the start of the book to arrive and combine the “visual” and “verbal narratives” together, such as ‘17,434 disasters, 3,791 wars, 663 emperors, 95 dynasties’ (Jing, 2016, p. 1) in Figure 8. At the same time, readers also can find and compare the data and changes in population in each Dynasty in Figure 9. Combining infographic, dialogue and some summarizing information into the graphic novel better presents the historical events for readers.

Figure 8

Understanding China through Comics

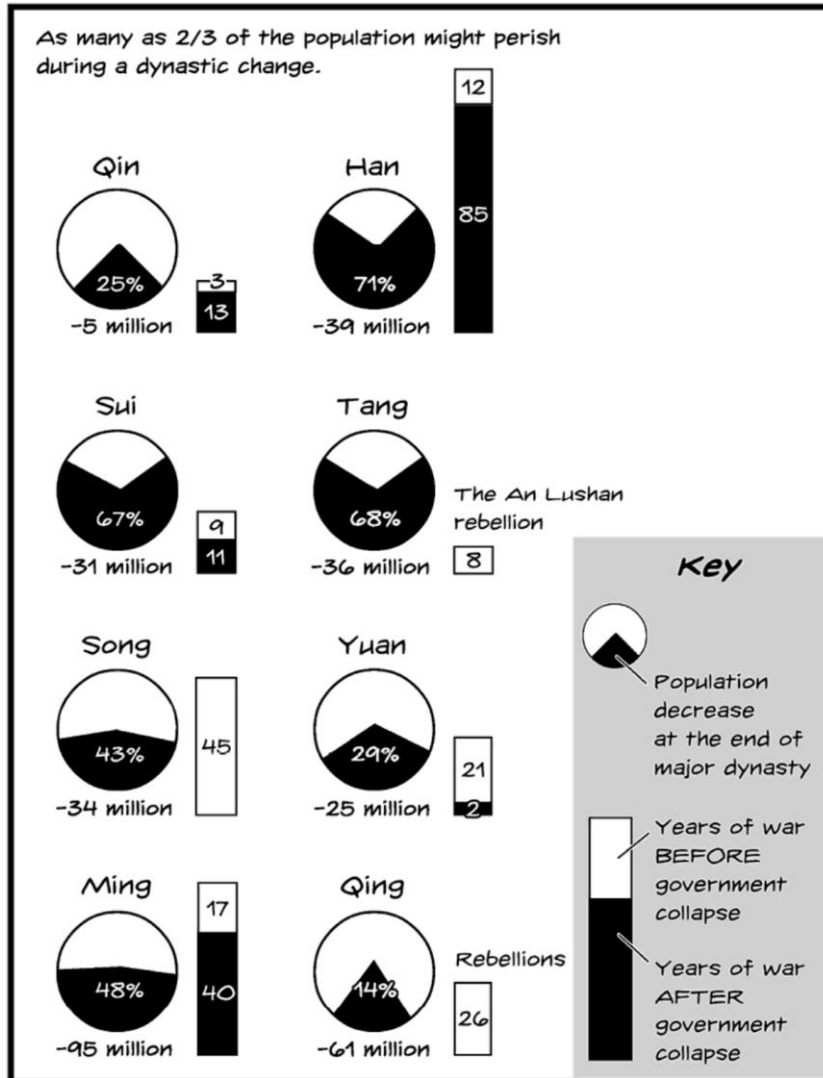


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(Jing, 2016)

Figure 9

Understanding China through Comics



Copyrighted material

(Jing, 2016)

Understanding China through Comics is a highly recommended educational book series for anyone who wants to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese history. With its unique approach, it uses graphic novel conventions to offer an accessible way to explore historical knowledge. What's more, this graphic novel will become a helpful

resource for students and readers who are interested in learning more about Chinese history. And it also is a valuable contribution to the field of history education.

The value of graphic novels

The graphic novel usually not only uses a stylized method to present historical events through an individual account, including traumatic events, such as *Maus* using the lens of personal experience to show the horrors of the Holocaust. but also using a colourful style to display the overview of history to readers such as *Understanding China through Comics*. This is why I would like to say a graphic novel is a valuable tool for introducing historical information and historically traumatic events.

In Hillary Chute's article: *The shadow of a past time: History and graphic representation in Maus*, Chute (2006) describes the usefulness of graphic novels in representing history and illuminating societal issues. She thinks "the graphic narrative is a contemporary form that is helping to expand the cultural map of historical representation" (p. 214).

At the same time, Pam Watts (2015), a professor of literacy education at Longwood University in Virginia, agrees with Chute's views. In her article *Graphic Novels Offer Diverse Perspectives, Narratives*, Watts (2015) demonstrates that graphic novels are a valuable tool for representing history.

"Graphic novels and comic narratives use images as a primary mode of communication, allowing them to convey information in a more accessible

manner than purely textual works” (p. 39).

For example, the graphic novel *Maus* employs anthropomorphic animals to represent different countries and highlight the horrors of World War II, using visual techniques to convey the story's meaning (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Maus



(Spiegelman, 1980)

This image renders the unwavering commitment of Red Guard members during the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the graphic novel format, it depicts the patriotism of the Chinese people through both image and text. (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

A Chinese Life



(Kunwu, 2012)

Marjane Satrapi's (2000) *Persepolis* uses the veil as a visual element, and the facial expressions of the women in the illustrations to describe the challenges faced by women. And then it also offers visual information about the restrictions placed on women and the suppression of individual freedom in recent Iranian history (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

Persepolis



(Satrapi, 2003)

This demonstrates how graphic novels use visual images as an effective means of representing cultural, societal, and historical contexts. They provide readers with an accessible means of understanding these events and can serve as a valuable supplement to traditional historical texts and literature. Whereas the traditional historical texts provide information in long text formats, the value of the graphic novel, is that the

reader can absorb a lot of visual information efficiently and effectively enabling the reader to remain relaxed enough to absorb a lot of difficult information (Smith & Pole, 2018, p. 171).

In addition, the graphic novel is a tool for artists to reflect on their own subjective experience, because they offer the minimal authorial distance between the author and historical events. The graphic novel becomes an entirely new way of perceiving these historical events and the artists' life. Graphic novelists, who adopt a reflective attitude to the society and history of their time as they experienced it, can reveal the ideological and political beliefs that have transpired in different times to the audience. Omer Ali and Ahmed Sabah Neamah (2021) are professors in the College of Fine Arts at the University of Babylon. In their article: *Cultural Sociology in the Modern Art*, they use a statement from a Marxist perspective to support this idea:

“Social conditions can prepare for art its themes and trends and may unleash and inspire the power of creativity and vice versa ... As Marx believes: social consciousness, ideas, values, and beliefs in the superstructure are influenced by the material base” (p. 3082).

For example, during the Cultural Revolution, Li Kunwu used the graphic novel to show children grandiose propaganda about Mao Zedong as the leader of the proletariat, which

was disseminated through various ways such as cigarette packets, tickets, slogans, and posters (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

A Chinese Life



(Kunwu, 2012)

Figure 14

A Chinese Life



(Kunwu, 2012)

After the Cultural Revolution, the State of the Republic of China disseminated propaganda that emphasized the country's socio-political, economic development and ideology evolution, following the opening of the borders to Western countries. In *A Chinese Life*, for example, Kunwu (2012) shows scenes in a drawing class where the model undresses and the teacher instructs her to “spread her legs a little bit wider”. The school’s president keeps finding reasons to return to the classroom “to make sure that everything is going okay” (Mather, 2016, p. 101). The model undressing in this scene is a reflection of the historical change in ideology that people were undergoing at the time (see Figure 14). These examples reveal that artists are influenced by real-life material conditions and culture to effectively convey to their audiences the changes in social development and ideological and political beliefs that transpired. This graphic novel can help an audience understand the material conditions and society's development and how different times have different ideologies.

The graphic novel can be used to show how historical events can be seen in a different way when viewed at different times. This can impact the readers' ideas about history and politics. For example, Kökerer (2021) is a German historian with research interests spanning 20th-century German history, Jewish culture and literature, and memory studies. In her article: *Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma in Spiegelman’s Maus*, she says:

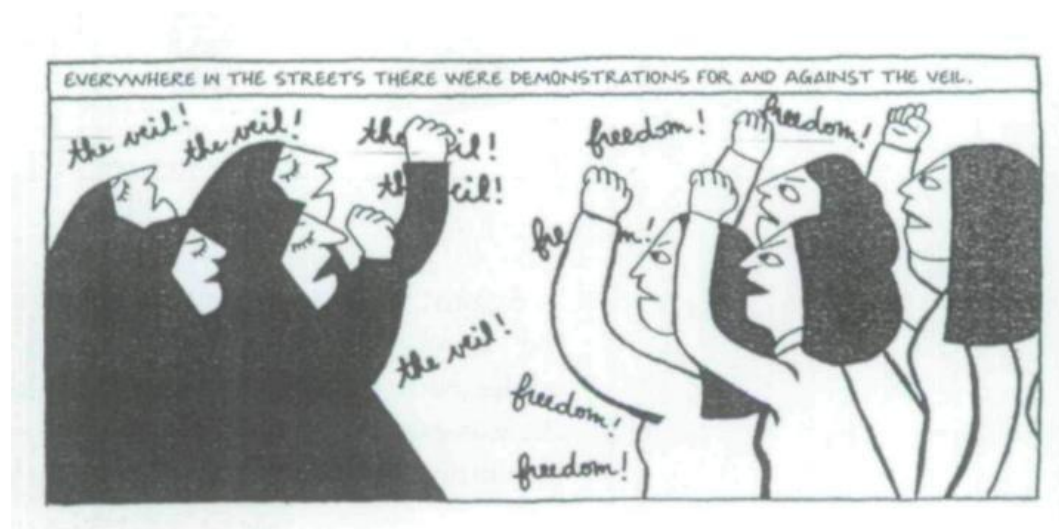
“Comic books and graphic novels, can challenge ideology, raise public awareness,

and even change social issues. That is, art also can help audiences become politically efficient and powerful” (Kökerer, 2021, p. 375).

For example, *Maus* tells the story of World War II through the graphic novel, while *Persepolis* talks about a woman's experience during the Islamic Revolution. *A Chinese Life* is a graphic novel that shows Chinese history during the Cultural Revolution, reforms, and the opening of Chinese borders. *Understanding China through Comics* is a helpful example of using graphic novels to teach people about Chinese history. All of these examples demonstrate how the graphic novel can inform readers about not only historical events that took place but also political situations that occurred. The graphic novel impacts people's political ideas and enables them to become more politically savvy. For example, *Persepolis* reflects on the injustice done to women during the Islamic Revolution. It is an effective way to show how women were treated and impacts people's thoughts and feelings about that political regime (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

Persepolis



(Satrapi, 2003)

This research reveals that traditional literature or history books often require a high level of cognitive skill for audiences to comprehend historical information. In this context, the graphic novel can offer a useful alternative and is an accessible tool for audiences to easily comprehend complex historical information. These examples show that when Chinese or Western artists utilize graphic novels as a medium for representing history and historical issues, it becomes an accessible method for audiences to comprehend complex, ambiguous and conflict-ridden historical information. This is why I am interested in utilizing graphic novels as a means of depicting Chinese history.

Discussion of findings

Schwarz (2002) argues that

“graphic novels are a useful tool for readers because they provide alternative views of culture, history, and human life in an accessible way, giving voice to minorities and diverse viewpoints” (p. 264).

However, after researching and analyzing examples from both Western and Non-Western graphic novels, I have found significant differences between Western and Non-Western graphic novels. For instance, all graphic novels are created through the artist's ideology. In the following sections, I will examine these differences in detail.

The differences between Non-Western and Western graphic novels

The primary difference between Non-Western and Western graphic novels is that artists, historians or media practitioners have different ideologies and political climates when they create a historical graphic novel. Ali and Neamah (2010), professors in the Department of Geography, College of Education for Pure Sciences, University of Babylon, support this argument by stating that art is an expression of social culture and is shaped by an artist's awareness and relationship with society. In *Cultural Sociology*

in the Modern Arts, they state:

“art is part of social life and expresses social culture through individual creations that differ from one artist to another according to the artist’s awareness and his relationship with society” (Ali & Neamah, 2021, p. 3084).

Kunwu, a member of the Chinese Communist Party, had to work indirectly to avoid being persecuted by the party for having views that directly opposed the views of the party. For example, he highlights the environmental effects of the Cultural Revolution through his work. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, people extensively felled trees and forests to achieve the ‘Four Olds’: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, Old Ideas, and this demonstrates how people blindly worshiped Mao to make some unwise decisions (see Figure 16 and Figure 17).

Figure 16

A Chinese life



(Kunwu, 2012)

Figure 17

A Chinese life



(Kunwu, 2012)

Similarly, Satrapi's *Persepolis* provides evidence of how women are restricted in the Islamic Revolution. However, where Satrapi is able to reveal this restriction openly in her graphic novel, Kunwu is not able to be so open because he is working under the regime of the Communist Party (see Figure 15 and Figure 11).

Thus, the difference between graphic novels such as *Persepolis* and graphic novelist such as *Maus* is that the Chinese and Iranian graphic novelists had much more pressure to work in an indirect way because of political pressure exerted by the Chinese Communist Party, or Iran respectively. As a result, Western and non-western artists, historians and media practitioners have different ideological regimes to negotiate "the shape of a particular society determines the nature of the culture that corresponds to it" (Ali & Neamah, 2021, p. 3083). For example, Mather supports this idea when Kunwu had the constraints of being a member of the Chinese Communist Party and the social environment in *A Chinese Life*:

"A Chinese Life has been used to present the Culture Revolution through the graphic novel, he is unable to separate himself from, and in many ways becomes, that which oppresses him" (Mather, 2016, p. 102).

When artists use the graphic novel to represent history for readers, the difference between, for example, Western and Non-Western graphic novels is that they have different cultural environments and societies that impact artists and their freedom to

express their ideas.

Despite differences between Western and Non-Western graphic novels in their representation of history, due to variations in cultural environments and ideologies, artists, media practitioners, and historians can create new graphic novels that help readers learn about historical events while also gaining a better understanding of societal and political issues. For instance, graphic novels such as *A Chinese Life*, *Maus* and *Persepolis* use visual elements and images to enhance readers' understanding of historical events. Graphic novels are effective in transporting the audience to different historical periods and raising awareness about serious, even destructive, events in history and culture through the use of graphics. In this way, graphic novels play a significant role in the existence and development of culture and history.

The use of formatting to convey ideas in the graphic novel

Spatial layering

Spatial layering is an important formatting device that graphic designers use to present history through the graphic novel. Chute (2006) emphasizes the significance of spatial layering in presenting history through the graphic novel in her analysis of *Maus*. In *The shadow of a past time: history and graphic representation in Maus* :

“Spiegelman thus represents the accreted, shifting "layers" of historical

apprehension not only through language but also through the literal, spatial layering of comics, enabling the presence of the past to become radically legible on the page” (Chute, 2006, p. 212).

The spatial layering and formatting of the graphic novel is an important way to present history to readers through visual space. Ball and Kuhlman (2010), both experts in American literature, popular culture, and comics, define spatial layering in their article:

The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking:

“Spatial layering as the use of multiple planes within a panel or page to create a sense of depth, whether through perspective, overlapping images, or the placement of figures and objects in space” (Ball & Kuhlman, 2010, p. 3).

For example, in *Maus*, Spiegelman employs a spatial layering technique, which is a non-linear and linear way of showing how time and memory operates within the graphic novel to present his father's experiences in Auschwitz and his survival journey with his wife in Europe through two distinct temporal planes. This approach not only follows the timeline of historical events in World War II, but also uses a more appropriate format to facilitate the reader's comprehension of these events in the graphic novel. In addition, *Understanding China through Comics* also explains why spatial layering is important. The author provides a summary of key events in Chinese history, such as 17,434 disasters, 3,791 wars, 663 emperors, and 95 dynasties (see Figure 8). Through the

technique of spatial layering, the readers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the timeline of Chinese history. Spatial layering effectively presents this information to readers. Thus, Graphic novels that incorporate spatial layering with timelines in history can effectively convey complex historical information and events to readers, allowing them to easily understand a wide range of topics (see Figure 8 and Figure 9).

Symbols in graphic novels

Symbols in graphic novels are an essential component for effectively presenting historical events and ideas. For example, in *Persepolis* we see the symbols using “it became obligatory to wear the veil at school” (Chute, 2006. p. 96).

Figure 21

Persepolis



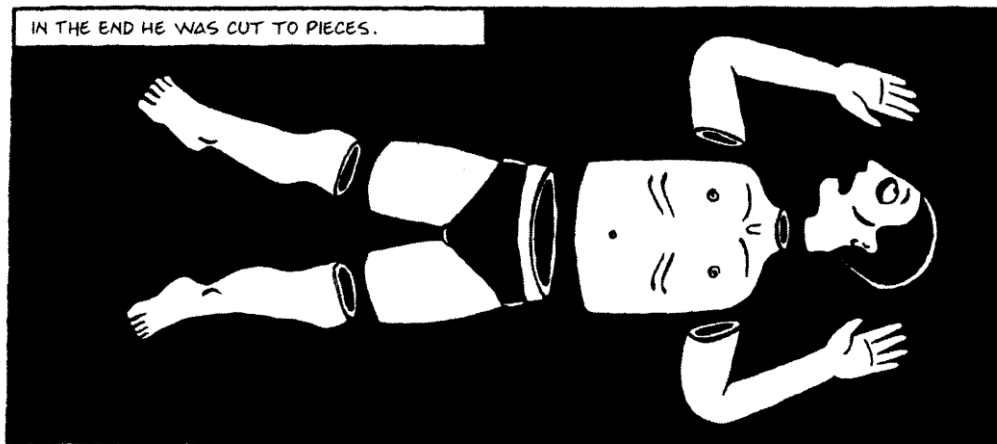
(Satrapi, 2003)

The use of the veil as a visual symbol highlights the significance of the meaning of the veil in Iran during the 1980s in Figure 21.

Another example of the use of the symbol in the graphic novel can be seen in the dismembered figure of the man in *Persepolis* (see Figure 22).

Figure 22

Persepolis



(Satrapi, 2003)

This symbol has been used by Satrapi to represent the brutality of the Iranian Revolution. Satrapi has emphasized the importance of using visual elements to convey main ideas that cannot be easily expressed through text alone. Similarly, in *A Chinese Life*, the use of propaganda, such as cigarette packets and posters, helps readers understand the political and social issues in China (see Figure 11). In *Maus*, animal metaphors are used to represent different nationalities making it easier for readers to understand complex historical events (see Figure 10).

The use of conventions in the graphic novel

Additionally, the use of conventions in graphic novels can help readers to understand historical events and convey the emotional tone of historical events. For instance, the use of black-and-white conveys a sense of the bleakness of the Holocaust in *Maus* (see Figure 1). In *Persepolis* (see Figure 4) Satrapi has used both text and images with minimal text to convey “rich narrative texture” and “visual and verbal narratives” to show the horror of a child in Iran. The conventions of *Persepolis* help the readers understand the Iranian Revolution in a relaxed and relatable way. In *A Chinese Life*, it uses classical ink illustration as a convention, which makes it easier for readers to understand and relate to the events that occurred. *Understanding China Through Comics* incorporates the easily understood conventions of black-and-white brush painting, allowing the reader to read the events that occurred in different periods of Chinese history.

It is evident that the use of spatial layering, symbols, and conventions of illustration in graphic novels is crucial in effectively presenting history. By using these methods, graphic novel artists can convey complex historical events and ideas to readers in a clear, relatable, and memorable way.

Finally, graphic novelists do a lot of research to represent history. Autobiographical graphic novels, such as *A Chinese Life*, *Maus*, and *Persepolis*, are typical examples of

how historical events can be described in detail based on an author's personal experiences. However, when the author lacks relevant personal experience, research is required. For example, this research can be seen in *Understanding China Through Comics*. Liu Jing collected and researched historical information to create this series. Therefore, when representing Chinese history through a graphic novel without personal experience, it is crucial to conduct thorough research and analysis of historical events and characters. This allows the author to present readers with a comprehensive understanding of these events.

Overall, I think that to represent history through a graphic novel, extensive reading, research, and summarization of relevant historical events is necessary. In addition, the use of spatial layering which is the key feature to following the timeline in history, visual symbols and elements in graphic novels, and useful conventions of illustration are essential to effectively history. By combining these methods, graphic novels can convey complex historical information in an accessible and engaging way.

In addition, graphic novels as a medium can present society and history to a diverse audience, ranging from elementary school children to teenagers and adults. Smith and Pole (2018) argue in *What's Going On in a Graphic Novel?* "However, these students also admitted that they did not read the pictures as closely as the words" (p. 171).

This suggests that the audiences of these graphic novels are older. In *Persepolis*, if readers miss the images about “veils covering women and men wearing women's clothing”, they cannot clearly understand that the author expresses the social injustice and lack of freedom of expression for women during the Islamic Revolution. Therefore, to easily find details and understand the meaning of history, my target audience will be between 20-40. It is not to say that readers under 20 cannot comprehend the issues surrounding the use of veils, however, considering that they may have not enough information and background to understand the historical events depicted in the graphic novel. Younger readers may need additional historical background information or educational support to fully understand the depth of social and political commentary from the narrative in the graphic novel. This age range has a greater degree of life experience, knowledge of historical events, and cultural awareness to enable them to know the social and political significance of the graphic novel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation shows how the graphic novel provides an accessible way to represent historical events. *A Chinese Life, Understand the Chinese History Through Comics, Maus, and Persepolis*, demonstrate the value of using graphic novels to present historical events. For example, the graphic novel enables readers to follow the timeline of historical events in a relaxed and easily understandable way. It can help readers to understand complex information such as historical timelines, political ideology and social conflicts. Art as an illustrator and recorder to use the spatial layering, symbols and certain conventions of illustration such as the use of colour, and minimal text combine with powerful images in the *Maus* to help readers understanding the complex and ambiguous memories from his father narrates through the graphic novel. Media that represent memories and lived experience, as shown in this research, is often non-linear, complex, and full of slippery moments. They do not necessarily follow a linear or chronological order. Within this context, the graphic novel emerges as a useful tool to help readers understand the complexity of the situations being illustrated.

This research provides an idea for artists, historians and media practitioners to use the graphic novel to make history more accessible and interesting for readers and provide an alternate view of how history may have been represented. Graphic novels impact people's perceptions and values in certain cultural and social aspects, and the graphic

novel, as an art form, impacts history, contemporary culture and art. Future research could analyse how the graphic novel represents historical events in New Zealand.

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