



3-15-2017

Wesley Sun Interview

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Recommended Citation

Novotny, Chad, "Wesley Sun Interview" (2017). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. 95.
http://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/95

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Interviewer: Chad Novotny

Artist: Wesley Sun

Location: Phone interview; Interviewer: Lombard, IL Artist: Hyde Park, IL

Date: February 10, 2017



Photo: Courtesy of Wesley Sun

Brad Sun (Left) and Wesley Sun (Right)

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media, & Design.

Bio: BA, 2004, Stetson University, DeLand, Florida; M.Div, 2008, The University of Chicago. Both Wesley Sun and his brother (Brad Sun) were born and raised in Orlando, Florida, by their parents who are Chinese immigrants from Malaysia. Wesley serves as the Director of Field Education and Community Engagement at the University of Chicago Divinity School and is a volunteer chaplain at Cook County Jail. He also does creative writing for graphic novels that both he and his brother have collaborated on. His completed graphic novels include: *Chinatown*, *Apocalypse Man*, and *Monkey Fist*. *Eisegesis: Kings + Queens* is expected to be completed by Spring of 2017. Learn more about Sun Bros Studios: <http://sunbrosstudios.com/>

Interview Transcript:

Chad Novotny: Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

Wesley Sun: My name is Wesley Sun. I have multiple careers that I am working on right now. The reason Laura [Kina] put us in touch was because of my work at Sun Bros Studios. I am the cofounder and Communications Director of Sun Bros Studios. I work with my brother Brad. We have been writing, illustrating and self-publishing comics since 2012. It is where our company began. We put out several full-length comics and graphic novels. We've also had short stories published and few anthologies.

Currently, we are working on a book that will be out in the spring of this year, 2017 called *Eisegesis Kings + Queens*¹ which is a collaborative effort among multiple artists. Something I would like to share about our company which is quite interesting is that we have had good success with crowd funding and kick-starting our comics which is how we have been funded. We're on our third Kickstarter campaign which is running right now.

We travel around the country at times or out of the country to exhibit our books at comic book conventions and publishing festivals. We also sell our books online and at bookstores throughout Chicagoland. Currently, Sun Bros Studios is based in Chicago, which is where I currently reside, and my brother Brad lives and works in Boston. He does most of the comic-cons on the East coast. I take care of the Midwest and then for a few shows a year, we fly together and reunite to meet our fans and sell our books. In addition to my comic book career, I am on the faculty of the University of Chicago and the Director of Field Education and Community Engagement at the Divinity School. I manage all of my grad student's internships there. I am also an ordained American Baptist Minister who is currently serving as a volunteer jail chaplain at Cook County Jail.

CN: How would you define yourself as a writer?

WS: I am a comic book writer. One thing I am always asked is if I illustrate and the answer to that is, no. I do not draw or illustrate at all. I have no training or ability in that field, so I write with my brother. We co-write most of our scripts. I have written independently, but even in those cases, I run the scripts by my brother for editing purposes. For me it's a collaborative process.

In addition to collaborating with my brother on scripts, we also collaborate with the artwork. Brad does most of the artwork, but at times, we bring in other artists. I do not micro manage or overly dictate what the artist does once I hire them or a publisher has paired us up to work together. I look at the artist as a co-creator of the work and so a lot of my script notes

¹ *Eisegesis: Kings + Queens* is the current Kickstarter that Wesley and Brad Sun with a collaboration of other artists are working on.

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/364698788/eisegesis-kings-queens>

include an invitation to deviate from the script if he or she so feels that it will make the art more effective or bring the story together better.

As far as genre, I am very attracted to psychological horror and magical realism. I also enjoy gothic literature or creepy, surreal stories. I have always been attracted to those as a reader. As a writer, most of my stories introduce some form of hyper reality or supernatural elements to them.

CN: How would you define your writing style?

WS: Comic book scripts can differ a lot, so I keep an open mind to the various ways they can be written. I have colleagues who write as if they have the whole page mapped out - the number of panels, what each panel is conveying, etc. The writer believes it's the artist's job is to take a script and follow it closely without a whole lot of deviation. I am more relaxed on the process. I have an idea how many pages a script needs to be and I know what the pacing should feel like, but I don't dictate to the artists what specific panels need to look like.

Occasionally, I will have notes or even scribble sketches to convey the art that I envision to the best of my ability to the artist, but I include a clause stating that if something does not work for you, feel free to do something else. When I agree to work with an artist or a studio hires an artist to do the work, we are not just renting their arm so they can draw for us. We are hiring them for their aesthetic sensibility and because we trust them as artists for their ability which might include changing the dialogue.

We're finishing *Eisegesis* right now and there was one line from a character that Brad and I --- Brad was the primary writer on that story --- could not quite get so we had to finish with three options of what she could say in that moment. We asked the artist their opinion knowing they spent time with the character and designed the character and felt their way into the character in a way that we the writers have not. This method may not be all that common or totally unique and I don't think most writers operate this way, but I certainly do. I have learned much from my brother who is the primary artist on most of our books.

CN: What introduced you into the comic book world of writing?

WS: I grew up reading comic books. I loved them when I was a kid. I did not have a lot or was one of those kids who had a huge comic book collection. In the 90's, I was really into *Spider-Man* comic books; he was my guy. So I was introduced to comic books early on and it has always been a medium I am familiar with. However, I did not have aspirations as a child to grow up and become a comic book writer.

I credit my brother Brad in helping me to get more serious about it. Growing up we always talked about stories and movies, role playing games and even talked about forming our own stories. Once Brad completed art school and finished a degree in Fine Arts at the University of Florida, and I had completed my Religious Studies and Philosophy degree we started sharing ideas and writing them down. We discussed doing some art concept sketches and

writing a script. I probably would not be in the profession at all if it wasn't for the fact that my brother went to art school and really wanted to pursue this.

My brother was much more intentional about it. Because he's an artist, he wanted to utilize his skills making comics. Because we already had been informally collaborating on storytelling, I was eventually pulled into doing it on a more professional level.

CN: These next questions are related to the graphic novel, *Chinatown*. My first one question is, what materials and ideas did you use to create *Chinatown*?

WS: *Chinatown* was the first graphic novel we collaborated on. We started out by kicking around ideas for stories. It did not have a title for a long time. The story we were working on was greatly influenced by Hong Kong Kung Fu movies and horror flicks. When we were kids, we would watch Kung Fu movies and had always wondered what would it be like for a Kung Fu movie to include supernatural elements.

If you read *Chinatown*, you will not find people running around doing Kung Fu. The book got a life of its own as we started writing. I think it was also influenced by our interest in Westerns. The idea of lawlessness in a frontier town, and then of course our interest in psychological horror was what inspired the story.

Chinatown is about an immigrant community and Brad and I are children of immigrants, so a lot of our understanding of what it is to be children of immigrants is written into the story. We did not grow up in a Chinatown per say, we actually grew up in Orlando, Florida and Orlando doesn't have a Chinatown the way Chicago or New York does. There was a part of the neighborhood that was predominantly Chinese and Vietnamese owned stores. We spent a lot of time growing up there and it was always a fascinating place. The Chinese market and grocery stores were so different than the other grocery stores and markets my white friends went to. I think part of the development and spark of *Chinatown* was growing up with the inspiration of Chinatown.

CN: What does *Chinatown* represent to you?

WS: Thematically, *Chinatown* and many of our books has a theme of either combating, wrestling with, or attempting to navigate through nihilism. It's a challenge to find the meaning in life, value in life, especially when the presuppositions of value are needed. The background assumptions of values are challenged which relates very much to what I do as a chaplain and a professional minister. I think it's a question of nihilism, meaninglessness and also meaningful thinking plays into the theme of *Chinatown*. I do think it is open for interpretation so I do not want to over interpret it too much, but I think that that is in play for just about all of our books.

CN: What do the characters in *Chinatown* represent?

WS: I'm not sure I would talk about the characters as being representational in the sense that they stand for something. You could probably divide the characters up with each one having its own set of qualities. There is a large cast of characters in *Chinatown* and part of

our goal is to develop a real community, like a neighborhood or town. So much of the story is about isolationism and being isolated. We removed a lot of infrastructure that you would expect to see within a town. For example, there are no cars in *Chinatown* or other things you would find in a town such as telephone poles. Anything you would normally associate with any place that would connect it to a larger world, were removed. The idea that these people are on their own, and it is in question as to how much of that is self-imposed versus how much of it is imposed upon them. Of the cast of characters, you could divide them in half between older generation immigrants and second generation immigrants, such as children or young adults. It is essentially two generations operating in a town and *Chinatown* focuses more heavily on the older generation who tends to be the actors driving things forward versus the children who tend to be reactionary to what is going on around them.

The basic plot of *Chinatown* is that people start disappearing in one earlier version of it, but I don't want to give too much away and spoil it for future. I hope whoever is listening to this recording or reading this transcript will hopefully buy the book.

The supernatural element shows up at the end of the book, but there was another version of the script where there were no supernatural elements at all. People were leaving the town but it was inconceivable for this small immigrant community to believe that they were choosing to leave. Maybe it is easier to believe that monsters are eating your children, rather than believe that your children do not want to live with you anymore. That was kind of the theme.

Ultimately, it would have been far more interesting if there were actual monsters or supernatural elements. The bedrock of our society or the bedrock of this culture of multiple generations living in the same place and that falling apart is still there. I do not feel that there are figures who represent specific things, but I think the way the characters interact with each other, especially across generations, does represent some of the themes I mentioned above.

CN: How did you get where you are today?

WS: In terms of funding our comics, crowd funding and Kickstarter got us started. Originally, my brother Brad contacted me and asked if I wanted to start funding our own way. The natural question was do we print them? If we print them, how many do we print? Do we print two copies for just me and Brad and that's the end of it, or do we print hundreds or thousands of copies and sell them? Then once we choose to print hundreds or thousands of copies to sell, how do we go about achieving this? We were rifling with those questions as the book was being written. Kickstarter was new and I had no idea if it would work for us or not. People started asking me if I was going to kick-start the book and I had no idea what they were talking about. When I heard about it, I was quite suspicious that it was going to work. But wow, the idea that people on the internet would pay money for a project that did not exist, by people they did not know, was surprising. Brad and I were planning to pay out of pocket from our savings. We are frugal people, who both work very hard but were willing to do whatever it took to start a business. We had figured this is what it costs to create art

and were prepared to sink our own money into it. After talking to several comic book people locally in Chicago, we decided to go for it.

We found ourselves heading in a specific direction. I became the Communication Director of Sun Bros Studios and Brad the Creative Director. We both write and some people have the impression that I am the writer and Brad is the artist, which is really not true at all. We both write, but Brad is also the artist. I took on the responsibility of Communications Director working on the actual making of the comics, and other activities that nobody wants to do while getting into the comic book business. There were challenges such as negotiating with printers and running our Kickstarter campaigns. I looked for shows and events to participate in among other things. Most of the social stuff falls on me, while Brad is hard at work illustrating at the drawing table. He would rather do that than cold call a bunch of printers.

I spoke to as many local comic book people as I could and ultimately, we decided Kickstarter was the way to go. Our Kickstarter campaign is still ongoing. If we bundled the crowd funding we have done over the three campaigns, it would be something in the neighborhood of \$45,000.00 to \$46,000.00, which for comics is fairly significant. Comic books in relation to movies that may not be much of a budget, but for independent comic book people, that is quite a bit.

With our first campaign, we did really well and raised a little over \$25,000.00 which allowed us to print *Chinatown* and our follow-up books like *Apocalypse Man*. We defeated our goal by a lot which was \$11,000.00 when we started. We more than doubled that so that allowed us to print the follow-up on *Apocalypse Man* and it also allowed Brad to work on the comics full-time, quit his job and move to Chicago. At the time, I continued working as a Hospital Chaplain then later I moved to the academy teaching at the university.

We reach fans all over the country and have had a few backers from Australia and Canada, with a few other countries as well. We became really serious and started hitting the road. We do about twenty comic book conventions, book festivals, signing events and public speaking engagements a year, which is a good amount. We really hit the ground running with public appearances, conventions and an online presence. We did not want to appear on the comic scene without actually having a book to show for it.

A lot of people in our profession start by doing small prints and a lot of art prints of which they do not own. We decided not to do that and we debuted with a 120 page, full color, graphic novel as opposed to a mini comic or zine. A few people told us not to do it that way because it was unwise and that we should start with a more modest project and build off of that, but we decided to do it our way. *Chinatown* was not only a story that we could talk about, but it was uniquely our story. For instance, not everyone can write about a Chinese immigrant community with a certain authenticity. We also had a real eye for the market and recognized that our story was not one you would see often in comic book stores. You do not see a lot of Asian American characters portrayed as people going about their daily lives in a

community struggling with questions of identity, and so we thought we were contributing to that particular field and the indie comics world.

I'm very proud of our follow up book *Apocalypse Man* and its genre of survival horror which was very much influenced by the zombie craze and the popularity of zombies. By design, that was our second book, not our first. It's forty pages, black and white, and staple-bound. It was a more modest project, but we felt like that was not the primary story we wanted to tell. The story we want to be known for is *Chinatown*. We wanted to debut with that book and I think that contributed to where we are now.

We started the comic-con circuit in 2013, and this is the beginning of our fifth year on the road. Going from city to city, meeting fans, meeting comic book people, speaking on panels, are all great contributors to where we are right now.

CN: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity themes or histories in your work?

WS: Yes, I think *Chinatown* does that most explicitly. In 2014, we put out a book called *Monkey Fist* which was a very loose retelling and was inspired by the Monkey King stories in Chinese folklore. I think our Asian identity is present in all our books.

CN: Have you ever been included in an event or comic book convention that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American?

WS: Yes and no. We have been part of events that were not focused on Asian Americans. However, a couple years back at a public library in Chicago, for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Heritage Month, there was a series of exhibits in the library and our books were on display for a couple of months which was part of the gallery exposition. In Toronto, a business development association hired us to do some artwork for them for a Chinatown Festival in the Chinatown in Toronto. So there have been events that have been very specific to Asian Americans where we have been featured either by providing artwork or being guests there or having our work on display.

There's also been a number of festivals and publishing events that emphasize diversity or people of color, not Asian Americans specifically. We have been supporters of these events, especially in Chicago which is home base for us, specifically for me. Some of that has included CAKE (the Chicago Alternative Comics Expo) which is a comic book convention or publishing festival that puts emphasis on diversity and underrepresented voices of all types and all different identities. Pocket Con which is a very small south side of Chicago comic book convention is specifically for people of color with an emphasis on characters and creators who are African Americans. It also includes other underrepresented voices such as Latinos, Latina creators and Asian Americans as well. We often take part speaking on panels about diversity and representing the comic book industry. For example, I'm speaking at a gaming convention about diversity being debated on a moderating panel. That is quite common, but I would not say the entire event is focused on Asian Americans. There are events within these events that are specifically about matters of diversity and representation.

CN: Do you identify as an Asian American writer?

WS: I am an Asian American writer. It is who I am and how I identify.

CN: Since you identify as an Asian American writer, is there anything else that is important to you personally?

WS: Occasionally I'll do research into areas I am less familiar with when I write a book. When writing a story, there is a lot of autobiography. I've only written one comic that was specifically about an event in my life where I'm the character in the book.

There are many other things I identify with. I'm male, I'm in my thirties, I spend a lot of my time and research at the university and jail, homeless shelters and hospitals talking with people about the meaning of life and nihilism, but I think there are philosophical and theological bents in my writing, but I don't know if I have a label for that. I do not think of myself as a religious writer, but I am very interested in rituals and religion orientation of myths and folk tales. Those have influenced me a lot and is part of who I am and what I do for a living which all goes into my writing. I don't know that I have any other specific identifiers that I publicize as part of my writing, but I will say, all the different identities that I have, definitely influence my writing and there are parts of my identity that are always changing. Now that I'm thirty, I still write comics, but when I'm eighty, I don't know if I will claim a senior citizen writer label.

CN: What types of events or opportunities have changed or stayed the same over the years?

WS: My understanding or my experience in the comic book industry has involved sitting across from giants in the industry who are some of my heroes in terms of writers and artists. Give it three or four years in any business, it's unlikely you'll meet people at the top immediately, but within the comic book world it is entirely possible. There are some really outstanding and talented people who I admire. I was warned when I first started that when you start a comic, you're going to spend the first five to ten years just struggling, barely breaking even at these shows as you are finding your readers. You have to put a lot of time, blood, sweat, tears and energy into this before you start getting a following. I'll say that our experience has been quite different from theirs. We've done very well and we have always made money.

Typically, our books are well received, I'm very happy to say. We have some loyal readers and fans out there which is really great. I'm really grateful for it. As a company, we're always trying to grow and expand. We came into it being told by other creators and people who had been in the comic business longer than we had that we should not expect to be turning a profit in the first five years. We have not found that to be true. We can afford to pick and choose where we go. It used to be the case that I was afraid that when we started we wouldn't get anything. I didn't expect that within a few years we would be invited to these shows. Some shows offered an honorary work license so we were already ahead of the game when we arrived. I thought this was something that happened to artists at the top after many years of work.

I have been pleasantly surprised at how well received we have been. I was not sure how diverse our readership would be, but I'm very happy to say that in this industry which is so very male dominated, we have many female readers. We have readers of all nationalities from what I am able to observe. It seems to me that we have a pretty broad and wide readership. We have not experienced a lot of racism or offset behaviors because we are Asian Americans who write about subject matter from our Asian American perspective. I have been pleasantly surprised by that. Definitely when we started, we were warned about racism and it was something I was worried about, but I am very happy to say that has not been our experience.

CN: What are you currently working on?

WS: I mentioned *Eisegesis* which is currently being crowd funded. As of this recording, the goal of *Eisegesis* is \$6,000, which is smaller and is not as grand or epic as the other ones, but it is a small project we are very excited about. We just crossed over \$5,000 today and it's only been two weeks. We were not even halfway through the campaign and close to achieving our goal.

The book is a collection of short stories about meaning and interpretation. The word "eisegesis" is a technical word from my field of religious studies and Biblical interpretation, although I did not come up with the title. All three stories are about creating worlds of meaning. Eisegesis is a word my brother stumbled upon. I'm not sure too many know what it means. Eisegesis is usually a negative word describing the kind of reading where you read your own thoughts, ideas and assumptions into a text rather than drawing meaning out of the text, as in exegesis. In Biblical studies, we warn students not to do eisegesis and not to read their own interpretation into the Bible, the scripture or ancient text. We typically are telling our students to think about the historical context, think about the author's intent, different motives and genres, communication, etc. In Biblical studies students are warned as to the danger of eisegesis, but for our book, which is largely about creating your own ideas, we're inviting the reader to be eisegetical.

Eisegesis should be out in April, 2017. June, 2017, we'll have all the books printed and we will have a big launch party for our books including our backers and supporters to share a glass of wine and celebrate the publishing of a new book. There are always delays in printing, but that's just the nature of the business. We are estimating the summer of 2017, to have our new book out though.

This was our first time hiring many different artists, but Brad's art is also in the book. The primary artist is Ali Cantarella who is a good friend and colleague of mine who does amazing comic work. She is the primary artist and we also have two guest artists, Jonathan La Mantia and Geannina Gutiérrez who also do some amazing art.

There are three stories... I wrote one, Brad wrote one and we wrote one together. There are two writers and four artists. There is a lot of art tucked in there and even a poster in the middle that you can remove to hang on your wall. I'm really pleased with the book and the

artwork looks fantastic. I can't wait to get a physical copy of it, but I'll have to wait until the summer.

The business model for us has been to put out a brand new book every year. It's a pretty ambitious model, but we never want a fan to come to comic-con when we're in their town, buy our stuff, and then see them the next year and they ask what is new. We never want to say nothing, so we're always creating, always writing new scripts. While the book is being illustrated, I'm submitting issues to other editors and writing other scripts and we'll see what comes after that. Every year, we offer a new book out and we've been very happy with that.

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