Sinophone Comics

Comics Studies

Aesthetics, Histories, and Practices

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Volume 2

Sinophone Comics

Histories, Identities, Medialities

Edited by
Adina Zemanek

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Adina ZEMANEK

Introduction

Abstract: The introduction highlights the twofold intervention this volume aims to make: to showcase comics production not only from China, but also other Sinophone locations (Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Italy, the US), and to account for recent transformations within and beyond the Sinophone cultural sphere by exploring comics and related issues grounded in the twenty-first century. First, it defines the Sinophone and other concepts relevant for this book and argues for the usefulness of the Sinophone as central framing, with the 'Sinosphere' and 'Pop Culture China' providing complementary insight. This section is followed by a discussion of recent global trends in media and comics reflected in this book: the platformization of cultural production and rise of digital comics, the global popularity of Japanese manga which spurred official projects of building soft power through comics in other Asian countries, and graphic novels' strengthened legitimacy as cultural field for exploring identities, social and political issues. This section also explores Taiwan as a site where all these trends are manifested, which accounts for its prominence in this book. After outlining this volume's contribution to comics studies, the introduction provides an overview of its structure, with emphasis on the core themes of histories, identities and medialities.

Comics have been claimed to be a global medium, inherently susceptible to crossing national and cultural boundaries due to its visual-verbal interface, and shaped by transnational aesthetic, political, social, economic and cultural flows (Denson, Stein and Meyer 2014, 13, 19). Recent studies have also argued that comics have acquired the status of world literature, and comics studies has become an established academic discipline across the globe (Hodapp 2022, 2). On the other hand, these authors are equally quick to point out the centers and margins, powerbrokers and gatekeepers inherent in the 'global' production, dissemination and study of comics – visible, for instance, in hegemonic forms such as the graphic novel borrowed by global south comics to achieve international circula-

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tion (Hodapp 2022, 2, 7). They underscore the sustained relevance of national categories (established comics traditions still treated as self-contained, as an example), and the importance of local variation: local politics of representation and cultural legacies underlying comics, the local cultural and political work they perform, and their multiplicity due to exchange within, not only between localities (Denson, Stein and Meyer 2014, 15). Therefore, they advocate a bidirectional analytical approach, which can tease out both local specificity and global connectivity (Hodapp 2022, 3).

This volume adopts such a double framework of reference. It uses the cultural sphere of the Sinophone to localize the comics it discusses in a conceptually coherent manner, and to explore connections and references established within this sphere. At the same time, it shows how the analyzed comics reflect or draw upon contemporary global trends, concerns and linkages. The three main themes showcased by this project's contributors – histories, identities and materialities – are productive under both these logics. History can be written with reference to a Sinophone cultural centre and localities of settlement, and histories of marginalized communities can also be used to make interventions within globally established historical narratives. Identity construction can reflect the lasting relevance of a Sinophone centre, or global concerns (neoliberal self-branding or recent preoccupations with identities in graphic memoirs). As Taiwan's case poignantly shows, national identity can also be asserted through practices making comics visible in international arenas. Comics can spur timely reflection on mediality and remediation in the digital age, while visual play with linguistic or cultural elements can impart a new perspective on contemporary Sinophone identities.

This introductory chapter will first present an overview of the Sinophone and other related concepts present in this volume. As this project aims to complement existing research into comics from the Chinese cultural sphere by emphasizing recent works, the second section will discuss recent trends pertaining to comics in a global context. The final sections will present this volume's intended contributions to comics studies, its structure and individual chapters, relating them to the adopted framework and salient themes.

The Sinophone and Other Relevant Concepts

The concept of Sinophone was pioneered by Shu-mei Shih in 2004 as an alternative to the existing, increasingly contested and problematized concept of 'Chinese' underlying Chinese studies. Shih's definition of the Sinophone delineates its scope in broad terms, to "the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopo-

litical nation-states and their hegemonic productions" (2011, 710). The critical thrust of her approach is twofold. One of its building blocks is colonialism. She draws on an established framework for "the study of colonial language cultures in previous or current colonies" (such as 'Francophone' or 'Anglophone') (2013a, 1) and her underpinning critique is directed against China-centrism and colonialism by the Chinese state, understood as late imperial China, the People's Republic of China (PRC) or the Republic of China (ROC) under nationalist (KMT) rule (2011, 713). Shih also debunks the idea of diaspora, stating that it "has an end date" (2013b, 37), and advocates replacing 'routes' with 'roots.' Thus, her approach to the Sinophone is time- and place-contingent. Instead of emphasizing connections with a (mythical) motherland, central to conceptualizations of diasporas, it underscores complex processes of change – integrating with, and becoming constitutive of, places of settlement (36–37).

Shih's framing of the Sinophone has inspired a steady wave of academic debates, events, and publications. However, her firm and partisan ideological standpoint (her anti-Sinocentric, anti-diaspora political stance) also spurred criticism. Flair Donglai Shi signals the unclear theoretical vitality of her take on the Sinophone beyond the above-mentioned stance (2021, 312). Shih's Sinophone can be problematic for overseas Chinese communities as it negates their need for preserving the Chinese language and culture as a form of resistance against nationalist projects in places of settlement (314). Another problematic aspect is the perceived Sinophobia underlying Shih's stance, spurred by the PRC's rise as an economic world superpower, while downplaying the fact that China's hegemonic status has but a recent history (316). The assumed equivalence between the PRC and the Sinophone cultural center can also be questioned: prior to 1971, when the authoritarian KMT government in Taiwan and the US were invested in supporting a 'free China,' it was Taiwan that claimed the status of center (317). Taiwan's role as a Sinophone cultural center was also promoted post-1971 by subsequent ROC governments and sustained by artists choosing the island as a safe haven and hub of cultural recognition for publication or creative practices – writers from Malaysia, Hong Kong, the PRC, and Chinese exiles settled in the West (326). Shi poses the question of whether Taiwan thus functions as an open space or rather as another center of power and influence that might be equally cooptative as the PRC-dominated universe (321).

Another famous theorist of the Sinophone, David Der-Wei Wang, proposes a definition that circumvents these problematic issues and includes China itself. Instead of emphasizing colonialism and settlement, Wang shifts the focus to migration within and beyond China as the primary factor shaping Chinese history. His concept of 'post-loyalism' refers to a psychological condition for existence: that of being 'lost,' 'abandoned,' 'incomplete' or 'bequeathed' connoted by the Chinese

word *yimin* (遺民), which designates loyalists of a former dynasty (2013, 97). It is a historical imaginary defined by feelings of attachment to, being haunted by, and longing for, as well as a desire to recover an ever-absent lost home (100).

The starting point for applying a Sinophone framing to this volume was pragmatic. Rather than engaging in theoretical debates, it borrows a perspective discussed by Flair Donglai Shi as a trend initiated in American area studies, intended to counter its long-established Orientalist logic – "America's obsession with China" (2021, 324) – and to make visible Sinophone cultural products from regions marginalized by a China-centric approach to Chinese studies. Thus, the Sinophone perspective allows for geographical inclusiveness: this sphere of cultural production encompasses not only Greater China, but also other locations in and beyond Asia. Consequently, this volume showcases comics published in the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Italy and the US, as well as comics-related exchanges between Japan, China, and Taiwan.

A Sinophone viewpoint is also productive due to its other aspects that constitute central concerns of this book: "acknowledging both the *heterogeneity* and *situatedness* [original emphasis] of Chinese diasporas" (Shi 2021, 312); its multidirectional critique of both China- and other centrisms; its critical reflexivity pertaining to various forms of colonialism and nationalism, while at the same time "disrupt[ing] the chain of equivalence established, since the rise of nation-states, among language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality and explor[ing] the protean, creative, and overlapping margins of China and Chineseness" (Shih 2011, 710–711). A Sinophone perspective draws attention to the changing nature of "the Chinese imaginary" (Shih 2013a, 5) and the "plasticity" of Sinophone cultures (11). In tune with the latter point, this volume keeps the Sinophone framing open by revealing connections and cultural flows both within and beyond the Chinese cultural sphere. Thus, it does not seek to define an essentialized specificity for 'Sinophone' comics, but to capture their evolution shaped by both local and global factors.

The Sinophone is often (though not always) defined through language, which underpins Shih's understanding of it as "Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China, where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted" (2013b, 30). Within this framing, the concept challenges a Han-based idea of 'Chinese' as a national marker – "the Sinophone foregrounds not the ethnicity or race of the person but the languages he or she speaks in either vibrant or vanishing communities of those languages" (32). David Der-Wei Wang's definition of the Sinophone (2013) does not explicitly engage with this issue. The anthology *Sinophone Studies. A Critical Reader* (Shih, Tsai and Bernards 2013), often quoted as authoritative in the field, includes chapters discussing various aspects of Chineseness as an ethnic,

linguistic, cultural and national category, or a category of identification and affect (Rey Chow's seminal "On Chineseness as Theoretical Problem,"[1] Ien Ang's "Can One Say No to Chineseness?"), and the implications of other languages (such as English) on Chinese identities (Ha Jin's chapter on writing in English as a Chinese academic, or E. K. Tan's text on the place for Chinese languages and a Chinese cultural heritage in Singapore's policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism).

In tune with this emphasis on language, book projects that adopt a Sinophone approach have focused primarily on literature and film, whose legitimacy as (highbrow) art is strongly established (Chiang and Heinrich 2014, Yue and Khoo 2014, Tan 2021, Hee 2020, Chiu and Zhang 2022). Several studies have attempted to go beyond these fields (Peng and Raidel 2018, Riemenschnitter, Imbach and Jaguscik 2023), including a few contributions on performance, visual arts, and gardens (which also enjoy highbrow status). In contrast, subaltern fields of cultural production have only recently gained prominence, and the present volume is designed as a contribution to this trend. Chiang's work (2021) stands out by articulating a queer Sinophone theoretical framework for the history of gender transgression in Sinitic-language communities. Guo, Eyman and Sun's edited volume (2024) explores games and play across social and historical contexts. Comics began to gain critical respectability in the Sinophone context from the mid-1980s onward, despite their long and rich history, and comics studies only began to burgeon in the twenty-first century. This volume shows the lasting relevance of Sinophone-specific themes in comics: politics of identity and memorialization built relationally, through connections with 'China' that can be explicit or (significantly) implicit, positive or negative; the local embeddedness of such politics; the role of Chinese language and writing in defining diasporic 'Chinese' identities even in works published in other languages. It also reveals medium-specific strategies for addressing such themes – the use of colours, framings, or even formats such as palm-sized booklets (連環畫, *lianhuanhua*), exploring the latter's potential to constitute a unifying category for Sinophone comics that goes beyond language.

The Sinophone is not the only available framing to designate a 'Chinese' sphere of cultural production while underscoring the ideas of center and periphery, historicity and cultural exchange. Alternatives include the 'Sinosphere' and 'Pop Culture China.' The former term was coined by Joshua Fogel, and its primary thrust was geopolitical: it referred to intraregional relations within an "organiz-

1 It must be noted, however, that these chapters' authors do not necessarily position themselves within Sinophone studies. In a talk given in November 2023 for the University of Zurich, where she revisited "On Chineseness as Theoretical Problem" from a present-day perspective, Rey Chow expressed unwillingness to use the label 'Sinophone.'

ing model or ideology" based on interdependence between China as the core and various "orbital ellipses" as its peripheries, where both types of entities changed over time (2009, 4–5). Fogel's definition of the Sinosphere is relevant to Liang and Strzałkowski's chapters included in this volume.

Chua Beng Huat's 'Pop Culture China' (2012) refers to a history of exchange in popular culture among *Huaren* (華人, Chinese) communities in Asia, which can be traced back to the rise of cinema in the 1920s. Like the Sinophone, it emphasizes language as a unifying factor. Although these cultural productions use different spoken varieties (Mandarin, Cantonese or Minnan/Hoklo), cultural traffic between locations is facilitated by a common script. Unlike the Sinophone, however, 'Pop Culture China' is not defined by a deep sense of (and investment in) shared identity, community, and cultural similarity or the existence of a singular center, but by market forces and new media technologies that interconnect multiple Asian locations. Thus, it is "a decentered, multi-lingual, multi-nodal, relatively well integrated cultural economy" whose claims to "the presumed 'sameness' of a 'common' Chinese cultural heritage" (Jinna Tay, quoted in Chua 2012, 40) are motivated by market logics. It is also a "practical accomplishment," a cultural imaginary constructed by entertainment media reporting on individuals (celebrities), institutions (festivals), and practices (coproductions, promotion, competition) in continuous transnational movement (Chua 2012, 42–44). This imaginary space is open to non-Chinese (Korean, Japanese) influences, incorporated, consumed, and represented in different ways in various locales and media outlets (Chua 2012, 46–48).

Comics-related cultural production in areas inhabited by ethnic Chinese communities, which encompass Greater China, Southeast Asia, and North America, has followed the trajectories highlighted by Chua's model. A long history of cultural exchange between these locations led to the medium's emergence and development (albeit also shaped by Japanese and Western traditions). The beginnings of comics in Singapore can be traced back to political cartoons that advocated nascent nationalism in China and rallied support for the anti-Japanese movement; they were published in Chinese-language newspapers and exhibited during the first decades of the twentieth century (Lim 2010, 201–202). Although they evolved separately since the 1950s, Hong Kong comics have their roots in mainland China (Wong 2018, 17). During the 1950s, after the People's Republic of China was established on the mainland, Hong Kong became a major exporter of *lianhuanhua* (連環畫, 'linked drawings' or palm-sized picture books) and *manhua* (漫畫, comics/cartoons) to Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia (Wong 2018, 19, 27), as well as Taiwan (Lee 2024). Hong Kong still held this status in the 1980s, when Jademan Holdings sold publication rights to China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, and the United States (Lent 1999, 210). The ex-

change with Taiwan went both ways: before its government adopted strict copyright regulations in 1992, Taiwan also exported pirated Chinese translations of Japanese manga to Hong Kong (Lent 1999, 112). As demonstrated by several chapters in this book, such transnational exchange has continued into the present time.

'Pop Culture China' is a concept that aims to de-center Chinese identity and showcase a market logic underlying the (re)production of a Chinese cultural imaginary. Most chapters in this volume explore issues related to identity through ever-changing, negotiated and contested links with China and Chineseness, diasporas, locations of settlement, colonialism and nationalist projects, thus resonating best with Sinophone studies. Chua's framework is nevertheless useful as a complementary lens that foregrounds transnational movement and exchange, new communication technologies, political agendas, and communities within and beyond the Sinophone sphere, as well as openness to non-Sinophone cultural flows, which constitute themes visible across all contributions here.

Global Connections – Recent Developments in Comics Within and Beyond the Sinophone Sphere

Alongside de-centering 'China' and making visible comics from various Sinophone locations, the second major aim of this volume is showcasing recent comics. By doing so, it complements existing research (which is mostly focused on the past), and it reflects major transformations undergone by comics within and beyond the Sinophone cultural sphere during the last decades, thus holding relevance for comics studies in general.

Among these changes is the platformization of cultural production. Digital platform services are not neutral technological mediators that "facilitate socioeconomic, cultural and political interaction, but very much organize and steer this interaction" (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4276). Rather, they challenge "the autonomy and economic sustainability of particular forms of cultural production" (4277). Thus, platform infrastructures as sociotechnical systems driven by data and algorithms deeply impact the cultural industries, transforming markets and business models, modes of production, access and consumption, structures and dynamics of power and governance. In the field of comics, social media platforms have provided easily accessible publication outlets and facilitated outreach for both amateur and established artists. The sweeping implications of platformization are

markedly visible in the development of webtoons embedded in distinctive platform ecologies, which shape production, circulation and consumption, "relations among artists, advertisers, users/viewers/readers, and other transmedia production parties, as well as the ways in which those relations are managed" (Cho 2021, 77). In Korea, the webtoon industry has also involved government and educational institutions, which established (sometimes in collaboration) dedicated training programmes and awards for aspiring webtoon creators (Cho 2021). The success of webtoons has resulted in the international expansion of Korean platforms, despite recent setbacks causing withdrawal from Southeast Asia and Europe and a shift towards locations deemed more profitable, such as North America and Japan (Choi 2024). It has also inspired the emergence of similar content providers outside Korea; among these are China's tech giants and major entertainment platforms (Tencent, Bilibili), which have set up digital comics divisions, and new dedicated platforms – Webcomics (SideWalk Group), Kuaikan Manhua, and MangaToon. The emergence of digital comics has impacted traditional print forms, spurring strategies of adaptation or response.

The global popularity of Japanese manga has created a favourable context for the emergence of state-led projects aimed at strengthening Sinophone comics locally and increasing their international visibility as an instrument for public diplomacy. In 1995, China's Central Propaganda Department and the News Publication Administration launched the '5155 Project' (5155工程). Under this initiative, several comics periodicals publishing mangaesque works were established and flourished in the early 2000s, a period that also saw the rise of independent comics. These developments are reviewed by Martina Caschera (2023, 191–250). John Lent (2022) discusses the efforts of Beijing agent and publisher Wang Ning) to help Chinese creators make their voices heard abroad. Gravett (2017) offers glimpses of such comics – 1990s youth magazines, propaganda *lianhuanhua* from the early 2000s, fantasy and adventure comics, new editions of classical tales (such as *Journey to the West*) published in 2006–2008, as well as alternative and independent works included in *Special Comix* and *Cult Youth*. The Hong Kong government has sponsored comics-related initiatives as part of broader efforts to develop the city's cultural and creative industries: events aimed at boosting the visibility of local comics and showcasing their history, and grants for comics production, exchange projects with overseas artists and participation in international festivals (Chu 2018, Wong 2022). Singaporean institutions, such as the National Arts Council and the Media Development Authority, have also invested in the development of local comics. An overview of more recent trends is provided in an online article by Cheng Tju Lim (2014); works by Troy Chin and Koh Hong Teng are discussed by Silvio (2018) and Gui (2019). Among cartoonists publishing in Singapore, Sonny Liew has received the most scholarly attention, mainly pertaining to *The Art of*

Charlie Chan Hock Chye (see, for instance, Holden 2016, Leow 2020), but also his state-sponsored educational graphic narratives on Covid-19 in Singapore (Feng 2023).

In Europe and the US, graphic novels have strengthened their position as a site for exploring timely issues of personal, social and political significance. Comics journalism has become institutionalized, with independent media outlets such as The New Humanitarian, Revealnews or Correctiv introducing one-off or regular comics features in their portfolios (Pike, Bui et al. 2020, Uzunlar 2021, Faiz and Azim 2021). For Sinophone comics, this trend can be exemplified by Zumrat Dawut's graphic testimony of PRC government repressions against the Uyghur minority, commissioned by Business Insider, published as a print book (DelCol, Adams and Azim 2024) and online.[2] The 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Illustrated Reporting awarded to this story triggered backlash from traditional editorial cartoonists who claimed back an artform felt as rightfully belonging to them (Viri 2023). The award and subsequent contestations over what constitutes 'legitimate' illustrated reporting can be viewed as further testimony to the institutionalization of comics journalism and to the above-mentioned impact of digital comics, which redefine established categories and threaten their subsistence. Other examples of Sinophone graphic novels include Li Kunwu and Zhang Lun's autobiographical accounts of historical trauma (the 1989 Tiananmen events and the Cultural Revolution, Ôtié and Li 2012) or Zhang's recent work on protests in Hong Kong, published in France and thus shielded from PRC censorship (Zhang, Gombeaud and Améziane 2019, Gombeaud, Zhang and Ango 2023).

The tradition of graphic novels exploring American Chinese identities by Gene Luen Yang and other authors, as analyzed in Monica Chiu's excellent volume (2015), has been continued in recent years (Wang and Pien 2019) and diversified by authors addressing other, more narrowly defined Sinophone identities, such as Taiwanese (LaMotte and Xu 2020) or Hunanese (Gao and Xu 2022). Identities have been a major theme in graphic novels published in other Sinophone locations as well. The mid-1990s decline of corporate, mainstream comics in Hong Kong was paralleled by the rise of independent productions. This was a period of quest for a local cultural identity, menaced by the imminent PRC takeover of the former British colony (aptly termed 'politics of disappearance' by Akbar Abbas in his discussion of New Wave cinema, 1997). Such quest was reflected in independent (single-authored – *auteur*) comics with their autobiographic and nostalgic themes, markedly endorsed and granted high autonomy since the 2000s by

2 The online version is available at: https://www.businessinsider.com/comic-i-escaped-a-chinese-internment-camp-uyghur-2021-12 (publ. 28 December 2021, acc. 23 November 2024).

institutions tasked with supporting local comics: CreateHK, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, and the Comix Home Base. In 2006, Joint Publishing Hong Kong launched the Local Comics Series (土製漫畫系列), under the strong leadership of Anne Lee, its deputy editor-in-chief (Chu 2018, Wong 2018, 50–60). Mather (2017) and Chu (2020) provide insightful analyses of such graphic narratives.

Taiwan is the Sinophone location where all trends mentioned above are present in the most prominent, systematic and interconnected manner, which makes it particularly worthy of attention. Between the 1960s and 1980s, censorship stifled local creativity and created conditions that fostered a thriving market for pirated Japanese works. Available at rental stores, such comics were stigmatized as children's entertainment distracting from schoolwork. The 1990s ushered in strict copyright enforcement, which led to the legitimate publication of Japanese comics, paralleled by a rise in local production. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, however, homegrown comics were virtually invisible in Taiwan (whose market is still dominated by Japanese manga), albeit present at the Angoulême International Comics Festival due to grassroots efforts (since 2010). This situation changed in 2016, when a newly elected Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government became the driving force for a revival of local comics, specifically, the Ministry of Culture and the Taiwan Creative Content Agency/ TAICCA, an arm's length institution founded in 2019. Since then, production and sustained promotion have flourished. Global venues have been key sites for both artists, whose local profile is boosted by international awards, and the government, invested in strengthening Taiwan's soft power through comics.

From an empty signifier emphasized in state-led projects, the national category of 'Taiwanese comics' (*Taiwan manhua*, 台灣漫畫, abbreviated as *taiman*, 台漫) has become increasingly established through cultural practice. Many artists showcase themes related to local history, culture and identity, some of which employ a nostalgic mode. Sustained projects pertaining to translation[3] and international rights sales have made these works available abroad, with Japan being a key export market. New works adopt both mangaesque conventions, due to manga's dominance and an established self-publishing (*dōjinshi/tongrenzhi*, 同仁誌) milieu, and individual, non-mangaesque styles. Despite being less popular on the local market, the latter are supported through state funding, perhaps with the aim of appealing to foreign audiences whose tastes were shaped by *bande dessinée* (referred to as 'European comics' in Taiwan); some of these are created

3 The most recent example is a large-scale project for English translation of newly published comics and illustrated books, funded by the Ministry of Culture and led by Locus Publishing, aimed to introduce them to foreign publishers and facilitate licensing of translation rights under the existing Books from Taiwan initiative.

by artists trained and publishing in France. Thus, comics have been subsumed to a nationalizing logic, whose complex implications can nevertheless only be understood from a global perspective. Similar to the post-1970s situation discussed by Shi (2021), Taiwan has become a publishing hub for artists from Hong Kong and the PRC, away from censorship and increasing crackdown on Hong Kong media following the 2019 pro-democracy protests (Lau 2020, Wong, J. 2022, Yipiyu 2021).

Recent shifts in Taiwan's media ecology include a widening network of outlets and digital materialities for comics. Organizations hitherto unrelated to this medium commission graphic narratives to promote their activities – cultural institutions such as the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute (Jian 2018, 2020)[4] or the National Archives Administration (Langqi 2021, Jian 2023) and independent journalism outlets such as The Reporter. Many print comics are simultaneously released in e-book format. In 2020, TAICCA launched a comics platform similar to Webtoon (CCC Webcomics, CCC 追漫台), which serves as the digital continuation of a project initially published in print (*Creative Comics Collection*, CCC創作集).

This new ecology encompasses comics studies as well. Established in 2022, the Taiwan Association for ACG Studies (台灣ACG研究學會)[5] organizes annual conferences and regular public talks,[6] revisiting the past, assessing the present and projecting the future with the aim of strengthening and legitimizing a local comics culture. An increasing number of scholarly studies in Chinese explore digital comics and platforms, new institutions, readership and creative labor (Liu and Yi 2015, Wang et al. 2023, Chen 2022, Yin 2024, Zhang 2022). In English, Teri Silvio discusses strategies of localization in manga-style comics (2019); Adina Zemanek (2020) and Corrado Neri (2021) explore history-writing through graphic memoirs by Sean Chuang (庄永新), Lin Li-jing (Lin Li-Chin, 林莉菁) and Stellina Chen. However, except for the above-mentioned studies, these recent developments in Taiwan remain largely uncharted territory.

4 English excerpts from these two books are available on the website of Books from Taiwan, a TAICCA-led international promotion initiative: https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books_info.php?id=283 and https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books_info.php?id=383 (acc. 28 November 2024).

5 ACGs refers to animation, comics and games, as recent state-led initiatives aim at encouraging media convergence.

6 As of spring 2024, these talks can also be accessed through online live-streaming. Event announcements with booking links are published on the association's Facebook profile.

Contribution to Comics Studies

Pascal Lefèvre (2010, 85–86) highlights various forms of compartmentalization and localization pertaining to comics. Due to limitations in knowledge and skills, marketing strategies, personal interest, or inaccessibility of comics works on foreign markets, comics authors, publishers, readers, critics, and scholars usually specialize in a single type or format. This view may need revisiting to account for the transnational movements and media flows that increasingly shape comics, foregrounded by Chua's 'Pop Culture China' and outlined in the previous section. Other scholars such as Berndt (2010, 5–6) also highlight the need to overcome a nationalizing tendency in comics studies – that of claiming national particularities shaped by specific historical, cultural, and political factors, and of framing national comics traditions as self-contained, homogeneous phenomena. This discursive shift would account for comics' historical propensity to transcend the 'national' (also discussed by Denson, Stein and Meyer 2014, 14), and the more recent impact of globalization. A Sinophone standpoint problematizes such compartmentalized, nationalizing approaches by proposing a transnational, cross-cultural view of national projects, while maintaining a focused, relatively limited framework of reference. With its focus on recent comics, this volume updates the academic discourse, showing, among others, that national projects remain relevant, but need to be considered from a global standpoint.

The Sinophone framing can destabilize the China-centrism that has characterized academic research on 'Chinese' comics to date. Many existing studies focus on newspaper and magazine cartoons or *lianhuanhua* in mainland China during the first decades of the twentieth century and the Maoist era. This volume addresses comics production in mainland China, but also makes visible other Sinophone locations, along with various forms of interconnectedness between them. Coverage of such locations has so far been uneven and disparate. Existing book-length publications on Asian, Chinese or Hong Kong comics were designed as overviews for general rather than academic audiences (Wong 2002, Lent and Xu 2017, Lent 2015, Gravett 2017, Wong 2018, Lent, Wong and Ng 2022, Caschera 2023). Until very recently, comics in Taiwan were understudied, with I-yun Lee's works among the few exceptions. Most of her publications, however, are in Chinese and provide historical overviews of the industry and market in Taiwan up to the 1990s (Li 2012a, 2012b, 2018). Lee's much-needed English monograph (2024) makes her research internationally available, while remaining within the time frame set in her earlier work. Other academic studies are dispersed across many venues, as individual book chapters or journal articles – such as Shiau's chapter (2022) on the transnational career and eclectic style of Taiwanese artist Zheng Wen (Cheng Uen, 鄭問) from the 1980s to the early 2000s, or Cheng Tju Lim's dis-

cussions on political cartoons in Singapore and Malaysia from a historian's standpoint (2000, 2010, 2018).

The Sinophone perspective is also useful for de-centering another cultural hegemony – that of Japan and manga. This volume aims to show that the label 'Mangasia' (dominating the title and textual contents of Paul Gravett's 2017 book) cannot be unreflexively extended to all Asian comics production. An 'anti-Mangasia' stance invites inquiries into local comics histories and media ecologies shaping the production, naming, consumption, international marketing, and contents of mangaesque comics. It also invites reflection on non-mangaesque comics, self-termed 'alternative' or 'independent,' and consideration of the location-specific cultural references, meanings, and ideological agendas underlying such naming. All studies included in this volume focus on non-mangaesque works. This is not due to an explicit intention to downplay or avoid manga-style comics, well entrenched as they are in many Asian markets, but it derives from the chapter authors' expertise and interests. Although not necessarily reflecting what is mainstream or commercially successful in the Sinophone cultural sphere, such a focus does reveal the local specificities mentioned above.

Structure of the Book

Japanese literary and comics scholar Naoko Morita argues that the use of 'comics' as a generic term applied to production from various locales reflects the status of English as *lingua franca* in global academia rather than a consensus in comics studies (2010, 32). She emphasizes the fundamental significance of local terminologies for the study of comics in various geographic locations, due to historically contingent meanings, cultural connotations, and patterns of usage. In Chinese, *manhua* (漫畫/漫画) is the most common term designating 'comics' (both cartoons/comic strips and sequential art). But it is not the only such term. Its current generic status is the outcome of negotiation processes involving local, regional, and global factors as well as various actors' interests, at work both in the past and the present of comics within the Sinophone cultural sphere.

Although this volume does not follow Morita's recommendation as it uses English instead of Chinese terms, it nonetheless acknowledges the validity of her point. To underscore the importance of naming for both Sinophone and comics studies, the first section is dedicated to such discussions. Jaqueline Berndt provides a nuanced exploration of the difficulties and risks associated with using the deceptively generic *manhua* to refer to Sinophone comics. Her chapter reflects on the historical and sociocultural contingencies involved in labelling comics: artists'

claims; state agendas and projects (both locally and internationally oriented); affordances offered by graphic narratives, their publication venues, and, significantly, their interplay with reader literacies and expectations. It also explicitly mentions the need to problematize manga-centrism, and presents a masterful argument around cultural hybridity and intercultural exchange between China/Taiwan and Japan since the 1920s, ending with a fascinating discussion of the recent Taiwan comics boom in Japan.

John Crespi's contribution opens with a translated essay inaugurating a Chinese anthology of independent comics, which reveals the emergence of a new art form and the role of naming in this process, from the perspective of its founders. It is followed by an afterword that traces the origins of the term *manhua* in China in the late 1920s and 1930s, and its political implications as a marker of differentiation from commercial art and association with modernity, cosmopolitanism, and a traditional elite ideal of literati painting. The chapter goes on to discuss the subordination of the term to state-ideological demands and a nationalist project under Communist rule, and the later associations with Japanese manga and mainstream mangaesque comics. Finally, it turns towards recent artists' coinage of Chinese-language neologisms and use of the English term 'comix' (with its original connotations of underground, adult comics and counterculture) to express a historically contingent agenda revolving around high status, freedom from state control, local grounding and international relevance. The distinction between mainstream and alternative, 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' culture is salient in both Crespi and Berndt's chapters. It is also central to Nick Stember's analysis of an experimental comics anthology related to the artist milieu introduced by Crespi. Stember situates these graphic narratives within the (global) framework of art comics. He discusses strategies employed by artists to build a creative space that allows them to escape the constraints of both conventional genre expectations and ideological acceptability imposed by the PRC's censorship regime.

The following two sections of this book are delineated according to a Sinophone logic. "China and Its Margins: Contested Belongings and Legitimacies" showcases China as a point of reference. The arguments made by Piotr Strzałkowski and Chia-yu Liang in their chapters resonate with Fogel's political model of the Sinosphere, which looks at changing configurations of intraregional relations between China as the center and its peripheries. Both authors demonstrate how comics utilize the ancient Chinese concept of Heavenly Mandate (*tianming*, 天命) to contest the legitimacy of Xi Jinping and Communist Party rule from the perspective of China's margins: dissident political cartoonists publishing online and Hong Kong graphic narratives belonging to a locally established martial arts hero genre. At the same time, Liang demonstrates that these comics express a local, Hong Kong-bound identity linked to a long tradition of political protest since 1989.

Shih-wen Sue Chen and Phyllis Yu-ting Huang's chapter explores the case of a Taiwanese cartoonist whose main body of work was published in the 1960s. His long-lasting official acknowledgement was based on connections established with two centers of national identification: China under territorial claims made by the authoritarian Nationalist government at the time the analyzed comic strips were published, and Taiwan under the wave of indigenization that began in the late 1980s.

While signaling the potential implications of cultural essentialism and ghettoization of the ethnic national label 'Chinese,' theorists such as Ien Ang and Rey Chow (included in Shih, Tsai and Bernard 2013) highlight the continuous relevance of Chineseness as a category of identification and analysis, understood as a discursive construct, a kind of hybrid, disaggregated, multiple, and constantly negotiated identity. The third section, entitled "Routes and Roots," discusses connections with China as an imagined homeland, and with localities of settlement, while also contributing to debates on Chineseness and its relevance. The topic of identity (already addressed by Liang, Chen and Huang) takes center stage in Martina Caschera's chapter. She examines the articulation of Chineseness through strategies that include language, communicative memory, mapping, and movement between locations in China and Italy. Interestingly (and in tune with recent trends mentioned earlier for comics published in the US), these identities are not only 'Chinese,' but also regional, pertaining to Qingtian in Zhejiang province, and Milan in Italy.

The idea of memory links to another core theme for this volume: history and its (re)writing. Corrado Neri looks at Sonny Liew's mockumentary that links Singapore's national history with an invented, prosthetic history of national comics. He also reveals how Sonny Liew and Gene Luen Yang apply the strategies of reboot and retro-continuity to revise the history of the superhero genre by hybridizing it with the experience of Chinese immigration. Ngoi Hui Chien analyzes an educational comic book that revisits the Japanese occupation of Malaya (1941–1945). He comments on the obscuration of ethnic Chinese suffering within the Malaysian national history discourse, and employs the Lacanian concept of the 'Real' to argue that historical trauma seeps through in the graphic narrative. His discussion of the Sinophone echoes voices of dissent against Shu-mei Shih's model, which advocates the need to underscore associations with China as a strategy of resistance against a local nationalist project that downplays Chinese ethnicity.

A Sinophone perspective sharpens sensitivity to connections, whether with a (mythical) motherland or places of settlement. Such linkages are markedly present in the second and third sections of this book. The fourth and last section comprises chapters on Taiwan, which reflect the recent evolutions mentioned earlier. At the same time, they highlight a different type of connections: branching out-

ward, beyond the Sinophone cultural sphere. This section showcases transnational exchange between Sinophone locations and within the broader East Asian region, and is reminiscent of Chua Beng Huat's 'Pop Culture China.' Finally, it highlights the theme of (print and digital) materiality.

Norbert Danysz explores the ephemeral rise of a publication format that he names 'review.' While one of these periodicals was aimed at strengthening the local visibility of Taiwanese comics, others sought to make Taiwanese comics visible abroad, serving the agendas of two types of actors: state institutions invested in boosting Taiwan's soft power, and artists interested in enhancing their domestic status through international recognition. Teri Silvio looks at strategies of self-branding through comics characters, which she positions within a global neoliberal discourse of the entrepreneurial creative subject, and in the context of similar activities across Sinophone locations. She also considers a local ecology configured by a Japan-inspired media mix logic, which includes digital materialities and platforms. The affordances offered by internet communication technologies, facilitating the formation of creative collectives across and beyond China, and bound by a shared appreciation of European comics disseminated within these online networks, were already touched upon by John Crespi and come full circle here. In the last chapter, Adina Zemanek specifically addresses the interplay between digital and print materialities as a marketing strategy employed by a digital-native media outlet publishing comics journalism. This case study comments on comics journalism in Taiwan against the background of global trends (the institutionalization of comics journalism and an 'emotional turn' in news reporting), contending that the generic label 'comics journalism' is used by the Taiwanese news platform to build authority through connections with Western traditions. One of the authors she discusses is Lau Kwong Shing, who originally worked in Hong Kong but has been settled in Taiwan since 2021, thus demonstrating that the newly established category 'Taiwanese comics' is also shaped by transnational movement between Sinophone locations.

Conventions Adopted in This Book

As this book hopes to reach audiences beyond Chinese studies, Chinese language terms are limited to those which are central to contributors' arguments or do not have satisfactory equivalents in English. English translations of such core terms are provided and used instead of Chinese whenever possible. For readers with knowledge of Chinese, key terms, comics artists' names and titles of their works

are accompanied by Chinese characters, to facilitate identifying core concepts and locating the graphic narratives mentioned throughout the book.

Individual chapters employ simplified or traditional forms of Chinese characters, depending on the locations discussed. Key terms in Chinese are romanized in *pinyin*, due to the international popularity of this system. Names of comics authors are romanized according to their local pronunciation. *Pinyin* is also used for this purpose; Taiwanese names, however, are accompanied by Wade-Giles and other preferred romanization styles. The romanization system used for Japanese is the modified Hepburn system. The final index lists names of artists, publishers and other intellectuals discussed in the book according to both *pinyin* and other romanization forms. All terms in Chinese and Japanese are listed in the index as well. Names of persons from Chinese-speaking regions and Japan are provided in the order 'surname + given name,' unless reference is made to persons using English names for public communications (including Chinese-language publications – Sean Chuang) or reside outside Asia and publish in other languages, using a Western name order (Yi Yang, Sonny Liew).

The illustrations are provided as full pages and are accompanied by English translations of texts, which allows readers to grasp the context of those fragments or aspects discussed in individual chapters. Western translations of comics referenced throughout the book are signposted whenever possible, in the bibliography or footnotes.

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Section 1: **The Politics of Naming and Distinction**

Jaqueline BERNDT

Chapter 1
What's in a Name: *Manhua*, *Manga* – 'Manghua?'

Abstract: This chapter traces the historical and sociocultural contingencies in naming Sinophone comics through the lenses of comics studies and Japanese studies. While contemporary Chinese and Japanese use the same word for comics, this word invites cultural particularization when romanized. Referring to Sinophone comics as *manhua* and Japanese comics as *manga* not only creates a certain distance from the broader domain of global comics and the field of comics studies but also risks obscuring historical intercultural exchanges within the East Asian region, as well as today's diverging sociocultural positions (for example, between corporate, or mainstream, productions and 'alternative,' often publicly funded ones). Taking a discourse-analytical stance, the chapter surveys how the terms *manhua* and *lianhuanhua* are used in Anglophone Sinology and which equivalents for the latter have been utilized in Japanese before addressing how the cultural bricolage that characterizes Taiwan's comics is made invisible by the label *manhua*. The final section of the chapter reverses the intercultural vector and examines the recent surge of translated editions of *Taiwan komikku* in the Japanese market. The overall aim is to discern the contexts and affordances of discursive cultural particularization.

Introduction

Contemporary Chinese and Japanese use the same word for comics, a compositum of two logographic characters, from which the Korean term *manhwa* also originates (漫畫, 漫画).[1] This word may designate a broad range of formats and settings and even serve as a transnational umbrella term, but in Western lan-

1 In this chapter, special terms are provided in the Japanese standard character form if related to the Japanese context, in traditional characters if related to Taiwan, and in simplified characters if related to the PRC.

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guages, it easily assumes a connotation of cultural particularity as it is romanized according to the phonetics of the respective language – *manga* for Japanese and *manhua* for Chinese. Cultural particularization has been promoted by fans, as well as area studies academics. Japanologists, for example, tenaciously translate the Japanese word *manga* as 'manga' even if it refers to comics or graphic narratives in a generic sense (see Natsume 2020, 2022, 2023). Alternative artists (such as Yokoyama Yūichi, 横山裕一) are also labeled 'manga' in English, which appears to run counter to the term's general connotation of being produced by large media corporations and tied to established franchises and intellectual properties, as well as to the corresponding fan-cultural engagement. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs calls the annual comics prize it established in 2007 *International Manga Award*, suggesting cultural diplomacy via comics.

This inclination to particularize Japanese comics through naming is echoed by attempts to explicitly distinguish *manhua* (and *manhwa*) from *manga*, which certainly benefits the marketing of translated editions. It helps to subvert Japan-related hegemonic overtones, as well as the homogenization of a whole region, which make themselves felt when Asian productions are showcased under a heading like Manga City, for example, at the annual international comics festival in Angoulême. Symptomatically, the exhibition *Mangasia: Wonderland of Asian Comics* that was curated by Paul Gravett for the Barbican Center, London, in 2017, was renamed *Asian Comics: Evolution of an Art Form* for its 2024 edition held at the Bowers Museum, Los Angeles. It goes without saying that 'comics' is not a neutral term either: "terms such as 'comic' and 'graphic novel' are predominantly Anglo-American in their usage, whereas a less culture-specific term like 'graphic narrative' [. . .] has the potential to embrace the medium on a transnational/transcultural as well as transhistorical scale" (Stein 2015, 425). But in the contemporary global media environment, 'comics' points less to a country or region of origin than 'manga,' as for example the Filipino word *komiks* and the word *komik* in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand indicate.

Calling Sinophone comics *manhua* and Japanese graphic narratives *manga* implies a certain distance toward the broader domain of comics and the global field of comics studies. More importantly, it runs the risk of obscuring diversity and power relations within the national comics cultures of the (East) Asian region. Differences pertain to the historical contingency of terms and their references (caricatures vs. graphic narratives, fictional vs. nonfictional, entertaining vs. 'educational' comics, etc.), diverging contemporaneous positions (generic vs. idiosyncratic comics, mainstream/corporate vs. alternative/small-press productions), as well as the usages that the texts themselves primarily suggest (for example, affective-participatory vs. critical-representational). Cultural hybridization cannot be overlooked either. Just as *manga*, in the sense of Japanese comics, has histori-

cally benefited from the exchange with American and European comics, the evolution of *manhua*, in the sense of Sinophone comics, has been fundamentally affected by *manga*. Taiwan is a particularly intriguing case in point, as I will sketch out in this chapter. Before that, however, I shall survey terms employed by Sinologists for Sinophone comics publications. My perspective is informed by comics studies and Japanese studies, meaning that I approach Sinophone comics from the position of a linguistic outsider who relies on translated editions. Against this backdrop, I will bring in a Japan-based view, ultimately considering the presence of Taiwanese productions in the contemporary Japanese manga market. Overall, I aim to discern in which contexts discursive cultural particularization comes to the fore, what it critically affords, and how significant a historically and socioculturally differentiated naming is for contributing East Asian perspectives to truly global research on graphic narratives.

Manhua

It seems obvious to refer to Sinophone comics as *manhua* in English. Occasionally, scholars go beyond language considering the nationality or descent of the creator, and the orientation of narrative content, that is, 'stories about China.' The latter forms one of the five notions of *manhua* proposed by Nick Stember (2014). The other four are: comics exclusive to China; contemporary graphic narratives rendered in a mangaesque style;[2] comics as an "inclusive global medium," represented by alternative, small-press productions; the cartoons, sketches, and woodcuts that populated the magazines of prewar Shanghai; and an umbrella term that embraces the pictorial booklets called *lianhuanhua* (to which I will return below).[3] Foreign comics translated into Chinese stay out of the picture. Remarkably, Stember refers to the above categories under the heading "Don't call it manga!" and thus brings the relationship between China and Japan to the fore.

As is well known, the word *manhua* has a "chameleon-like history" (Barmé 2002, 89). Within the scope of this chapter, it is probably most important to recall that *manhua* was a case of translated modernity and, as such, tinged with cultural hybridity from the beginning. Artist Feng Zikai (丰子恺, 1898–1975) re-introduced the term from Japanese to modern Chinese in the mid-1920s after his return from a short study stay in Tokyo, where he had come across the *Hokusai Manga* (1813–

2 For the term 'mangaesque,' see Berndt 2020.

3 See Stember (2023) for a detailed and substantiated discussion of how to call *lianhuanhua* in English.

1878), as well as the works by Kitazawa Rakuten (北澤楽天, 1876–1955) and Takehisa Yumeji (竹久夢二, 1884–1934).[4] In contradistinction from the word's contemporary meaning, painter and woodblock artist Katsushika Hokusai (葛飾北斎, 1760–1849) and his publisher had used *manga* to title a whole series of pictorial copybooks (see Berndt 2017). According to Barmé (2002), Hokusai's drawings fascinated Feng Zikai as a casual approach to everyday life, less calculated and time-consuming than the Western tradition of oil painting with its inclination to mimetic realism. In a similar vein, Feng Zikai was attracted by Yumeji's poetic art of illustration rendered with ink and brush on paper, which deviated not only from oil painting but also from the satirical imagery promoted by Kitazawa Rakuten. Around 1900, Rakuten had appropriated the term *manga* for his newspaper cartoons modeled on the American humor magazine *Puck*. Yet, across all differences (regarding brush and pen, lyricism and satire), Hokusai, Rakuten, and Yumeji shared a preference for line drawing. This preference for graphic art aesthetically connects them to postwar manga and becomes obscured when painting is foregrounded, as happens in research on Feng Zikai. Among the artists appreciated by him, Yumeji has arguably left the clearest mark on the type of Japanese comics globally known today, more specifically, *shōjo manga* (少女マンガ, girls comics). But during Feng Zikai's time in Tokyo, the word *manga* was not yet primarily associated with long-format visual storytelling.

The Chinese romanization of the term prevails in John Crespi's monograph *Manhua Modernity*. This word use is, however, not motivated by seeking dissociation from or a counterposition to Japanese manga and its 'influence' (i.e., an inter-national relation and a monodirectional one between an active sender and a passive receiver at that). Rather, it is aimed at "making the word *less* [original emphasis] defined and thereby opening *manhua* up to larger historical phenomena of modernity" (Crespi 2020, 3), last but not least to subvert equations of *manhua* with cartoons in general and *the* Chinese cartoon in particular. Consequently, Crespi conceptualizes *manhua* not as a genre but as a media, which resembles the most widely shared notion of manga today. Just as *manhua* obviously associated illustrated pictorials in prewar Shanghai, *manga* (in particular, マンガ as rendered in the Japanese *katakana* mora) has come to primarily connote specialized

4 Pre-war artists are represented by their first names only (for example, Rakuten), as this was customary prior to 1945, particularly if these were pen names. According to Laureillard (2024, 53), *manhua* carried the meaning of "spontaneous images" in the wake of Feng Zikai, which differs from the initial quantitative meaning in nineteenth-century Japan.

comics magazines in postwar Japan.[5] Noteworthy is further that Crespi understands the term *manhua* promoted by prewar Chinese artists and editors as a matter of intracultural relations, that is, diverging positions within one and the same culture: "adopting the word *manhua* from the Japanese helped carve out a sphere of visual representation distinct from the kinds of illustration already populating the entertainment serials" (Crespi 2020, 5).[6]

From a Japanese perspective, this relationality is reminiscent of how Rakuten adopted the term *manga* from Hokusai – not out of nostalgia for a vanishing tradition, but in favor of American-styled modernity, as Ronald Stewart so aptly demonstrated (2013, 43). His modernist stance led Rakuten to oppose a concurrent type of Japanese cartoon, i.e., the *ponchi-e* (ポンチ絵, 'Punch pictures') of the late nineteenth century, which were filled with riddles and puns and designed to be read aloud in order to be shared with others. Rakuten's use of the word *manga* was directed against them. Consequently, the question arises which distinctions the term *manhua* served in prewar Shanghai, apart from defying oil painting. According to Barmé (2002) and Crespi (2020), it also facilitated distance from both "combative" current-affairs cartoons and popular pictorial narratives in the format of *lianhuanhua* (連環畫/连环画, initially *lianhuan tuhua*, 連環圖畫).[7] For many decades, *manhua* designated sketches and short comic strips.[8] As distinct from booklets providing graphic fiction, it appeared mainly in newspapers and periodicals. But this prewar *manhua* differed fundamentally from the 'new *manhua*' that came to spread from the 1980s onward through negotiating foreign imports, at first, via pirated editions. In the process, the domestic *lianhuanhua* played the role of an intermediary (see Danysz 2024).

5 The Japanese script consists of two syllabaries, in addition to Sino-Japanese characters. The *katakana* syllabary is used, among other things, for rendering loanwords from foreign languages or generating a transcultural connotation.

6 See also the Afterword in Chapter 2 of this volume.

7 According to Bouvard et al. (2024, 15), *lianhuanhua* and *manhua* spread more or less concurrently in the latter half of the 1920s. According to Takeda (2017), the abbreviated form of the term *lianhuanhua* took hold from 1949 onward, primarily in the PRC.

8 See the English titles of the pictorials discussed by Crespi, including the Shanghai magazine *Modern Sketch* (时代漫画), and also the Japanese monograph on Ye Qianyu and his stock character Mr. Wang, the title of which is given in English as *China's Manhua Modernism* (Shiroyama 2023).

Lianhuanhua

Sinophone comics of the long-format narrative type have been known in Western languages not as *manhua* (if at all). Recently, there are remarkable attempts at integrating *lianhuanhua* into comics studies – as a distinct genre and cultural form on a par with *manga* and *bande dessinée*.[9] This justifies a brief look at the use of *lianhuanhua* as a generic label for Sinophone comics. But instead of tracing the term's historical contingency in the Sinophone context, I will apply a Japan-based perspective, and focus, in particular, on Sino-Japanese interculturality in the domain of graphic narratives, including considerations of comics-specific formal traits.

Literally meaning 'linked drawings' (or sequential images, to use comics-studies terminology), *lianhuanhua* started out in prewar Shanghai as a type of affordable graphic reading material targeted to children. It took the format of palm-sized (i.e., B7) and horizontally oriented booklets which carried, in principle, one bordered image, or panel, per page with captions placed outside of it. As such, Japanese comics critics have found *lianhuanhua* to resemble Japan's magazine-based *emonogatari* (絵物語, picture stories) rather than the dynamic long-format *story-manga* (ストーリーマンガ) that came to replace them in the 1950s. In both *lianhuanhua* and *emonogatari*, visual and verbal tracks stayed separate while sharing the same page space. Comics-specific devices that integrate text into pictures, such as speech balloons and sound (or, more precisely, mimetic) words, were not regularly used. Visual storytelling did not play the primary role. Pages were, as a rule, not broken down into sequences of simultaneously visible, closely interconnected panels, and the panels' visual content did not necessarily guide the gaze of the reader-spectator forward, for example, through characters' turns and gestures.

Another aspect that invited comparisons of Chinese *lianhuanhua* with Japanese 'picture stories' of the 1950s was the detailed illustration style, in particular, pertaining to adaptations of Chinese literary classics (Takeda 2017, 6). Whereas *manga* at the time was mainly associated with simplified line drawing, cartoonish exaggeration, and blank backgrounds, the 'picture stories' by Yamakawa Sōji (山川惣治, 1908–1992), Komatsuzaki Shigeru (小松崎茂, 1915–2001), and others consisted of blocks of well-crafted prose and images that leaned on crosshatching and shading to feature anatomically realist characters in three-dimensional spaces. Their line work was inherited by the so-called *gekiga* (劇画), a type of graphic narrative for young adults that emerged around 1960 and took an oppos-

9 See Henningsen (2024), University of Freiburg (2023).

ing standpoint against manga, then represented by visually and narratively child-friendly serials like Tezuka Osamu's *Astro Boy* (see Takeuchi 2025). Symptomatically, *lianhuanhua* were introduced in Japanese translation as 'Chinese *gekiga*' (中国の劇画) (Tabata Publ. 1974).[10] Concurrently, they were also labeled *manga* or *emonogatari*, for example, in the magazine of the Japan-China Friendship Association, *People's China* (Jp. 人民中国) (Takeda 2017, 312). This points to the contingency of the terms and their different meanings in Japanese and Chinese. It is, however, worth noting that by the mid-1970s, *lianhuanhua* as both artefact and name had come to be regarded in Japan as an equivalent to manga, just as the core notion of manga itself had shifted from the cartoony comic strip to the long-format graphic narrative.

Conversely, in China, the *lianhuanhua* format provided an early venue for Sinophone editions of Japanese *story-manga*, for example, Tezuka's *Astro Boy* that appeared in an unlicensed and amended version in 1980, after the Chinese broadcast of its TV anime adaptation (Takeda 2017, 232).[11] How Tezuka himself reacted to this publication is depicted in volume 3 of the manga series *The Untold Story: How Tezuka Created his "Black Jack"* (Yoshimoto and Miyazaki 2013, 158–163). His studio staff relates the master's anger to the fact of piracy, only to learn soon that he is more concerned about the terrible quality of the visuals and the clumsy adoption of the page layout from the vertical manga pages to the horizontal *lianhuanhua* format. As the *Astro Boy* edition could no longer be changed, Tezuka revised the manuscript of *Kimba the White Lion* instead, so that "the Chinese readers can also enjoy it" (中国の人にも楽しんでもらわないと!) (Yoshimoto and Miyazaki 2013, 166). He did not claim any remuneration, neither fees nor royalties. Apart from the specific incident, this anecdote indicates that in the early 1980s, *lianhuanhua* involved paneling, especially when Japanese manga and American comics were adapted.

According to Japanese Sinologist and *lianhuanhua* historian Takeda Masaya, it was not only the page composition that changed. Chinese adaptations of manga also introduced new narrative genres such as sports, science fiction, and romance, as well as close proximity between the works and the readers, replacing the previously dominant didactic stance with the invitation to meet fictional characters at eye level (Takeda 2017, 250–252).[12] Chinese labels, too, became fluid over the course of the 1980s: manga was named Japanese *lianhuanhua*, *lianhuan manhua*, and *xinmanhua* (新漫画, new manga) before its more recent integration into

10 This bilingual edition included *Sun Wukong, the Monkey King*, *The White-Haired Girl*, and *Master Dongguo*; it featured two panels per page.

11 By General Science Press (科学普及出版社).

12 Lee (2024) observes similar trends in 1980s Taiwan, although not in the *lianhuanhua* format.

the Chinese categories that give preference to transmedial industry practices and the respective fan-cultural interests: *dongman* (动漫), a term combining *donghua* (animation) and *manhua* (comics), or ACG (animation, comics, games).[13]

In contrast, media-specific interest in Chinese comics occasionally combines with a promotion of cultural particularity. After all, *lianhuanhua* refers to specific Sinophone locales; neither as an object nor as a name has it obtained a degree of transculturality that would rival *manga* or, more recently, *webtoon*. Its scope appears historically limited: even in Chinese, it does not serve as a generic term for comics any longer (Danysz 2024, 126). Ranking *lianhuanhua* at a level with contemporary *manga* or similar graphic narratives could be questioned from a formalist perspective with respect to verbal-visual integration and the centrality of paneling for modern concepts of comics. But there is also a political dimension to be considered. In the 1950s, *lianhuanhua* came to be preferred over *manhua* in the People's Republic of China as the latter was suspected of unwanted foreign influences (Danysz 2024, 123); and in Taiwan, *lianhuanhua*, or more precisely *lianhuan tuhua*, was the umbrella term for comics and graphic narratives used by the ruling Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) from the late 1940s to the early 1970s when entertaining 'lowbrow' graphic narratives were marginalized if not suppressed, last but not least due to both actual and alleged Japanese, that is, manga-esque, traits.

'Manghua?'

The promotion of Chinese particularity can also resort to the romanized term *manhua*. But when used in English as an umbrella term for multiple Sinophone settings and historical periods, it risks obscuring significant differences between adjacent locales like Hong Kong and Taiwan. The *Encyclopedia of East Asian Design*, for example, operates with *manhua* in such a uniformizing manner (Lee 2019, Lai 2019), although "the case of Taiwan can be seen as a particularly dense site of metissage and bricolage" (Neri 2021, 24). Bricolage characterizes the island's contemporary national culture and the graphic novels analyzed by Neri (2021), but also Taiwan's comics culture under martial law (1949–1987), where status hierarchies between different comics traditions (i.e., mainland cartoons and the colonizer's manga), as well as between later local productions and Japanese imports were officially maintained while in actuality, assemblages emerged,

13 See the Taiwan Association for ACG Studies, founded in 2022. https://www.acg.org.tw/ Recently, the acronym also includes a reference to light novels: ACGN.

whether recognizable to contemporaneous readers or not. Precisely this type of bricolage might go unnoticed if Taiwan comics are subsumed under the heading of *manhua* in English.

As Lee (2024) explains, the mainland cartoonists who retreated to Taiwan with the KTM in the late 1940s (*waishengren*, 外省人) had not had the same exposure to Japanese narrative manga as the local Han Chinese artists, that is, the Native Taiwanese (*benshengren*, 本省人). Under martial law, this difference in exposure relative to provincial status translated into the dichotomy between political cartoons and funny comic strips vs. dynamic adventure stories as developed in prewar Japanese magazines for boys. It also emerged in the high status of comics commissioned by state-run newspapers and re-distributed in book format through authorized bookstores, as distinct from entertaining graphic narratives, and *story-manga* in particular, which were available only at subcultural venues such as rental stores (although status gaps were not always congruent with artists' provincial status).

From the mid-1960s onward, manga went 'underground' (Lee 2014). To accommodate both the de-Japanization policy of the KMT government and economic requirements, publishers had postwar *story-manga* hand-traced, visually and linguistically amended, released under Taiwanese author names, and primarily distributed through rental stores after the decline of children's magazines by the mid-1960s. The adapted graphic narratives were not necessarily identified as Japanese by their readers, but they carried elements of manga's aesthetics, first of all, the three-tier page layout that presented the standard in 1960s Taiwan, according to Lee (2024). She defines manga's 'visual grammar' as modeled on Tezuka Osamu's postwar innovations in graphic storytelling. These included a diversity of 'shot' sizes and angles, the occasional restriction to a single character per panel, an emphasis on characters' feelings via close-ups as well as an increasing reliance on comics-specific symbolism (sweat beads, speed lines, and the like) and sound effects. While the actual presence of manga was shielded from view by the KMT government's pre-publication review system (1966–1976), this very system also paved the way for the open piracy of the 1980s, which helped publishers to compensate the dearth of local creators (who had turned away from comics due to decreased income opportunities). For the sake of economic viability and based on new photocopying machines, small presses came to give preference to direct manga reprints in non-licensed editions until this line of business was brought to a halt by new copyright legislation in 1992.

As outlined so far, the romanized word *manhua* implies much more than a reference to the Chinese language. At least in the case of Taiwan, it connotes the juxtaposition of authorized culture vs. subculture, and also *manga* as *manhua*'s 'other.' Thus, Taiwan comics might be better accommodated in English with a

portmanteau like *manghua*. This, however, is not only impractical in terms of marketing and search engines; it also retains the politically informed tradition of neatly separating things Chinese from things Japanese, even if the first entity is now replaced by a Taiwaneseness that no longer revolves primarily around things Chinese. Such a discursive tradition of identifying discrete cultures where bricolage in fact prevailed is evoked in English by the label *manga* applied to contemporary local productions such as the series *Ming Zhan-lu*: *the Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare* by Wei Zong-cheng (Wei Tsung-chen) (hereafter referred to as *Ming Zhan-lu*).[14] A comics bestseller and an extraordinary example of successful transmediality, the narrative of *Ming Zhan-lu* features a young male magician who collaborates with the police to fight monsters that threaten Taiwan after a giant earthquake. He is supported by a cute girl who turns out to be an incarnation of the local goddess Mazu. This led some Taiwanese academics in August 2017 to accuse the series of not only sexualizing the deity but doing so in a specifically Japanese (that is, mangaesque) manner and thereby rose-tinting the colonial era (Lee 2024). In contrast, anthropologist Teri Silvio appreciates *Ming Zhan-lu* as "a self-conscious attempt to localize the Japanese manga system and, if not directly, contest the hegemony of the Japanese culture industries in Taiwan, to hold a place for local aesthetics and local concerns within the Taiwanese manga market" (2019, 182). Retaining the intercultural configuration 'Taiwanese (as non-Japanese) vs. Japanese' but reading it differently, Silvio claims that "*Ming Zhan-lu*'s settings insist on Taiwan's coevalness with Japan" (2019, 187). Japan is represented by the cute girl character that elicits affective responses, as well as by the genre mix that correlates magical-girl fiction, mystery, and supernatural beings to form a "fantasy *wuxia*-style manga" (Silvio 2019, 183). Localization is found primarily at the level of textual representation: the series' setting (Taipei and New Taipei City), character types (the 'archetypal' male Taiwanese comics hero), and narrative substantiation (an actually existing folk religion as the source of magic).

Recognizable Taiwanese settings had begun to emerge in comics narratives right after the lifting of martial law, closely related to the promotion of the island's locally specific modern history, which unfolded under Japan's colonial rule. Such comics were commissioned as part of the Taiwan Collection project by the Academia Sinica's Center for Digital Cultures (since 2002). They have been published in the quarterly magazine *Creative Comic Collection* (CCC 創作集) (2009–2015, 2018–) and distributed through regular bookstores, that is, main-

14 https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books_info.php?id=91Record *of the Dark* Wars, trans. Nick Stember. An Introduction and a 42-page English preview can be found here: https://taiwan-comic-city.taicca.tw/book.php?id=85&lang=en. Silvio (2019) translates the title as *Final Destiny of the Formosan Gods*.

stream rather than subcultural channels (Lee 2022). The localization by *Ming Zhan-lu*, however, is slightly different as it comes from a 'lowbrow' background that connects back to the rental bookstores, which had been the primary venue for pirated manga since the 1960s (Lee 2024, 276). Remarkably, *Ming Zhan-lu* took its departure from FutureDigi (未来数位), a Taiwanese company established in 2006 and initially specialized in translated editions of Japanese adult games. Yet, *Ming Zhan-lu*'s emergence 'from below' – through the manga-typical trade paperback format, but also the private funding – has not hampered its receiving public acclaim through state awards, for example, a Second Prize in the National Education Research Academy Awards for Best Comic. This makes *Ming Zhan-lu* an example of the "impossibility of drawing clear lines between high and low culture" (Zemanek 2017, 146) with respect to Taiwan's comics and their contribution to local (as national) identity. It is precisely such impossibility that may also undermine delineations as *manga* – unless the term *manga* is used to signify more than comics made in Japan or comics that follow a certain 'manga style' (see Kacsuk 2018). In the absence of a strong domestic industry in Taiwan, *manga* tended to stand in for corporate comics as distinct from 'alternative' publications, the latter branching out into 'graphic novels' that are commissioned and subsidized by public authorities, and fan-cultural productions (*dōjinshi*, 同人誌) that have helped artists to make a living (for example, AKRU to whom I will return in the next section).

The intercultural configuration (Japanese vs. non-Japanese) often overshadows the internal sociocultural one (authorized vs. subcultural), not only in the case of Taiwan. It comes to the fore whenever the term *manhua* is used to market translated graphic novels outside of East Asia, while *manga* serves to foreground an economically lucrative, highly affective type of graphic narrative that invites creative participation on the part of fans and transmedia franchising. Neither label refers to the whole spectrum of comics in their local Japanese or Sinophone settings. Against this backdrop, the answer to the problem posed by the term Mangasia, namely, how to subvert the predominance of Japan and manga to "the detriment of other aspects of East Asian comics" (Laureillard 2021, 6) can certainly not be to completely avoid *manga* and the associated corporate productions (which recently also capitalize on resonances of *manhua* with *manga*). Looking beyond national categorization, the challenge is rather to consider the exact position that specific texts hold within the same comics culture and how different audiences (as well as funders) perceive them. Does a locally produced graphic narrative still count as *manga* to those who seek affective pleasure in its consumption as an amalgam? And how does the Japanese manga market respond to non-Japanese productions labeled *manga* elsewhere? The next section reverses the intercultural vector, considering the recent boom of Taiwan comics in Japan.

Taiwan komikku

From a Japanese perspective, the label 'Taiwan manga' could apply to three different categories: first, comics that combine Taiwanese settings and motifs with the "Japanese manga system" as discussed by Silvio (2019); second, translated editions of Japanese comics, including those that circulated incognito in the 1960s and 1970s; and third, works by Taiwanese creators published in Japanese translation as manga, that is, on a par with Japanese productions. The last category is at the center of this final section, which looks at adjustments made by the local comics industry to meet Japanese consumers' expectations of manga.

The arguably first instance of a Taiwanese manga in Japan was *Heroes of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty* by Zheng Wen (Chen Uen, 鄭問); it was serialized in *Morning* (モーニング) from 1989 to 1993 (Hara 2008, 136). In 1988, the then-chief editor of this weekly, Kurihara Yoshiyuki (栗原良幸), began inviting comics artists from Europe and North America, but also South Korea and Taiwan.[15] While most of them could not accommodate the Japanese format of magazine serialization, Zheng Wen ended up working with Kurihara for almost a decade. He proved exceptionally capable of involving readers, not only by character design and artwork, as Shiau (2022, 76–80) assumes, but more so through dynamic panel layouts and varied pacing. The appeal of his storytelling to primarily male adult readers was also due to a drawing style that relied on organic linework and anatomic realism: along with a self-contained diegesis uninterrupted by cartoonish gags, Zheng Wen's works approximated the *gekiga* lineage of Japanese graphic narratives, which itself had been inspired in part by American comics. Suffice it to mention that *gekiga* artist Ikegami Ryōichi (池上遼一) was Zheng's mentor. Correlating the familiar *gekiga* aesthetics with something so unusual as using a brush instead of a pen, Zheng Wen attracted the attention of Japanese manga critics and became the only non-Japanese artist who was visually cited in the now legendary Japanese book *How to Read Manga* (Natsume et al. 1995, 16).

Gravett's *Mangasia* exhibition featured Zheng Wen and his *Heroes of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty* (dated 1991–1994 in Gravett 2017, 92), in addition to three other male artists from Taiwan: Qiu Ruo-long (Chiu Ruo-lung, 邱若龍) with a non-

15 In 2011, Kurihara was awarded a Special Achievements Prize at the 14th Japan Media Arts Festivals for his 16-year long efforts to internationalize the domestic comics market (https://j-mediaarts.jp/award/single/kurihara-yoshiyuki/).

fiction work on the 1930 Wushe Incident, *Seediq Bale* (Qiu 2011) in the chapter on graphic history (Gravett 2017, 156, Zemanek 2020, 396–397); *Silent Monkey Sword* (Gravett 2017, 2017) by Li Long-jie (Li Lung-chieh, 李龍杰)[16] as an adaptation of a literary classic, in this case, the *Journey to the West*; and Sean Chuang (小莊) under the heading of autofiction with his *'80s Diary in Taiwan* (Gravett 2017, 184, Chuang 2013, Zemanek 2020, Neri 2021).[17] None of the latter three works has seen a Japanese translation.[18] For that, it apparently needs either a Japanese comics award or mediation by a Japanese editor (such as Kurihara in Zheng Wen's case) and even better, an international co-production.

Japan's governmental comics awards, however, have not been linked to subsidies for publication in Japanese. AKRU's *Scrolls of a Northern City* (2010), also known as *The Bai Hua Café*,[19] was an early nominee in the manga division of the Media Arts Awards by the Cultural Agency of Japan (2011) but has not seen a translated edition.[20] What appealed to the jury back then was AKRU's mastering of manga's 'visual grammar,' that is, paneling, blackened page backgrounds for flashback sequences, considerations of the whole double-page spread and how the reader's gaze is guided across it (Ikeda 2014), as well as the narrative's relation to Japan. Set in 1935 Taipei and featuring iconic colonial architecture along the way, it revolves around a coffeeshop run by a handsome and mysterious Japanese man. In Taiwan, *Scrolls of a Northern City* began in the quarterly print magazine *CCC*, targeting both manga aficionados and readers who were eager to dig into the island's colonial past through "nostalgic contemporary global popular culture vintage mania" (Neri 2021, 15). But Japanese publishers apparently did not know how to place this artist in their domestic market. In 2015–2016, AKRU ran a short series on the e-comic site *Jump+* (少年ジャンプ+). In 2020, she released a cartoony nonfiction manga book on what to eat in Taiwan, a commissioned work obviously motivated by tourism. Her capability to create captivating original narratives was eventually acknowledged with an invitation to serialize a fantasy story with folkloric elements in the Japanese-language bi-monthly *Aokishi* (Der Blaue Reiter [sic!], 青騎士), launched by the media corporation Kadokawa in 2021; the series was published as a book in 2023.

16 Called a 'manga artist' (https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books_info.php?id=170) on the *Books from Taiwan* website (curated by TAICCA, the Taiwan Creative Content Agency), which includes a whole tag named *manga* (https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books.php?tag=Manga).

17 https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books_info.php?id=92

18 *Seediq Bale* is available in French, *'80's Diary in Taiwan* in French, Italian and German.

19 English excerpt: https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books_info.php?id=81

20 In the 2010s, the rights for a Kindle version were obtained by Comic Catapult, a publisher that has meanwhile ceased to engage in comics.

As AKRU's case suggests, capitalizing on cultural exoticization in familiar forms pays off. Since 2022, Japan has seen a boom in Taiwan comics thanks to Kadokawa and its close collaboration with *CCC*, which was revamped as a digital platform in 2020 and is supported by the Taiwanese government, particularly the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA). On its digital site *Comic Walker* (コミックワーカー), Kadokawa promotes the joint venture with a blurb that employs the loanword *komikku* (コミック): "We are publishing 'Taiwan comics' now! [. . .] They feel nostalgically new" (台湾コミック始めました! [. . .] 懐かしいような新感覚を味わえる).[21] Whether works originating from *CCC* and published by Kadokawa in Japanese translation or releases by recently founded small presses, the narratives that enjoy exceptional attention confirm Silvio's observation that "Taiwan tends to be read in Japan as a folkloric and/or nostalgic place, as a stand-in for Japan's past" (2019, 187). Nostalgic rather than historical references to the shared imperial past are, for example, characteristic of *A Beautiful Tale of Flowers: Stories*, whose narrative is set in 1936 Taiwan. Tagged as 'historical,' 'romance,' 'slice-of-life,' and 'supernatural,' this girls-love (or *yuri*, 百合) comic by artist Monday Recover (星期一回収日) adapts a literary work by Yang Shuang-zi (楊双子), an author known for queer stories. In Taiwan, it had received a Golden Comics Award in 2019 before it saw its Japanese translation published in 2022 by Thousands of Books, a small press that relies on crowd-funding and was supported by Taiwan's Ministry of Culture in this case. Run by Hara Masato (原正人), an established scholar and translator of Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, it has also produced Japanese editions of *Heartstopper* (Alice Oseman, 2021) and *Asterios Polyp* (David Mazzuchelli, 2024).

The girls-love orientation of *A Beautiful Tale of Flowers* indicates another crucial element for succeeding in the Japanese market besides nostalgic themes and a mangaesque style, that is, a familiar genre. The manga-styled series *I Will Be Your Paradise* by Shen Lian-fang (Shen Lien-fan) (2020, originally printed in 1998) is based on an actual event, that is, the suicide of a young lesbian couple from an elite high school in 1994, but it has not yet been noticed in Japan despite its Sinophone online reserialization in 2020, which was even followed by a sequel (Shen 2022). Since the early 2000s, Taiwanese readers have related the genres of girls love (GL) and boys love (BL) to actual human-rights issues, such as same-sex marriage, and a government-funded institution like the Taiwan Comic Base even held

21 https://comic-walker.com/taiwan/

a BL comics exhibition in June 2023 (Wang 2022).[22] In the Japanese context, however, political aspects do not come to the fore; the emphasis is on eroticism if not explicit sex. Narratives such as the recent CCC production *DAY OFF*, which received a Golden Comic Award in Taiwan in 2022, do very well.

Keeping a distance from political issues also shows in the marketing of "manga conveying Taiwan's reality" (漫画が伝える台湾のリアル)[23] focused on contemporary daily life, for example, Ruan Guang-min's *Yong-Jui's Grocery Store*, released in Japanese by the small press Two Virgins under its label Michikusa Comics in 2022 (exceptionally, the artist's name is rendered not in Chinese characters 院光民 which invite a Japanized reading, but ルアン・グアンミン in Japanese *katakana*, signaling foreignness). The focus on everyday life in Taiwan, facilitated at least in part by an increased touristic familiarity, goes hand in hand with shared popular media content (beyond manga genres such as GL and BL) as a common ground. Japanese popular music of the 1980s, as well as the novels by Murakami Haruki, are enjoyed by the young Taiwanese woman Lu (緑, 緑), who is the protagonist of *The Song about Green: Gather the Wind* by female artist Gao Yan.[24] After serialization in *Monthly Comic Beam* (月刊コミックビーム) 2021–2022, this graphic narrative saw a two-volume book edition (Gao 2022) released in Japan by Kadokawa, whose Taiwan branch was established already in 2001.

Translated editions of graphic narratives that address political history such as *Son of Formosa*, are usually produced by non-manga presses, in this case by the prestigious academic publisher Iwanami (You and Zhou 2022). Together with the chronology and glossary at the end of each volume, the publication venue itself positions the work in the domain of 'educational' comics (*gakushū manga*, 学習漫画), a Japanese category that tends to include what is named 'documentary comics' elsewhere.[25] But the 'belly-band' strip that adorns the Japanese translation of *Son of Formosa* carries a blurb by established manga artist Kouno Fumiyo (こうの史代), the creator of *In this Corner of the World*, hinting at attempts to connect to 'manga proper.' Just like Kouno's narratives, the Taiwan comics that are now available in Japanese target adult readers beyond manga's gendered genres. As such, they dovetail with recent changes in Japan's comics industry: the de-

22 For an early anthropological investigation of Taiwan's BL fandom see Martin 2012.

23 https://www.nippon.com/ja/japan-topics/g02164/#

24 Literally, the main title means *Lu's Songs*, but the Japanese book cover indicates it as *The Song about Green*, as Lu is written with the character for green.

25 For an English language excerpt of this book (released in 2020 in Taiwan), https://issuu.com/contact-sloworkpublishing/docs/sample_en_son_of_formosa1. It also has German and English editions, the latter under the title *The Boy from Clearwater*.

cline of the manga magazine with its age- and gender-specific readership and the shift of emphasis to the more universally circulating book format, which again is partly outstripped by digital comics. To briefly sum up, the question of why Taiwan comics are booming in Japan now brings at least three factors into focus: the new collaboration of major public and private actors, the post-digital conditions of manga publishing in Japan, and, closely related, the emergence of new small presses such as Thousands of Books and Two Virgins.

Coda

This chapter traced historical and sociocultural contingencies in the naming of Sinophone comics from the perspective of an outsider to Chinese studies. The issue of English wording presents itself, for example, when research publications that were initially authored in Chinese or Japanese are translated into English. In the case of comics historian Lee I-yun's monograph (2024), the translator and the editors opted for *comics* instead of *manhua*, while keeping *manga* for Japanese imports to indicate the cultural bricolage characteristic of postwar Taiwan. This is not to deny *manga* its actual heterogeneity but rather to acknowledge the different degrees of cultural coherence that are globally recognized.

The survey conducted above, ranging from *manhua* and *lianhuanhua* to *manga* and the Japanese anglicism *komikku*, is meant to raise awareness of the sociocultural positioning of individual graphic narratives in relation to the particularities of labels. Such an awareness includes, for example, specifying the conditions under which the media of comics as a whole (and not only certain variants therein) could be conceived as 'popular culture.' The insufficient consideration of sociocultural positions appears, in part, to be due to disregarding readership, as well as the interrelation of readers' expectations and literacies with the works' affordances and publication venues, but also their diverse associations with respect to terms such as *manhua* and *manga*.

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Chapter 2
Independent Comics in China: The Making of an Indefinite Art

Abstract: Part one of this two-part chapter is a translation of "A Brief History of *SC* Comics," a 2009 essay, written by the Nanjing-based comics artist Hu Xiaojiang, that offers an insider's account of how independent comics originated and developed in China from the late 1990s through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Hu's essay emphasizes how editors of the *Special Comix* (*SC*) series, which had by 2009 produced three multi-author anthologies, cultivated a genre of comics virtually unknown in the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the time. Part two, an afterword to the translation, looks at Hu's essay against the longer history of *manhua* (漫画, cartoons and comics) in China, to speculate on the strategic positioning implied by the name *Special Comix* (*tebie manhua*, 特别漫画). That positioning, I argue, represents the *SC* editors' attempt to resist a fixed definition for these new, independent comics, and in turn resist incorporation into the historical legacy of *manhua* in the PRC.

Introduction

This chapter comprises two parts. Part one is a translation of "A Brief History of *SC* Comics," an essay written and published in 2009 by Hu Xiaojiang (胡晓江), Nanjing-based illustrator, comics artist, and long-time proponent of independent comics (*duli manhua*, 独立漫画) in the PRC. "Brief History" first appeared as an addendum to *Special Comix 3*, abbreviated *SC3*, a compendium of comics by forty-five young Chinese artists. As the name implies, *SC3* is part of a series. Self-published irregularly between 2004 and 2015, the six volumes of the *SC* series document the emergence of new and diverse styles of comics from among a network of young artists, most based in the Chinese mainland, but with others from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Europe. Hu's "Brief History," to which I have added explanatory footnotes, provides an insider's account of how the *SC* series originated, with an emphasis on how its editors cultivated a genre of comics virtually unknown in China at the time. Part two, an afterword to the translation, looks at Hu's essay against the longer history of *manhua* (漫画, cartoons and comics) in China, to speculate on the strategic positioning implied by the name *Special*

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Comix (*tebie manhua*, 特别漫画). That positioning, I argue, represents the *SC* editors' attempt to resist a fixed definition for these new, independent comics, and in turn resist incorporation into the historical legacy of *manhua* in the PRC.

A Brief History of *SC* Comics: Some Things You May not Want to Know but That We Really Want to Tell You

By Hu Xiaojiang

The Spark

The idea for the earliest volume of *SC* (*Street Comic* or *Secret Comic*), the book we now refer to as *SC1*, emerged in March 2004. *SC1* was the first comics collection in mainland China to fly the banner of underground comics. It was edited and self-published by Tang Yan (唐彦) with assistance from Zhang Xun (张迅). Its print run of 500 copies sold out. It had sixteen contributors. [...][1]

The promotional leaflet for *SC1* read: "China's non-mainstream comics: An exploration of new expressive forms (a full year in the making, from March 2003 to March 2004)." From this you can see that the long cycle between *SC* issues is nothing new, although this may gradually change with experience (Thank Heaven!).

That a forward-looking publication like *SC* could come out when it did was due in part to its editor, Tang Yan, who at the time had recently returned from overseas study, and in part to the gradual growth of freestyle drawing[2] by young people in China. Just back from Japan and having self-published his first book of illustrations, *Utopia on the Road* (途中理想国), Tang Yan got the notion of pulling together a collaborative project. The idea clicked with friends in China who liked

1 The contributor list, originally provided in the main text, is as follows: Wowo (窝窝; actual name: Jin Ningning金宁宁), Yan Cong, Xiao Zhen (小镇), Tao Chong (陶冲), Nie Jun (聂峻), Green, Zhong Ling (钟铃), Yang Chao (杨超), ONEICE (一冰), BEN, Storyof (Hu Xiaojiang), Shao Kun (邵琨), Xiao Yu (小鱼), Zhang Yaping (张亚平), DN (Tang Yan), and Zhang Xun. The technical specifications of *SC1* provided in the original Chinese essay have been omitted. Note that for some artists Hu's list of contributors includes both pen names and actual names, and are provided as such in this translation. Some pen names are originally in English or use the Latin alphabet instead of Chinese characters.

2 'Freestyle drawing' (*ziyou huahua*, 自由画画) here refers to improvisational, freeform art contributed to online drawing platforms.

making graffiti and comics but were tired of the banality of comics done in the Japanese manga style.

SC1 came about just as young people were beginning to link up to form drawing groups. What set these groups apart was a sense of openness, tolerance, and freedom, not to mention an abundance of enthusiasm and innocence. Young people who loved comics tended to trust one another unconditionally.

Another key figure deserves mention here: Green (绿; Hao Liang 郝亮). Green was the first in China to use the Internet to promote and share illustration and comics from Europe. In 2001, when the Internet was still mainly used for reading news or communicating with other people in China through BBS and chat rooms, Green had collected, and was selflessly sharing, a vast amount of material from foreign sources. In so doing, he opened new horizons for his online followers. The impact was exponential. The editors and contributors to *SC*, such as Tang Yan, Hu Xiaojiang, Yan Cong (烟囱), Zhang Xun, Xie Peng (谢鹏), and Ann Xiao (肖艳菲), have all acknowledged Green as an influence.

The so-called Green School (绿校) became an even more important partner in the making of the second volume of *SC*, because the Green School was where quite a few talented artists first appeared and were discovered by *SC*'s editors. Green School was a grassroots drawing collective, active primarily online, but which also organized annual 'offline' exhibitions. Green was one of its founders. At present, the activities of Green School are mainly hosted by 54boy (Wen Ling 温凌), Yan Cong, Xie Peng, and Daguoli (大果粒).

Writing Fear

Published two years after *SC1*, the second *SC* volume kept the name *Special Comic* as well as its abbreviation, *SC*, making it *SC2*. The name in Chinese, *tebie manhua*, refers to comics that are special in a way that resists definition. Apparently, the phrase 'special comic' sounds a bit off in English, but we are certain that Chinese readers know exactly what it means.

Work on *SC2* began in November 2006 and the book came out ten months later, in September 2007 (some have compared it to a term of pregnancy). The chief editors were Hu Xiaojiang, Tang Yan, and Zhang Xun, with Wu Ning (吴宁) as contributing editor. Tang Yan and Zhang Xun designed the cover art. There were forty-nine contributing artists, and the print run was 1000 copies.[3]

3 The names of the forty-nine contributors have not been included in this translation.

For *SC2* we asked all forty-nine artists to develop their work on a theme: fear (*kongju*, 恐惧). *SC2* is, then, a collected volume of fears. The book's promotional leaflet reads:

> It's all about fear. With fear as the theme, we aim to awaken a new spirit that can disrupt the humdrum lethargy of reading. The forty-nine artists taking up the challenge offer a comprehensive vision. Each tackles the theme on their own terms, some in fun, others in earnest, looking from the long or middle distance, moving in for close-ups, or taking a bird's-eye view. With dishes both spicy and sweet, it's a potluck reading feast for the meat lover and the vegetarian. Engaging and accessible, it appeals to thinking readers who love to reflect and to dream while also providing an outlet for creative energies and readerly needs that eschew mainstream tastes.

SC2 was as accidental as it was inevitable. With the help of friends, Tang Yan recovered the costs of self-publishing when he sold all the copies of *SC1* at the end of 2007. Meanwhile, interest in freestyle drawing by Chinese youth had reached a fever pitch thanks to two Internet hotspots, Graffiti Kingdom (涂鸦王国) and the Green School, where more and more enthusiasts were connecting with one another. Meanwhile, Tang Yan, Hu Xiaojiang, and Zhang Xun, who would often hang out together in Nanjing, got to thinking: could they build on all this activity to put out a second volume? The sales of *SC1* had given them confidence. They talked it over and made a bold decision. Unlike the open format of *SC1*, *SC2* would have a theme. Also unlike *SC1*, which had included both new and existing works, *SC2* would be made more cohesive and readable by having everyone submit a completely new and original comics narrative centered on the theme of fear.

Was this going to work? That was the question on everyone's mind. For *SC2*, the three editors solicited submissions independently. Some of the artists were already more or less familiar to the three of us, some known only by word of mouth, and others were total strangers. Would they get on board with the concept and draw something just for *SC*, even though they would not get paid for it? In the end, things went surprisingly well. Almost everyone invited to submit jumped at the chance, perhaps because a shared love of comics created trust even among people who had never met. Among the contributors were artists and designers well-known in China, overseas Chinese who were quite hard to reach, and a number of artists whom we had spotted on the Internet. The discerning eyes of the *SC* editors identified these 'newbies,' tracked them down, and invited them on board.

Due perhaps to the wish to make this 'potluck' as diverse as possible, the process of assembling *SC2* somehow kept getting longer and longer, and the book thicker and thicker. Another independent comics collection called *CULT 1* started

gathering material a few months later than *SC2* but still beat it to publication by several months.[4] Finally, in September 2007, we completed the long process of compiling *SC2* and held a book launch at a gallery run by Guiming (贵明) in Beijing's 798 Art District.[5] That afternoon, in a small, crowded gallery space, the destiny of *SC* became forever linked to art exhibitions. From then on you could find copies of *SC* at exhibitions both in China and abroad, something you would never see with products from the state-promoted mainstream comics industry. Could it be that this young comics collection, with shimmering stars on its holofoil cover and infinite dreams in its heart, had entered the world of high art?

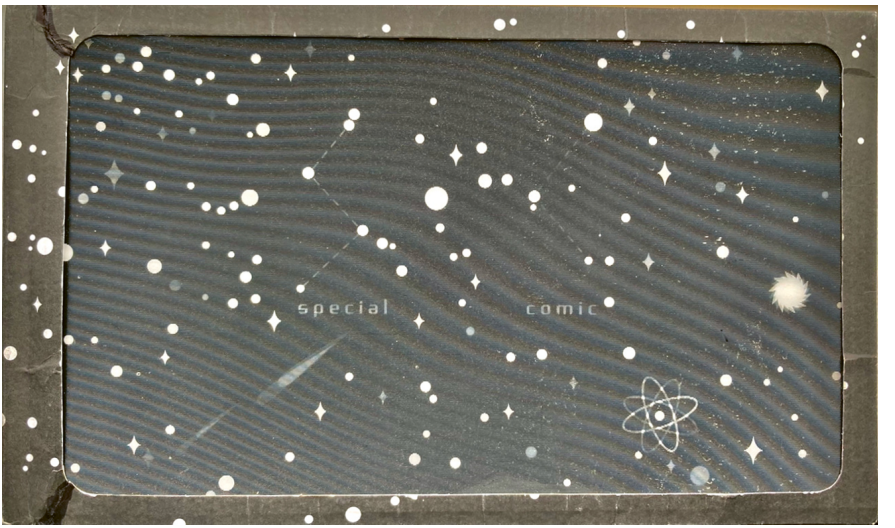

Figure 1: Front cover of *SC2*.

4 *CULT 1* refers to *Cult: Choice of Youth* (Cult 青年的选择) published in 2007 by the Beijing-based Cult Youth Production Committee comprising Chairman Ca (擦主席; Zhang Shihao 张诗浩), bini, Shuxue (数学), Shuang Qi (双麒), zizi, and Wang Yimian (王亦勉). The Committee produced two subsequent volumes, *Cult Choice of Youth 2* (2008) and *Cult Choice of Youth* 3 (2011). According to contributing artist Liu Zijie (刘子杰), the *Cult* series deliberately differentiated itself from the *SC* series by adopting a more visually unified and aggressively underground style (Liu Zijie, personal communication, June 13, 2017).

5 Guiming (Li Guiming 李贵明) was the proprietor of the Potential Gallery (潜·空间画廊), where the book launch took place.

Not exactly. Comics is a hybrid art with its own set of constraints and potentials. Done poorly, comics are a nondescript mess; done well they can break boundaries. Graphic novels, akin to movies in print, demonstrate the synthetic quality of comics. But as experimental comics, *SC* emphasizes diversity. Its readers will naturally have a range of tastes, so they had best come with an adventurous palate. As for fans of the stylistic tedium typical of commercial animation, they are hardly the kind of readers our comics would appeal to. To find an audience for *SC*, you have to go looking among lovers of literature and the arts.

In China, however, adults with broad and mature tastes are generally not in the habit of reading comics. How can comics reach this kind of audience? That was the biggest issue facing *SC*.

First, the comics must be of high quality. The main reason people don't read comics is, of course, that the comics are no good. This is why *SC2*, rather than limiting itself to people already making comics, boldly solicited work from a broad spectrum of young Chinese artists who had demonstrated creative potential. A lot of the artists in *SC2* had never even drawn a complete comic before. The results might seem a bit crude, but their expertise in illustration and design shines through. These edgy, sometimes difficult experimental works may not have the same appeal one would typically expect from comics, but their formal visual impact breaks away from stale conventions.

Second, you have to promote. Here it is worth noting that *SC2* invited four 'celebrities,' each with a different background, to write forewords: established independent comics artist Craig Au Yeung (欧阳应霁), scholar of aesthetics Zhou Xian (周宪), comics artist Zhu Xinjian (朱新建), and author Chen Cun (陈村). With a print run of just 1000 copies, the impact of *SC2* would be limited even if it sold out, so these forewords were meant to do more than just promote the book the way a typical foreword written by a big-name figure does. By demonstrating attention to this comics collection from different fields, they are there to make people think more deeply about the very concept of comics.

From Fear to the Future

The third *SC*, the one you are now holding in your hands, has had an official change of name: *Special Comix*. The abbreviation is still *SC*, which makes this *SC3*, the third volume of *Special Comix*.

Note that the last letter has been changed to 'x.' Not everyone will be familiar with the term 'comix.' It refers to comics oriented toward adult readers and published outside of official channels. But to confine comix to just those two meanings would be misleading. Rather, we use it to mark a difference from regular

comics, to indicate a special kind of comics whose distinctly heterogeneous nature departs from the mainstream and appeals to more mature tastes.

Work on *SC3* began in January 2008 under the theme 'the future.' Editing was completed in August 2009 and the book was launched in September. Twenty months in the making, it is an especially thick collection.



Figure 2: Front cover of *SC3*.

The chief editors of *SC3* are Hu Xiaojiang, Yan Cong, and Zhang Xun. Contributing editors are lilou (Lin Lijing 林莉菁), Xie Peng, and 54boy. Tang Yan did the visual editing, and UOH LAB created the logo and cover design. There were forty-five

contributors, the print run was 1500 copies, and the book is 640 pages in black and white.[6]

SC3 grew out of a long series of discussions over MSN Messenger. The editors would often stay up all night talking, researching, brainstorming, and re-envisioning the *SC* concept. They carefully considered all kinds of positionings and linkages to guide Chinese independent comics into uncharted territory. Passion drove us, but to keep *SC* alive and growing also required smart, informed management.

The long time spent in production was partly a result of the editors being busy with their day jobs, which inevitably slowed everything down. Another reason was the desire to develop comprehensive guidelines for an improved production process which could, we hoped, come in handy when editing future volumes of *SC*.

As with the previous two *SC*s, *SC3* invited submissions, but this time all initial submissions had to undergo editorial review. Only those that passed moved on to the second, and final, round of revision and resubmission. Throughout the process, each editor would provide specific feedback to the artists whose submissions they were handling. These added steps no doubt improved quality control for the book as a whole by enhancing editorial input, but they also asked a lot more of the editors by requiring a higher degree of professionalism. It was a brave experiment, and fortunately one which the contributors accepted with patience and understanding. Where *SC2*'s thematic focus on diverse interpretations of 'fear' brought polymorphic, if somewhat uneven, results, *SC3*'s focus on finding one's way into 'the future' made for a singularly engaging reading experience.

SC wants to make great comics, so form has to be supported by content. We chose the theme of 'the future' with this principle in mind. Going from 'fear' in *SC2* to 'future' in *SC3* changed the creative direction of *SC*: a transformation from the inside out intended to evolve the series. Talented artists unfamiliar with creating comics had worked through the notion of fear to liberate their inner feelings. Now they had to use their gradually acquired control of rhythm and craftsmanship to explore reality by depicting the encounter between their unique selves and the external world.

The results are plain to see in the contributions to this book. As we had expected, the comics in *SC3* look at life from many angles: from the Olympics, Spring Festival, college entrance exams, earthquakes, SARS, and avian flu, on down to travel, dreams, family life, and grappling with one's personal beliefs. The expanded subject matter shows how *SC3* has grown beyond *SC2* by shifting

6 The contributor names have not been included in this translation.

course away from *SC2*'s emphasis on private emotion and individual experience. One could almost call *SC3* a collection of realist comics that promises to reach out to even more readers by probing life itself.

We still attend to individual experience in the forms of dream, fantasy, sensation, and emotion, but these can only define the self through contact with the external world, which is why *SC* encourages its artists to rise above individual feeling and emotion. We believe that experimenting with realism can help talented artists find themselves, that they can discover ever more true and sincere paths of artistic creation in the conflict between the inner and outer worlds.

A lot of Chinese comics that copy the manga style even go so far as to imitate Japanese tastes and lifestyles, which is as idiotic as copying someone's name when plagiarizing an exam paper. This is a sham. Comics like these might be good enough for a dying industry, but beyond that, what readers really demand is something true to life, a quality that can only be found elsewhere. This is why we want to make comics that truly engage with China, comics that, by resonating with readers in ways that Japanese or European style comics cannot, put readers in touch with a pleasure that they can call their own.

The nearly fifty comics in this volume, gathered into eleven sections under the guiding theme of 'the future,' infiltrate multiple levels of reality, from lighthearted fabulist visions all the way to grand tales of 'China.' The China you will find in *SC3* is much more than just a name; it represents all the people and events around us that are worth recording and reflecting upon in all their savor and circumstance. And it represents the unique beauty of life, concealed behind the wreckage wrought by hyper-modernization, that today's China needs to rediscover, reconfigure, and reconstruct.

The promotional flyer for *SC3* reads: "The bite of social commentary, the grand scope of fiction, the fine detail of photography . . . So this is what comics can do!"

"So this is what comics can do!" These are the words that *SC* wants to hear from the lips of its readers. For all its lack of polish, *SC3* is a book meant to extend the realm of what is possible. The borders of comics stretch far beyond anything we can know. And that is the most exciting thing of all.

So let's read comics, let's recommend *SC* to more readers. To the future readers and artists of *SC*, thank you for your support and your help. May we grow together.

Afterword

The goal of this afterword is to take "Brief History" as a point of departure for thinking about how the comics it describes relate to the longer history of *manhua*, a Chinese term that encompasses both cartoons and comics. It would be easy enough to describe the kind of comics curated by the *SC* series, together with coeval publications like *Cult Youth*, as a 'new chapter' in the history of China's *manhua*. Indeed, Hu Xiaojiang suggests that *SC* comics emerged through a cause-and-effect process, a reaction against a 'mainstream' represented by the "banality of comics done in the Japanese manga style," which he derides as a 'sham' and 'idiotic.' Rejection of the immediate past is, of course, a familiar maneuver from countless artistic and literary manifestoes, and provides a compelling trope for narrating the historical development of many genres of art. One could certainly use that trope to write the story of early twenty-first century independent comics into the longer history of China's cartoon and comics history. "Brief History," however, suggests that we recognize not just these comics' difference from their immediate predecessors, but also how they resist being subsumed into China's longer legacy of *manhua* art. One way that Hu's "Brief History" does this, I argue, is by circumventing the historically freighted word *manhua* in a way that positions the *SC* series as host to an 'indefinite' art. To demonstrate how *SC* comics were, so to speak, undefined, I will first discuss the semantic ambiguity implied by the name *tebie manhua* attached to the series from *SC2* on. I then offer an overview of *manhua* from the 1920s through the 1990s to show the historical legacy of state-intervention in mainstream forms of *manhua*. That overview then brings us back to the emergence of independent *manhua* in China's early online communities around the turn of the twenty-first century, a milieu that, for a critical and formative span of time, provided an autonomous, unregulated space of creation and collaboration that the word *tebie* aimed to express.

As Hu Xiaojiang explains in "Brief History," from *SC2* onward the *SC* series called its contents not simply *manhua*, but *tebie manhua*. That phrase, Hu writes, refers to "comics that are special in a way that resists definition" (取义于特殊, 无法被定义的漫画), adding rather enigmatically that "Chinese readers will know exactly what it means." But what *does* it mean?

The prefix *tebie* implies not the possession of any specific identifiable quality, but rather the quality of being different from anything else. Thus described, these 'special' comics are marked as being, in their own way, unique. A neologism in both Chinese and English, *tebie manhua* also suggests a new category of *manhua*/comic, one that stands apart from both domestic and global comics traditions. And indeed, there is nothing specifically labeled *tebie manhua* in the history of comics in China. Nor, as far as I know, is there a genre or subgenre of 'special' in

comics communities anywhere in the world. The expression special/*tebie* also differs from standardized and globalized terms such as 'underground,' 'alternative,' 'non-mainstream,' and 'independent,' typically rendered in Chinese as *dixia* (地下), *linglei* (另类), *feizhuliu* (非主流), and *duli* (独立), respectively. "Brief History" does in fact use these labels to refer to *SC* comics, but only in passing. *SC* comics may identify with those designations, but are in their own right, *tebie*.

What, then, is achieved by inventing the name *tebie manhua*? In a practical sense, *tebie manhua* functions as a brand name for the *SC* series which, like the branding of any product, informs and guides audience reception. That branding was part and parcel of the promotional strategy, detailed in "Brief History": inviting intellectual 'celebrities' to write forewords for the *SC* volumes, holding book launches, and writing promotional flyers, not to mention the publication in *SC3* of "Brief History" itself, an essay aimed at educating readers about where this 'new expressive form' came from. At the same time, the deliberate ambiguity implied by the name *tebie manhua* also guided the creation of this art, though in a negative sense. That is to say, Hu's emphasis on 'resisting definition' and being 'distinctly heterogeneous' suggests the goal of keeping this new zone of artistic invention as open and inclusive as possible so that it can, over time, assume its own form, or forms, in a natural, semi-anarchic manner. The idea of being *tebie*, then, serves as a deliberate strategy on the part of Hu and the other editors of the *SC* series to create discursive space for an indefinite art whose foremost quality is that it 'resists definition.'

But what, then, does it mean to 'resist definition'? We can begin to answer that question by comparing Hu's description of *SC* comics with an actual dictionary definition dating from 1931, a time when the word *manhua* was a neologism itself, just coming into currency in the Chinese periodical press. Found in the Guanghua Bookstore *Dictionary of Literature and Arts*, the ambiguity of that definition resonates with the *SC* project. After providing two English-language glosses, 'sketch' and 'cartoon,' the dictionary describes *manhua* as "drawings without order or system" (没有秩序和体系的图画) (Gu and Qiu 1931, 347). This is, essentially, a non-definition that puts *manhua* beyond the pale of conventional genres and categories. The difference between this early non-definition and Hu Xiaojiang's idea of resisting definition is that the former was written before the pictorial art of *manhua* had an institutional memory in China. The word *manhua* had only come into fashion in 1926, when attached to Feng Zikai's (丰子恺) lyrical, neo-traditional, single-panel brush paintings (Barmé 1989, Crespi 2020, 4–6). The other significant use of *manhua* before 1931 was in the title of the weekly entertainment periodical *Shanghai Sketch* (*Shanghai Manhua*, 上海漫画) (1928–1930), where it referred not to cartoons or comics per se, but to a range of printed imag-

ery, that included satire and humor but extended as well into fashion, advertising and decorative art (Crespi 2020, 25–57).

Over the next twenty years or so, *manhua* grew into an increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan style of self-consciously modern popular art, but at the same time was gradually transformed by the political demands of responding to national crisis.[7] The latter process began in earnest during the 1930s as China faced increasing pressure from Japanese imperialist encroachment. A subsequent turn to 'national salvation *manhua*' peaked during the several years after Japan's invasion of China in 1937 with the formation of the military-sponsored National Salvation Manhua Propaganda Corps by Shanghai's leading *manhua* artists (Hung 1994, 93–97). By the end of the anti-Japanese war in 1945, and into the Civil War years of the late 1940s, *manhua* artists in a divided China continued to use their art, often in a sharply weaponized form, to critique social ills and satirize the misrule of the ruling Nationalist regime. The artists based in Shanghai and Hong Kong at this time were, in a sense, independent. They expressed their concern for the national plight without direct political ties to either Mao Zedong's Communists, dominant mainly in the rural north of China, or Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, who held power mainly in cities of China's south. In Shanghai, the center of China's publishing industry at the time, leading *manhua* artists found venues for their work in liberal-leaning media. There was, for instance, the Shanghai *L'Impartial* (大公报), where from 1947 to 1948 Zhang Leping (张乐平) offered social critique tempered with humor in his famous comic strip *The Wandering Life of Sanmao* (三毛流浪记). Also of note was the illustrated magazine *United Pictorial* (联合画报), which from 1946 to 1948 hosted *The Manhua Page* (漫画之页), a regular feature edited by Zhang Wenyuan (张文元) that eschewed humor in favor of biting social and political satire by artists such as Liao Bingxiong (廖冰兄), Han Shangyi (韩尚义), Tao Mouji (陶谋基), and Shen Tongheng (沈同衡). As Tao Mouji wrote in the 1 January 1947 New Year installment *of The Manhua Page* "*Manhua* —that is, normal *manhua*—must be a critique and a record of all that is ugly in politics and society. It must be consummately satirical, extremely forceful, and spiritedly abusive" (Tao 1947).

What Tao refers to as 'normal' *manhua* did in fact become the norm when the Chinese communists, having supplanted the Nationalist regime in 1949, established the People's Republic of China and began to shape cultural production under the guidance of party authorities. Purged of 'bourgeois' commercialism, the new regime amplified the role of *manhua* in the struggle against forces of im-

7 For a detailed study of this transformation of *manhua* art across the careers of several key figures during the 1930s, see Bevan (2016).

perialism and feudalism on the one hand, and as a medium for glorifying national heroes on the other. *Manhua* artists were instructed to attack internal and external enemies of China, praise the party, and educate the people, typically through state-guided mobilization campaigns aimed at heightening political consciousness or spurring industrial and agricultural production. Humor was allowed, as long as it was in some way politically constructive, but played a minor role. The political cooptation of the word *manhua* can be seen in the first lines of the foreword to the inaugural issue of the state-sponsored, flagship arts magazine *Manhua Monthly* (漫画月刊) in June 1950:

> Welcome to the first issue of *Manhua*. We have unhesitatingly chosen this simple, straightforward name for our magazine because the two characters in *Manhua* speak for themselves of this art's power, appeal, and rich history of combative spirit ("Foreword" 1950, 2).

Published from 1950 to 1960, from the Korean War through the Great Leap Forward, *Manhua Monthly* set the tone for 'combative' socialist *manhua* while also serving as the primary forum for China's leading *manhua* artists, from an elder generation that had come of age in the 1930s, to a younger generation that would carry the tradition of politically-sanctioned *manhua* into the post-Mao period. In fact, the two main *manhua* periodicals of the post-Mao reform period, *Satire and Humor* (讽刺与幽默 1979–), a supplement to Beijing's *People's Daily* (人民日报), and *The World of Cartoons* (漫画世界, 1985–1999), attached to Shanghai's *Xinmin Evening News* (新民晚报), were in many ways extensions of *Manhua Monthly* in terms of editorial personnel and state-sanctioned political messaging. Such was especially the case for *Satire and Humor*, whose chief editor Hua Junwu (华君武) had been a member of the editorial committee of *Manhua Monthly* starting in 1953.[8] At *The World of Cartoons*, the chief (but largely honorary) editor was the famous Shanghai-based artist Zhang Leping, who had been a frequent contributor to *Manhua Monthly* and member of its editorial committee until 1956.[9] Although *The World of Cartoons* deliberately distinguished itself from *Satire and Humor* by featuring more cosmopolitan, popularized material, both were official publications whose content had to remain within the ideological guardrails set by party authorities. The inaugural issue of *Satire and Humor*, for instance, opened with a poem declaring, "On the New Long March toward the Four Modernizations, / one

8 In *Manhua yuekan*, Hua Junwu's name is listed as an editorial committee member from issue 28 (1 March 1953) onward.

9 After Zhang Leping's death in 1992, the position of chief editor at *The World of Cartoons* was handed to Hua Junwu. The editorial committee of *The World of Cartoons* was largely populated by animation artists associated with the Shanghai Fine Arts Studio (上海美术电影制片厂), such as Te Wei (特伟), Zhan Tong (詹同), A Da (阿达), and Wang Shuchen (王树忱); see Du (1995).

needs satire, and one needs humor. / Such is our editorial purpose for this supplement. / It is no more than a tiny propaganda station along the New Long March" (*Satire and Humor* 1979, 1). As for *The World of Cartoons*, caricature of political figures was treated with extreme caution, purely comical *manhua* would not pass editorial scrutiny, and contributors were generally on the lookout for politically neutral material such as travel *manhua*.[10]

Where *Satire and Humor* and *The World of Cartoons* inherited the state-sponsored *manhua* tradition of China's socialist era, the comics of the 1990s that Hu Xiaojiang denounces in "Brief History" reflect a deepening of post-socialist reforms for how that decade's comics were engineered to capture not minds, but the market. When Hu mentions 'a dying industry,' he is referring to the flood of manga-style comics that had, with the direct support of the government's 5155 Project (5155 工程), inundated China's bookstalls in the mid- to late-1990s. Launched in 1995 by the Propaganda Department and the General Administration of Press and Publication, the 5155 Project aimed to nativize the Japanese *manga* style for a local Chinese audience and thus capitalize on the market for comics in the wake of a national crackdown on pirated Japanese manga in 1993–1994 (Chew and Chen 2010, 176–177). As can be seen in Figure 3, the Project's flagship publication, *Beijing Comic* (北京卡通), initiated in October 1995, promoted itself on the front cover as "a monthly magazine of 100% Chinese cartoon-*manhua* (*katong manhua*, 卡通漫画)". The expression 'cartoon-manhua' is an alternate term for *xinmanhua* (新漫画, 'new' manhua). *Xinmanhua* was described as a form of comics with 'Chinese characteristics' (*Zhongguo tese* 中国特色) "that differs from traditional serial picture-stories and satirical cartoons for its storytelling through the language of cinematic shots" (Deng 2003).

In "Brief History," Hu uses strong words, such as 'sham' and 'idiotic,' to describe *manga*-derived *xinmanhua*. It would be a mistake, however, to perceive this antipathy as a nationalistic impulse to free Chinese comics from some sort of Japanese hegemony. A closer look at the formation of the online communities that preceded the *SC* series does reveal a counter-hegemonic disposition, but of a different kind. Here again the names given to these new forms of *manhua* point toward an emphasis on making and maintaining an open, autonomous, and non-confrontational space of *manhua* creation. We can see the significance of such naming practices by turning to the predecessors to the *tebie manhua* series, specifically, the first *SC* volume and the early online platforms for posting and sharing art.

10 Zheng Xinyao (郑辛遥), personal communication, 23 May 2017.



Figure 3: Front cover from the inaugural issue of *Beijing Comic*, October 1995.

As "Brief History" relates, the *SC* abbreviation given to the first *SC* volume, self-published by Tang Yan in 2004, refers doubly to 'street comic' and 'secret comic.' In fact, as shown in Figure 4, the original title of the first *SC* volume, as printed on the title band across its front cover, was *SC2*, or more precisely SC^2, a formula meant to express the idea of "street comic x secret comic" (Hu Xiaojiang, 2022). In terms of form, the first *SC* was inspired by Japanese fanzines, or *dōjinshi* (同人

誌), that Tang Yan had encountered while studying in Japan.[11] The content, on the other hand, came from a creative community that formed online in the early days of the Internet in China. The two words 'street' and 'secret' imply several important features of that community. First, the use of English in the dual title points to the foreign comics influence, mediated by the digital technology of the Internet and, to a significant extent, by file-sharing from the key participant, Green. Second, the words 'street' and 'secret' point to the anti-institutional, self-styled clandestine character of three early online communities out of which independent comics grew: Sickbaby.org (暗地病孩子), *Graffiti Kingdom*, and the Green School.

The first of these three communities came together in 1998 at the *Sickbaby* site, a forum for underground youth culture and a resource for sharing digitized materials managed by its host, screen name Sickee. Sickbaby.org functioned as an online hangout for people around college age interested in youth culture beyond the mainstream.[12] The site included a message board as well as separate zones for literature, photography, freestyle illustration, music downloads, and information about Chinese punk bands. Each zone was titled in both English and Chinese using the prefix *andi* (暗地). The literature zone was thus called 'Underliterature' (*Andi wenxue*, 暗地文学), the punk band zone was called 'Undermusic' (*Andi yinyue*, 暗地音乐), and so on (Figure 5). The dictionary meaning of *andi* is 'secretly' or 'on the sly,' with the first character (*an*, 暗) meaning 'dark' or 'hidden,' and the second (*di*, 地), indicating grammatical function as an adverb. On the *Sickbaby* site, however, *andi* also transliterates the English word 'under.' In that semantic context, the same character *di* takes on the meaning of 'place,' 'location,' or 'ground' such that *andi* becomes an alternative translation and transliteration of 'underground,' more conventionally rendered as *dixia* (地下). At the same time, *andi* also intimates a 'hidden place.' The title of the freestyle drawing zone on Sickbaby.org takes this wordplay even farther. Set up sometime before April 2001, this section of the site is, in English, called 'Undercomix,' and in Chinese, *Andi goumei* (暗地够美).[13]

Goumei can be translated literally as 'really beautiful,' but like *andi* is also an inventive transliteration, in this case of 'comix.' *Andi goumei*, then, implies

11 On Tang Yan's time abroad, see Tang Yuting (2015) and the interviews with Tang Yan in part one of the four-part documentary film produced by Vice China, *Comics Without Borders:* "Wander in the Past: A Story of Chinese Comics That Began Twenty Years Ago" (Wang 2018).

12 For a personal account of the revelatory impact of Sickbaby, see Xiao (2009). The Sickbaby site indicates that it was launched in 1998.

13 The Internet archiving site Wayback Machine's earliest snapshot of the sickbaby.org 'undercomix' section is dated 4 April 2001.



Figure 4: Front cover of the first *SC* volume, *SC1*, with the "2" in the title indicating *SC*[2].

'hidden,' 'secret,' or 'underground' comix. The Undercomix/*Andi goumei* zone was a predecessor of the *SC* series in at least two ways: its participants and its online presentation. Regarding participants, between 2002 and 2004 *Andi goumei* accrued artists who later played important roles in the Green School collective, which in turn cultivated editors and contributors to the *SC* series. Among these are Green, namesake of the Green School; the female artist lanlan (兰兰; Liu Lanlan 刘兰兰), considered a co-founder of the Green School; Zhang Xun (screen name 'dodoby'), who co-edited *SC2* through *SC4*; Yan Cong (screen name 'dongdong'), a contributor to *SC1* through *SC5* and editor of volumes three through five, and; Hu Xiaojiang (screen name 'storyof'), author of "Brief History," contributor to all *SC* volumes, and co-editor of *SC*2 through *SC5*. Also, starting in 2002, "Undercomix" hosted two online exhibitions of freestyle art, hosted by Green, one



Figure 5: Entry page for the website Sickbaby.org.

of which featured all female artists.[14] As curations of participant art, these two exhibitions prefigured a series of gallery exhibitions held by the Green School collective starting in 2006 as well as the *SC* series itself, which in effect exhibits and distributed independent *manhua* through the medium of print.

As for the second 'SC' in the title of the first *SC* volume, 'street comics,' the reference is to street art in the form of graffiti (*tuya*, 涂鸦). In the years preceding the first *SC* in 2005, the concept of graffiti as online art developed initially on *Sickbaby* as well as on the professionally managed online social networking site *Graf-*

14 The earliest online exhibition saved by the Wayback Machine Internet Archive is from June 2002. See *Sickbaby*, "作品展之一" [Exhibition One], archived 6 June 2002, at the *Wayback Machine*, https://web.archive.org/web/20020614022122/http://www.sickbaby.org/cartooon/zuopinzhan/andi1.htm (publ. 6 June 2002, acc. 4 January 2023).

fiti Kingdom, launched in 2003 at the URL poobbs.com. On sickbaby.org, graffiti was a frequent topic of online discussion where, according to *SC* editor Zhang Xun, it appealed to participants because it represented a "marginal, slightly dangerous, casual but declarative form that intersected broadly with *manhua*" while also expressing a "sense of extroverted recklessness" that set it apart from the mainstream Japanese manga style and allowed for a level of rebellious self-expression (Zhang Xun 2023). In contrast to sickbaby.org, which had zones for various forms of art and literature, *Graffiti Kingdom* was a professionally managed online drawing BBS platform, or *oekaki* (お絵かき; 网络涂鸦), divided into zones for different drawing styles. Not long after *Graffiti Kingdom* was set up in 2003, members of *Sickbaby* could be found there as well, congregating mainly in the Freestyle (*ziyoushi*, 自由式) zone. Labeled on the site's main page as "a place to abandon the rules, to be free, to be oneself, to think," the Freestyle zone became another site of networking for future contributors to the *SC* series, as Hu mentions in "Brief History."[15]

The emphasis on autonomous creation characterizing *Sickbaby* and *Graffiti Kingdom* also motivated the activities of the other source for *SC* contributors that Hu mentions, the Green School. The Green School was not a formal, institutionalized school, but a loosely organized collective of Beijing-based artists named after Green, the screen ID of Hao Liang, a shadowy, charismatic figure who initially gained followers on *Sickbaby* by sharing foreign comics art.[16] The web presence of the Green School centered on the site lvxiao.blogbus.com, launched in November 2005, with affiliated artists having their own sites on blogbus.com and other hosting services. What set the Green School apart from *Sickbaby* and *Graffiti Kingdom* was that it also engaged in 'offline' activities, including two exhibitions at Beijing's 798 Art District in 2006, which foreshadowed the 2007 book release of *SC2*, also at 798.[17] The Green School's mission was in part to create an

15 This description of the Freestyle Zone can be found on the 13 October 2004 archived main page of the *Graffiti Kingdom* site https://web.archive.org/web/20041013001132/http://poobbs.com/Colorkin/poobbs.asp. *Graffiti Kingdom* was where Yan Cong discovered the Green School as a college sophomore during the SARS epidemic in 2003 (Qishui 2007). *SC* contributors active on *Graffiti Kingdom* include Zuoma (左马), Yan Cong, Liu Zijie, Wowo, bini, Noise, 54boy, and oneice.

16 By one account, the name Green School was devised to give its founding members—54boy, Green, lanlan, and Breath (周寅)—the nominal institutional legitimacy they needed to register for the 2003 annual *Beijing Comics* conference. A 2007 timeline for the Green School dates its founding to 2002; see Qishui (2007).

17 For a timeline of Green School exhibitions and other activities from 2002 to 2007, see liguiming (2007). The book launch for *SC2* was held on September 1, 2007 at Beijing 798 Art District's Potential Gallery, immediately after the Green School Five-Year Anniversary Exhibition had been held there (*Art China* 2007).

alternative to the Japanese-style manga on China's commercial market, but more importantly, to establish an open and autonomous community of non-professional artistic creation free from the professionalized authority governing established institutions of art. As stated in the "Background Information" to the second Green School exhibition, held in December 2006:

> The Green School . . . is an autonomous grassroots youth arts association based on the Internet. Although members of the Green School love art, as a majority they insist on creating as amateurs. It is precisely their amateurism that allows them to maintain a more autonomous, more genuine creative attitude relative to professional artists. For them, the Internet provides not just a place to come together, but more importantly, makes itself available as a diverse and open world of communication. (Qishui 2007)

In January 2010, while living rent free in a rundown factory dormitory on the outskirts of Shanghai, the editors of *SC3* received the news that their book had won the Alternative Comics Award at the Angoulême International Comics Festival (Zhang 2010, 416). The following year, in 2011, several *SC3* editors and contributors were invited to serve as judges for the Alternative Comics Award, and in 2012 a group of SC artists participated in the Planète Manga exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris. Participation in the international comics scene also prompted changes in the format of the later SC volumes. Whereas the text in *SC2* was all Chinese, *SC3* and *SC4* (2010) introduced translations of the comics texts at the bottom of the page, and *SC5* (2012) did away with the necessity of translation by soliciting wordless or 'silent comics.' One might conclude that the recognition brought by the prestigious award at Angoulême meant that China's independent *manhua* had 'come out' both on the global stage and in China, implying that this was no longer a 'secret' art. By and large, however, the response among independent *manhua* artists within China was to keep doing what they had been doing all along: maintaining their personal networks of fellow artists, sharing ideas, encouraging emergent artists, self-publishing their work on a minuscule scale and allowing plenty of room for each individual's vision to come forth and develop. If anything, the making of independent *manhua* is even more decentered now than when the *SC* series were being produced.

Not long after *SC3* won the award, in an interview with the mainstream contemporary arts promotion platform 99 Art, Hu Xiaojiang was asked: "How do you view your own free creation? Do you identify with the notion of 'working hard for your ideals'? What do you think when people say that you, individually or together with others, are 'moving bravely ahead for the cause of XX in China'?" In reply, Hu declared,

> There is no such identification. Where many people think we are 'persevering,' in fact there is nothing to persevere for. This is simply our choice. The notion of 'ideals' has been ruined by primary school education, so why even mention the word? This kind of talk about 'for the cause of XX in China' is, in my view, a misapprehension that has to be tolerated. China likes to attribute individual efforts to the collective, but in fact the motivation behind our creation and promotion comes primarily from our own beliefs and preferences" (Yuan Tingxuan 2010).

Hu's response speaks to the decentered nature of independent *manhua*, a quality that defines it as an indefinite art. It also, I believe, speaks to the difference between the undefined quality of *manhua* in 1931 and the indefinite quality of *manhua* in the twenty-first century. For where the former preceded the absorption of *manhua* into the narrative of China's cause, the latter's latent awareness of the past ninety years of *manhua* history makes for an implicit but nonetheless stubborn refusal to play by any rules but one's own.

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Chapter 3
Naked Bodies: Acceptability and Legibility in Chinese Art Comics

Abstract: In this chapter, two new concepts are introduced for coming to terms with the case of *Naked Body*, an anthology art comic published in China in the mid-2010s, and in English translation shortly thereafter. The first, acceptability, refers to the fact that the editors of the anthology stipulated that all contributions must feature a nude protagonist, a condition that was intended to challenge (however indirectly) regulations prohibiting the publication of sexually explicit, and otherwise 'adult' cartoons. Legibility, the second term, points to the particular utility of art comics for the transgression of such boundaries, given that when a narrative is less 'legible' to readers (and, similarly, censors) it is far less likely to be accused of being pornographic. Drawing on the work of scholars in both comic studies and Chinese studies, I place *Naked Body* within the context of the long-running tension between art and craft in the former, and modernity and sexuality in the latter. Individual comics are highlighted, finally, to demonstrate the myriad ways that their authors use self-exposure as a tool of self-fashioning, foregrounding questions of taste and aspiration, desire and ambition in an age of digital voyeurism and ongoing artistic experimentation through the comics medium.

How do publishers of cartoons and comics justify pushing the boundaries of acceptability in a medium considered by many – particularly in China – to be targeted at an audience of young children? To show the enduring nature of this question in the context of modern China, in this chapter I will look at two examples: one, very briefly, from the Republic of China (ROC) in the third decade of the twentieth century, and one, more substantially, from the People's Republic of China (PRC) nearly a century later, published in the second decade of the twenty-first. The former occurred in the fall of 1928, and concerned the editors of *Shanghai Sketch* (上海漫画), the flagship publication of a loose association of cartoonists and photographers looking to earn extra money apart from their day jobs as commercial illustrators. Rather unexpectedly, only one year into their venture, they found themselves the subject of an obscenity trial in the Provisional Court of the International Settlement. The trial would provide at least one answer to the question of censorship: to demonstrate that the sexually explicit images in question were, in fact, photographs taken by an anthropologist and therefore provided 'educational value' for readers wanting to see the world. Following a brief discus-

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sion of the obscenity trial and what it can tell us – even today – about the potential perils of publishing (and prohibiting) pornographic pictorials, I will turn to the example of an anthology of experimental comics published in Beijing in 2014 to point to a second, complimentary strategy: namely, using largely 'illegible' imagery and narratives to reframe comics as highbrow art, rather than popular entertainment.

The German Exception

Shanghai Sketch was launched in January 1928, just two years after the Shanghai *Manhua* Society (上海漫画会) had come together in December 1926 to share their love of cartooning (Stember 2016, 45–51). To help fill out their first ten issues, in addition to satirical cartoons, light-hearted essays, and a large number of hand-drawn advertisements, the editors of the magazine had included a recurring series of nude photographs titled "A Visual Comparison of the Human Form Around the World" (世界人体之比较图像).[1] Taken from a reference work published in German, the photographs participated in what Tamara L. Hunt (2002, 1–14) has called 'the colonial gaze' – a gendered way of looking at the world which accompanied the rapid spread of photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, making the foreign 'legible' to an audience of curious, mostly male readers. Just as important, considered within the context of pictorial magazines like *Shanghai Sketch*, meanwhile, was the invention of the new printing technology of photolithography which allowed those images to be duplicated with almost perfect fidelity.

When it was finally brought before the Mixed Court (dually presided over by a Chinese judge sitting alongside a consular representative from the relevant embassy), the case was decided in favor of the defendants. According to the then editor of the magazine, Ye Qianyu (叶浅予), their defense largely rested on the fact that not only the images, but also the text accompanying the photographs was taken from the original reference work. When the case was appealed by the Shanghai Municipal Police, the judge and consular representative again found in favor of the defendants, definitively expanding the range of the 'acceptable' for publishers, allowing them to justify potentially transgressive publications in terms of educational value. Further, although the trial seems to have divided the society, leading some of the older members to distance themselves from the

1 Background on the photo series can be found in Stember (2016, 58 f. 130) and Ye (1992, 63, 67–68).

group, Ye would later joke that the resulting publicity helped bring new readers to the magazine.

In short, what we might call the 'German exception' from this colorful incident provides an early example of the complicated negotiations at the heart of transnational cartooning, between acceptability on the one hand and legibility on the other. While the 'unacceptability' of lewd images (to at least certain audiences) is perhaps obvious, their 'illegibility' may be less clear. What I am referring to here is the degree to which the average reader might hope to understand the intent behind the inclusion of nude photographs in a publication like *Shanghai Sketch*, taking the images at face value. Absent other information from the editors, one would assume that the intent was to titillate. As it turns out, however, it was the very unoriginality of the seemingly 'obscene' images which provided Ye and his collaborators with the perfect defense. Tracing them back to a reference work made these images legible to the court, not as pornography, but rather as a kind of anthropological documentation. A similar case would implicitly be made for violent imagery (both cartoons and photographs) published during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), insofar as those images provided a 'true' account of atrocities committed by the enemy, and therefore helped mobilize the masses to take up arms. But how then might Ye's lawyer have mounted a defense of the *artwork* published in the magazine? After all, as Ellen Johnston Laing (2010) observes, the eye-catching 'artistic' female and male nudes which graced countless covers of both *Shanghai Sketch* and its successor publication, *Modern Sketch* (时代漫画), are much more well-known today than the nude photographs which inspired the obscenity trial.

While we can only speculate as to a hypothetical legal defense for the erotic art which graced the pages of *Shanghai Sketch*, the intense regulatory environment of the PRC today provides a strikingly similar test case, in the form of the 2014 art comics anthology *Naked Body*, edited by the cartoonists Yan Cong and Zuo Ma (see Figure 1, left). From looking more closely at this rather more recent example of sexually explicit Chinese cartooning, we shall see that legibility serves a second important function in relation to acceptability: in the case of works where the educational or moral value is less clear, it is works that are *less* rather than more legible which stand the greatest chance of being accepted as 'art' instead of being dismissed as pornography. Here, I take inspiration from the formulation of United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who found himself seeking to provide a definition of hard-core pornography in a case contesting a public screening of Louis Malle's sexually explicit 1958 film *The Lovers* (*Les Amants*). As Justice Stewart infamously opined, "I know it [hard-core pornography] when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that." (Gewirtz 1995). This would lead Stewart to ultimately conclude that trying to de-

fine pornography is an exercise in "trying to define what may be indefinable." As the manifest arbitrariness of Stewart's criteria suggests, and as making 'illegible art' can provide a strategy for evading censorship that is every bit as effective as making one's art 'legible' to the censors, as in the case of *Shanghai Sketch*. Whether in the PRC today or in the International Settlement of the ROC in the 1920s, as we shall see, illegible (or less legible) art provides an effective strategy for winning recognition and evading censorship in the field of comics, a cultural product that is more typically considered (particularly within China today) to be produced for an audience of younger and more impressionable readers.

Knowing It When You See It

Like *Shanghai Sketch* before it, *Naked Body* was the product of controversy. Editors Yan Cong and Zuo Ma had come up with the idea when the 10th issue of their underground comics anthology series, *Narrative Addiction* (叙事癖), was rejected by the printers for including nudity (Yan Cong 2020). In response, they decided to put out a call for a new anthology, titled *Naked Body*, in which the protagonist must only be nude – any exceptions would be subject to a summary rejection by the editors. Additionally, it was stipulated that submissions should be five pages long and in full color. The resulting anthology included twenty-five short stories by a mix of both established and amateur comics creators – very much like the cartoonists who contributed to *Shanghai Sketch* in this regard. While many of the stories contained within include either explicit depictions of sexual intercourse or allusive references to the same, these stories by no means make up the majority. Instead, if there is a unifying theme to the collection, it is in the dream-like quality of the stories, which largely (but again, not entirely) lack a clear narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end, despite operating in what can generally understood to be a 'realist' mode. This realism – the stories seem to take place in the 'real' world of the present – is offset not only by the absence of linear narrative, but more fundamentally perhaps by the 'cartoon-like' style of the art.[2]

Like Ye Qianyu before them, therefore, Yan Cong and Zuo Ma were facing both censorship and opprobrium, and like Ye, they too found a strange pull toward not only the artistic and the nude as a response to these conditions, but also the cartoon. In this regard, the comics in *Naked Body* can be seen to belong quite

2 By 'cartoon-like' I am referring here to the use of simplified geometric forms to represent characters in comic strips and animated films. For a discussion of the cartoon as the dominant artistic style in comics, see chapter 2 of McCloud [1993] 1994, 24–59.



Figure 1: (Left) cover of the original Chinese-language edition of *Naked Body*; (right) cover of the English-language edition, featuring an illustration by Yan Cong.

clearly within the tradition of art comics as described by Molotiu and Beaty. And like *Shanghai Sketch* before it, *Naked Body* was inherently transcultural, including English 'subtitles,' credited to SARSSRAS. *Naked Body* was not unique in this regard, with the other issues of *Narrative Addiction* also including subtitles – as indeed did *SC Comix*, discussed by John Crespi in Chapter 2. This detail suggests the transnational aims of the group's organizers, who further framed their work within the context of the global underground comics movement. Yan Cong, for instance, has cited the influence of the avant-garde German artist Anke Feuchtenberger, whereas Zuo Ma has gone on to have his work published by *Drawn and Quarterly* (Yan Cong 2020, Zuo Ma 2021). Five years later, *Naked Body* would arrive in North America, when eighteen of the stories were published in English translation by the Brooklyn-based press Paradise Systems in 2019.

The significance of *Naked Body* goes beyond the question of challenging censorship or hierarchies of cultural consumption, however. Rather, this anthology both demonstrates and deconstructs the complex interplay of shame and lightheartedness that is arguably central to the comics medium. In China, as elsewhere, there is a longstanding association of comics with both intellectual immaturity and masculine insecurity. Drawing on Nina Baym's critique of male literary

modernism as having defined itself in opposition to a female mass culture, Daniel Worden notes that a similarly 'gendered aesthetics' can be seen to be at play in the canon of the American alternative comics from the late 1980s through the early 2000s (Baym 1981, Worden 2006). To support his claim, Worden considers issue 13 of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, published in 2004 and edited by Chris Ware, featuring the work of Joe Matt, Daniel Clowes, Lynda Barry, and Charles Burns, among other leading underground comics artists. As Worden observes, in many of the selections, "repetitions of shame and melancholy produce a queer temporality, where even heterosexuals must struggle to form friendships, cultivate social connections, and have sex" (Worden 2006, 913). Not all of the contributions to *Naked Body* manage to escape this trap of 'male melancholy,' as Worden refers to it – indeed, on the cover of the English language edition (see Figure 1, right), which is taken from Yan Cong's contribution, the cartoonist depicts his avatar masturbating to pornography before crying in the shower.

More broadly, though, *Naked Body* is concerned with the 'pornographic' and 'cartoon' post-modernities that have characterized the emerging form of contemporary art comics over the past two decades. If shame represents a form of soft censorship, then contemporary comics artists, both in China and elsewhere, are less stereotypically male and heterosexual than their predecessors, and their art is also less stereotypically 'cartoon-like,' employing a variety of techniques, styles, and media. (Yan Cong, for instance, has become known for using oil paints to 'draw' his comics, which nonetheless retain their cartoon aesthetic). Perhaps uncoincidentally, they also seem to be considerably less likely to be ashamed of their own work. In this regard, the artists who contributed to *Naked Body* could be said to have far more in common with Ye Qianyu and his peers, who produced comics not in self-mocking homage to their childhood idols (as with American underground cartooning from its inception in the 1970s up through to the present day) but rather as an inherently internationalist and forward-looking political gesture. Cartoonists of the 1920s, in comparison, saw their work in terms of a global cartooning movement which repurposed the tools of mass printing to the ends of romantic mass mobilization rather than ironic self-expression. In this regard, they share a common cause (if not common politics) with cartoonists in the 2020s, who are increasingly concerned with championing queer sexualities and calling out racial and economic injustice.

Cartoon (Post-)Modernity and the Art Comic

As I suggest in my opening juxtaposition of the *Shanghai Sketch* obscenity trial with the *Naked Body* anthology published nearly a century later, in its playful illegibility and direct challenge to acceptability, the 'cartoon modernity' of early twentieth century China (Bevan 2015, Crespi 2020) provides an example of what is known today as 'experimental' or 'art comics.' To coin a term of my own, therefore, we might describe the cartoons in *Naked Body* as belonging to 'cartoon postmodernity.' These are comics which, according to art historian Andrei Molotiu's definition, are "created with sensibilities related to, or in full awareness of contemporary developments in, the art world" (Molotiu 2017, 119). The critic Douglas Wolk, meanwhile, has used the term 'art comics' in a more capacitive and relative sense, using it to describe comics published outside of the mainstream (in the United States) of superhero comics, and gesturing toward something closer in its sense to literary comics (Wolk 2007). In this regard, narratologist Barbara Postema's more neutral term 'experimental comics' might be more apposite, with Postema defining such works as seeking to "find new ways to create expression, and in the process test the conventions and boundaries of comics" (Postema 2022, 101). As this definition highlights, timing is central to the concept of art comics, insofar as what is experimental and boundary-pushing today might not be seen as equally transgressive tomorrow.

Further, Postema notes, "the experimentation can be applied in the visual style, formal elements, narration, or material and format" (2022, 101). In this explication, Postema spells out some of the expectations of the art world referred to by Molotiu while avoiding the more loaded associations of the term 'art' (as suggested by Wolk's usage) as an elite tradition of cultivated taste. This relates much better to the Chinese context, in which comics experienced a golden age during the socialist period, being used to communicate political messages and re-tell the foundational myths of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Seifert 2008, Stember 2023). Ironically, however, the contrast of 'art' with 'craft' – with comics generally having been seen to belong to the latter category – was if anything *more* prevalent within socialist China than it was within the capitalist West over the second half of the twentieth century, with the crafts of the people being elevated above the art of the experts for the duration of the Mao era (1949–1976). With the economic and political reforms that followed the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, meanwhile, the tables were turned once again, with the products of individual artistic expression and skill being valued over works of collective creativity and mass productivity.

The association of comics with craft is perhaps unsurprising, given that the concept of craft first emerged in response to the industrial revolution, which re-

placed the individual craftsman with drastically cheaper mechanical means of mass production. As is often observed, in contrast with the fame attached to single-authored comic strips, many comic books came to be produced in an assembly-line like process, with individual pencillers, inkers, letterers, etc. being treated as largely interchangeable. While the so-called 'Marvel method' was a particular phenomenon of the American comic book industry, a similar pattern can be observed with *lianhuanhua* (连环画, 'linked drawings'), the longer form narrative comics which were first published under this name in the 1920s and were therefore contemporaneous with appearance of *Shanghai Sketch* (Shen 2001). As with comic books elsewhere, however, by the late 1970s, a fan culture had developed among cognoscenti and collectors which prized the work of certain artists and writers over others – often by pointing to the depiction of the human form, the dynamic poses, the satisfying plots, or the awareness of deep lore about the characters and their world (Stember 2023).

This defiant self-definition of comics as being an art form defined by the technical skills of its practitioners and the connoisseurship of its audience can perhaps best be seen in a debate that erupted on the letters page of *The Comics Journal* in the mid-1990s. In a letter published in the August 1996 issue of the journal, then up-and-coming cartoonist James Kochalka declared that "Craft is the enemy!" (Editors 2013). Kochalka's intention seems to have been to encourage would-be cartoonists to spend less time worrying about the quality of their drawings and more time making comics with the skills they already possessed. The responses he received from established cartoonists and their fans, however, were overwhelmingly critical, with many accusing him of trying to make up for his own lack of artistic skill with an act of intentionally provocative, blatant self-promotion. For his part, Yan Cong, one of the editors of *Naked Body*, has discussed the initial inspiration he received from the work of the German artist Anke Feuchtenberger (who he describes as a *manhuajia*, or 'comics artist'), which he describes as owing to her relatively unpolished art and loose, dream-like storytelling (for more on Feuchtenberger, see Nijdam 2017). As Yan Cong explains in a 2020 talk delivered to Yixi, discussing his reaction to a story included in Feuchtenberger's 1998 collection *Somnambule*, "There was no plot, and no dialog. There was just the interactions between the characters and their environment. That was enough for a comic" (Yan Cong 2020). This was in contrast to Japanese manga, which he found both difficult to mimic successfully on a technical level, and also stylistically less suited to the kinds of stories he wanted to tell. "When I was little, these were the kinds of comics I grew up reading," gesturing to a panel from Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball Z*. "But if you want to draw comics like this one, you need to first make a draft in pencil, then use a nib to ink the line art. After that, you need to apply halftones. I tried drawing this way, but no matter

how I tried, I couldn't do it. [. . .] The other thing is the way that stories are told in Japanese manga is usually very exaggerated and melodramatic. My life, though – I don't think it's so crazy, or so funny, either" (Yan Cong 2020).

The tension between 'high' art and 'low' craft in comics is longstanding. In the case of the so-called underground or independent American cartoonists like Kochalka, the working out of these anxieties can be traced on the one hand to so-called 'underground' cartoonists like Gary Panter and Art Spiegelman, whose work was collected in alternative anthologies like *RAW*; and on the other to the adult orientated, long-form work of cartoonists like Will Eisner and Frank Miller, which came to be marketed (albeit not uncontroversially, see Williams 2022, 2–7) as 'graphic novels.' Whereas all of these comics creators can be said to have been concerned in their own ways with craft (indeed, the artistic qualities of their work formed an inherent part of their claim on the attention of mature readers), Kochalka and his peers would take the graphic novel one step further, rejecting (at least rhetorically) all formal constraints on their work, and focusing instead on the more nebulous criterion of 'self-expression.' In employing the term 'art comics', Molotiu, too, is writing in response to this sea change in artistic standards, drawing an explicit contrast with the literary aspirations of the graphic novelists. Accordingly, he cites examples of cartoonists engaging with (and in) the world of high art from the early twentieth century up through to the present day, creating what we might think of as a revisionist history of cartooning. Some of these creators, Molotiu notes, have rejected narrative and representative art altogether, preferring to work instead with abstract forms and nonlinear storytelling – a tradition which Postema refers to as the 'abstract comics' subgenre of experimental comics.

Drawing on key examples of European art comics from the 1990s up through the early 2000s, Bart Beaty, meanwhile, has gone even further to suggest that "the evolution from a criterion of value with its basis in the novel to one rooted in the artist's book is the most significant shift in the orientation of the comics field in the past century" (Beaty 2006, 7). For Beaty, this shift can be understood in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of the cultural field being made up of, on the one hand, works of high and low cultural consecration, and on the other, works that tend toward either autonomy or heteronomy in relation to the marketplace (Bourdieu 1993). Whereas fine artists create works that are both highly consecrated and highly autonomous, cartoonists have traditionally been treated as producers of works with the opposite valences: lowly consecrated, and highly heteronomous. The emergence of art comics – just as much as the emergence of avant-garde cartoon associations and magazines in Shanghai in the mid-1920s and early 1930s – therefore, represents a direct challenge to the previous conceptualization of comics, as creators have sought to be recognized as independent

creative artists, rather than as manufacturers of mass-produced entertainment. That recognition, however, is hard-won in a field such as comics, given that comics highlighting sex and violence are generally not assumed to be doing so for the sake of challenging the sensitivities of readers (as would be the case in avant-garde art) but rather seeking to appeal to the lowest common denominator of children, and adults with less 'educated' tastes.

On the other hand, if sex and violence in cartoons and comics are re-contextualized as personal expression or thinly veiled social commentary, then (as in film) audiences (and critics) generally prove more open to the possibility that the intent of the creators was to appeal to older, and more mature readers. In the most extreme examples of cartoonists pursuing this strategy, the semantic content of their work becomes almost entirely illegible, reduced to, as Postema describes it, drawing on Molotiu, "a sense of reading momentum [which] is engendered by shifts in direction, texture, or tone of the art across sequences of panels, creating sequential dynamism" (2022, 3). Even in the case of cartoonists who do not take the illegibility of their work so far (for example, in the case of ostensibly narrative autobiographical cartoons) the disjuncture created by the representation of the internal world of perception and thought through the frame of external depiction provides an effective means of signposting artistic and literary aims, rather than commercial ones. The heteronomy of the work, in other words, becomes embedded in the form the work takes, far surpassing the importance of any explicit paratextual framing that can be provided by the artist or their publisher.

Portrait of the (Nude) Artist

Drawing on a crowd-funded Kickstarter campaign that raised 16,648 USD from 443 backers in just 60 days, Paradise Systems was able to collect more than double the funds initially budgeted to cover the costs of publication, which included asking the artists to re-letter the speech bubbles and other textual details using a translation supplied by the editor of the anthology, Orion R. Martin, and his co-translator, Joey Schwartzman (Martin 2019b). In the introduction to this edition, Martin takes a somewhat different approach to framing the stories, observing that, "Every comics community is shaped by the cultural, political, and economic environment in which the cartoonists publish their work." (2019a, 1) What this suggests is that, even if the aims of Yan Cong and Zuo Ma (and their collaborators) are global, the constraints on their work are local. For Martin, the most salient constraints in the case of China in the 2010s were economic, stemming from the

overall political and cultural environment. As he notes, "The independent publishing of books was, as it remains today, illegal, meaning that major commercial channels were closed to independent publishers" (2019a, 1). What this framing suggests perhaps most immediately is that, for readers of *Naked Body* in English, the political repression of cartoonists – and moreover, their resulting economic deprivation – provides not only necessary contextualization but also an important 'selling point' for the collection.

As a case study of contemporary Sinophone art comics, *Naked Body* is interesting in at least three ways: first, in its foregrounding of the artists as creators, both through editorial framing and through the formal presentation and content of the stories themselves, which together show a clear influence from the underground (i.e., independent) comics (or 'comix'). Since their emergence in North America in the 1970s, underground comics have been dominated by the confessional format of the so-called 'autobio' comic.[3] Even accounting for the more recent turn towards more experimental art comics, for which the contributions to *Naked Body* provide ample evidence, the exposure of the self remains an important factor in the 'self-fashioning' of the indie cartoonist. Secondly, *Naked Body* demonstrates the continued relevance of what Yvon Wang (2021, 11–15) has referred to in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as "Chinese pornographic modernity." By this, Wang is pointing to the fact that pornography, and arguments around it, are central to debates over the relative modernity of China vis a vis Europe and the United States at this time. In this sense, we could say that *Naked Body* provides an example of what we might call pornographic 'post-modernity,' insofar as the maturity of the subject matter coveys a moral and artistic seriousness that is perceived as lacking in more sanitized works intended for a general audience (on the absence of depictions of sexual intercourse on Chinese television, see Brown et al. 2012). Related to this, *Naked Body* is notable for the centering of queer sexuality, with several stories featuring same-sex couples. In the final section, I will focus on one of these stories, titled *Naked* (in both the Chinese and English versions) by Xin Zhouzheng (信舟政, credited as Tianxing Wan without Chinese characters in the English translation), which explicitly draws on the Japanese tradition of boys' love (BL) manga. As I will argue, in this final detail, *Naked Body* gestures towards a heterotropic space

3 To better capture the autobiographical nature of many 'graphic novels,' Hillary Chute suggests 'graphic narrative' as alternative, noting that, "the force and value of graphic narrative's intervention, on the whole, attaches to how it pushes on conceptions of the unrepresentable" and that "graphic narrative asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent" (Chute 2010, 2).

in which art comics do not 'come' from anywhere specific, but in which they 'emerge' from a wide range of discourses and traditions.

One of the more curious details of *Naked Body* is the decision to omit a table of contents. Instead, the artists are listed in the order their works appear in the back of the book, with thumbnail images of the work alongside their names in English and Chinese, their geographic locations (except for two contributors), and their usernames on social media. The titles of individual works, meanwhile, are included within the comics themselves for eleven of the stories and left untitled in seven of the stories. Echoing this focus on creators rather than works, many of the stories feature what appear to be the artists themselves as protagonists, with first-person narration. For instance, in the already discussed cover story to the English edition by co-editor Yan Cong, the (nude) artist is shown downloading pornography on his computer. He notes that, "I haven't made any new work in three months, and I can't get it up" (2019, 20). This revelation is preceded by a depiction of his flaccid penis. When he receives a fast-food delivery, it leads him to wonder about the meaninglessness of his life. He then takes a shower and collapses on the floor, crying.

Although the protagonist of the story is never explicitly identified as the author, Yan Cong, this identification is encouraged both by using the first-person pronoun 'I,' and through the visual depiction of the protagonist, a recurring character in his work who physically resembles the cartoonist. Likewise, in another story, titled *Hair* (毛) by Wang XX (王XX), we see the artist taking a bath and discussing her body hair, which is shown to cover not only her arms and legs but her entire body as well (see Figure 2, left). She mentions wanting to get rid of it, because it makes her feel "like an old man" (2019, 11). As the comic progresses, she is surprised to discover one hair is longer than the others and speculates about why she only just now noticed. The story concludes with her stating that, "Fine, I give up!" and concluding with a panel which reads "Now I feel great!" (2019, 13). In the accompanying illustration, however, we see her looking at the reader with an expression of obvious displeasure while a squiggle of black lines writhes within a thought bubble. Like Yan Cong's work, the story suggests a kind of wry ennui, in which the artist is depicted as being unhappy and unable or unwilling to do much about the situation they find themselves in.

Likewise bringing the reader into the private space of the artist, an untitled comic by Zhao Xin (趙欣), aka 'Scissors' (剪刀), opens with a couple embracing in a green space outside a bright pink apartment building (see Figure 2, right). We cut to the interior of the apartment building, where we see a young woman, nude, drawing at her desk. Again, the suggestion is that this is the artist, who is seeking inspiration by peeking out her window at the couple. This suspicion is seemingly confirmed when the young woman gets up in frustration, walking past

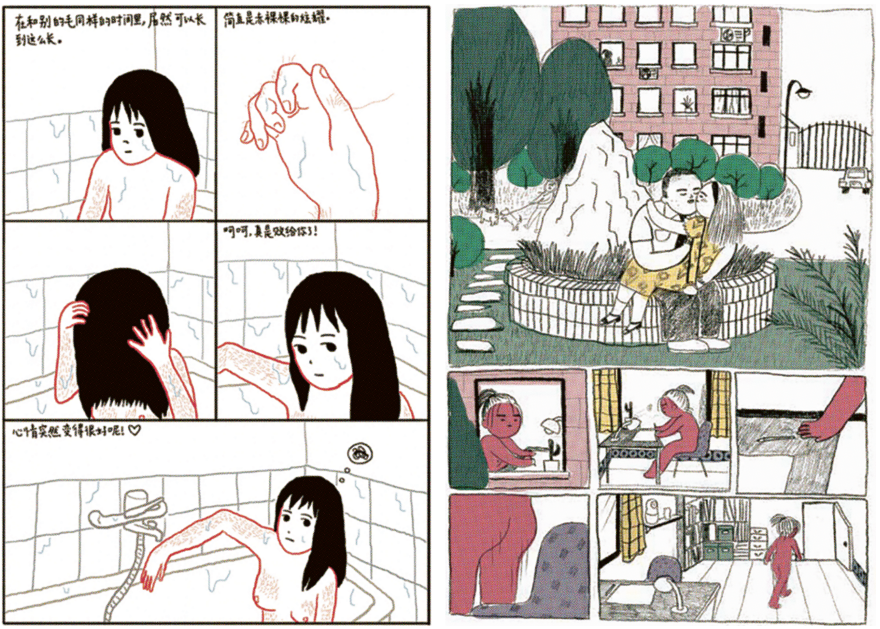

Figure 2: (Left) final page of *Hair* by Wang XX (translation on p. 80); (right) untitled comic by Zhao Xin.

a man (her boyfriend perhaps) watching television in the living room. She walks to the window to water a plant, only to discover the couple is now inside, two tiny figures making out under the 'branches' of her houseplant. More than simply suggesting an association with the artist (as in Yan Cong and Wang XX's more straightforward accounts), the surreal conclusion to this short sequence of events points to the all-consuming nature of the creative process. Even when entirely blocked, the artist finds themselves drawn back into the fabulation, finding inspiration where they least expect it.

Most immediately, what these three examples suggest is the tongue-in-cheek decision to 'lie flat' (*tang ping*, 躺平) embraced by many young people in China today who continue to face economic hardships despite having otherwise succeeded academically and professionally. A university degree is no longer a guarantee of full-time employment, and among those who have a modicum of professional success, the pay is often far too low to afford to purchase a home or even afford rent on an apartment in a first tier-city. As we have seen, in the foreword to *Naked Body*, Martin frames the political difficulties of artists in economic terms. As he similarly notes, "[the cartoonists] who appear in this book were facing an environment in which it was nearly impossible to make a living as a cartoonist" (Martin 2019a, 1). This, he is quick to point out, is not simply due to the

dearth of commercial publishing opportunities resulting from state controls on the issuing of book numbers (*shuhao,* 书号, the PRC equivalent to an IBSN or ISSN number): "There were no independent book fairs in China at the time (they have proliferated since)," he notes, "and few paying illustration jobs"[4] (Martin 2019a). Creators of art comics, in other words, could neither develop audiences to sell their self-published work to, nor could they seek out clients in the so-called gig economy.

From these examples, we can see the continued relevance of both acceptability and legibility in the PRC today, as the successor state to the ROC, particularly within the realm of art comics as a subset of the contemporary art scene. In so doing, my aim has been to demonstrate that, while these two concepts are in some ways uniquely relevant to the censorship regime in operation in the PRC, they can also be found in spheres of cultural production otherwise quite remote from the 'postsocialist' modernity of early twenty-first century China. Equally, the comparison between *Shanghai Sketch* and *Naked Body* serves to remind us of the fact that, just as the ROC drew on the legacies of the innumerable dynastic orders (and inter-dynastic disorders) which proceeded it, so too did the Communist PRC model its own censorship regime on that of the Nationalist ROC. Art and comics can be at times strange bedfellows, but they are in many ways complimentary, as both the examples of *Shanghai Sketch* and *Naked Body* demonstrate in different ways, in different eras. It is only by carving out a space for comics in the world of art (and, to a less obvious extent, literature) that cartoonists can escape the weight of expectations that constrain them to children's entertainments on the one hand and vehicles for political messaging on the other.

Self-exposure and self-fashioning suggest that there are two ways of thinking about comics: in terms of acceptability and in terms of legibility. Together, these two perspectives illuminate a tension at the core of comics, which (to borrow from Raymond Williams) represent a contested 'selective tradition,' being promoted and recognized (in part) by the cultural bureaucracy and its institutions, while at the same time responding to less well-defined formations, or movements, of which both *Shanghai Sketch* and *Naked Body* are examples. Indeed, not only are these two perspectives universal to all comics but to narrative texts more generally. They are expressed with an unusual degree of directness, however, in works like *Shanghai Sketch* and *Naked Body,* which operate in the 'third space' of the artistic underground.

4 For a discussion of the use of book numbers as an imperfect mechanism of censorship, see Shuyu Kong 2005, 72, Lynch 1999, 159.

What a work like *Naked Body* forces us to confront, therefore, is the residue of the abject low within the aspirational high. Self-exposure, which might otherwise consign a work to the realm of the sensational and the pornographic, can be reimagined with reference to the artistic and the transgressive. Similarly, illegibility can be mobilized to productive ends, with the fragmentary and the unfinished becoming transformed into virtues of the experimental rather than vices of low-class, 'pulp' entertainment. Within the context of the PRC in the early twenty-first century, meanwhile, the first quality, acceptability, is especially relevant given restrictions about what can and cannot be published. These restrictions are often thought of in political terms. Without question, as Martin's foreword to *Naked Body* suggests, a great deal can be said for the impact of political restrictions on cartoonists working in China today. In a sense, politics operate as a kind of unspeakable lacuna, or tangible absence in *Naked Body* and the contemporary culture of the PRC more generally. It is often remarked that part of what makes political restrictions so effective is the fact that they are so vague – clearly, some speech is considered unacceptable, even in (or perhaps especially in) fiction, but the line between what can and cannot be said is far from clear. Official crackdowns during the relatively relaxed censorship regime of the last two decades have targeted everything from time travel to homosexuality, diagnosing online authors as suffering from historical nihilism, feudal superstition, foreign interference, and bourgeois liberalization, among countless other catch-all ailments.

Ars Erotica vs *Scientia Sexualis*

If the link between the 'modern' and the 'post-modern' is highlighted by the naked bodies that populate both *Shanghai Sketch* and *Naked Body*, so too is the contrast between acceptability and legibility revealed by some of the more pornographic or otherwise 'unacceptable' sexually explicit works included in *Naked Body*. For instance, in Leng Zhiwen's (冷志文) untitled comic, two men engage in foot play with one of them asking the other to put on his socks so the other can kiss them, before removing the socks to lick his partner's feet. Visually, the tongue is mirrored by the man's penis, and both men's bodies are depicted in vibrant shades of red, purple, and yellow. In another untitled comic, by Hanada (花田), a gigantic nude woman walks through an urban landscape before meeting another giantess with whom she engages in erotic foreplay, kissing and licking water from each other's bodies.

Both of these stories could be said to participate in Wang's "pornographic modernity" (2021, 11–15) of cosmopolitan urban life, providing clear examples of the myriad of ways in which nudity is mobilized for liberation of a more figurative

sort. As Wang notes, "it was [. . .] material transformations [in China] at the turn of the twentieth century that made possible new ideologies and discourses of desire, promoted by self-appointed cultural and political iconoclasts" (60). Wang contrasts these new ideologies and discourses with an earlier focus on the corrupting influences of sexual desire, as exemplified in Ming-Qing erotic tales such as Li Yu's (李漁) *Carnal Prayer Mat* (肉蒲团), or *Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅), pseudonymously attributed to the Scoffing Scholar of Lanling (兰陵笑笑生). In these tales, sexual congress is a zero-sum game, with the male 'essence' (*jing*, 精) either giving energy to the female partner upon ejaculation (and thereby draining the male partner), or, if ejaculation is prevented, revitalizing the male partner. It is for this reason that such texts' emphasis is placed on the youthful vitality of the female (or indeed, male) partner rather than celebrating the health-giving potential of sex at all ages.

Wang's formulation, in other words, provides a more grounded formulation of the contrast of the *ars erotica* of the East with the *scientia sexualis* of the West. In his *History of Sexuality*, the French social and intellectual historian Michel Foucault famously argued that whereas the former is non-judgmental and concerned with pleasure for the sake of pleasure, the latter is tied up with Christian-derived concepts of guilt, classification, and control. As Leon Rocha has demonstrated, Foucault's understanding of 'Eastern' sexuality was largely inspired by the mid-twentieth century work of the Dutch sinologist Robert Hans van Gulik, who ultimately took a typically Orientalist approach to the subject (Rocha 2011). Rather than exploring the ways in which Daoist sexual practices may have contributed to the immiseration and objectification of women (a topic Rocha shows he was initially inclined to explore, describing the practice of withholding ejaculation and having sex with multiple young partners as 'sexual vampirism'), in his book van Gulik presents a rose-colored portrait of the Chinese 'bedchamber arts' which he contrasts with the puritanism of Europe.

It is this more restorative and catholic vision of sexuality which took hold of both the elite and popular imaginations in late nineteenth and early twentieth century China, as Wang argues. But we might pause here for a moment to consider how it was that sex (and female pleasure, however illicit) could be discussed at all in the context of a highly repressive and otherwise patriarchal society like China in the early modern period (seventeenth-nineteenth centuries). The mechanisms are not, upon further inspection, significantly different from those which allowed novels like Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* or Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* to be published in London in the eighteenth century. To make these texts acceptable (both to the censors and to readers), their authors resorted to the claim (however dubious) of providing moral education. With the romantic cult of the artist as a creative (and tortured) genius in the early nineteenth century and the

rising prestige of the novel in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, however, authors began to resort to another strategy, that of artistic license. Previously accessible only to practitioners of the more reputable arts, such as poets and painters, as the novel came to be accepted as an art form in its own right, authors came to incorporate increasingly transgressive themes and incidents within their narrative fictions.

In these texts, in other words, it is 'legibility' (or more precisely, the lack thereof) which provides a shorthand for artistic merit. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* – and indeed in many no less baffling modernist works by Joyce's Chinese New Sensationalist (新感觉派) contemporaries, such as Mu Shiying (穆時英), Liu Na'ou (刘吶鸥), and Shi Zhecun (施蛰存) – the depiction of taboo topics is implicitly justified through the use of obscure metaphors, odd conclusions, and anguished self-reprovals. A similar strategy of inscrutability can be seen in more ironic postmodern works, such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, or in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The difficulties such texts pose to interpretation are part of their appeal, providing a ready defense against critics who might accuse of their authors of frivolity or sensationalism. To take another example from the anthology, in Gong Yuwei's (宫煜伟) untitled comic, two lovers withhold climax (see Figure 3, left). As one lover tells the other, "there's no hurry, the page limit is five pages, so we can come together" (2019, 92).

In a similarly metatextual nod to the fictional conceit of the story, in a comic titled *Watermelon Man* (瓜男) by Zuo Xin (左新), meanwhile, a pole dancer in a strip club performs a dance with his erect penis concealed inside a watermelon (see Figure 3, right). The dance concludes with his partner using an apple corer to slice the watermelon into several pieces, leave the dancer's penis concealed in the remaining melon core. In the final splash page, we see his legs splattered with blood-red juice, and the stage littered with equally red 100 RMB bills (2019, 68). Here we have more complicated symbolism, with 'breaking the melon' (*po gua*, 破瓜) being a longstanding metaphor for taking a woman's virginity (Rea 2023).

Girls Who Love Boys Who Love Boys

Here it may be informative to set the highbrow experimentalism and queer sexual exuberance of *Naked Body* alongside two works included in the anthology that seem to have had a somewhat more mundane audience in mind – namely, readers of genre fiction. In the first, *Naked*, by Xin Zhouzheng we see two men drawn in a recognizably *bishōnen* (美少年), or 'beautiful youth' style: tall and thin, seemingly androgynous, they lounge about, gazing wistfully into each



Figure 3: (Left) untitled by Yuwei Gong (translation on p. 87); (right) "Watermelon Man" by Zuo Xin.

other's eyes (2019, 60). This style of illustration is characteristic not of art comics, but rather of BL fiction, or *tanbi* / *danmei* (耽美) as it is known in Japanese and Chinese, respectively.

This much discussed genre of narrative fiction originated in Japanese manga from the 1970s (Welker 2006). In the prototypical BL story, beautiful young men engage in ambiguous and tortured sexual relationships, often with a marked age difference (and corresponding power imbalance) between two or more partners. The fact that the audience for BL fiction is made up of primarily young women rather than gay men is perhaps the most remarked upon facet of BL fandom, drawing comparisons as it does with the slash stories of English language fanfiction, in which (most famously) Captain Kirk, the protagonist of the long-running science fiction television series *Star Trek*, is paired (or 'shipped') with his second in command, Spock. While Xin's story does not provide any obvious clues as to its origins in the world of fan fiction, or *tongren* (同人) as it is known in Chinese, the visual trope nonetheless allows it to be read as BL.

In the second story which plays with the boundaries of the art comic, *Mortal Questions* (人的问题) by Hai Shijie (海世杰), we see a nude man walking through a city center, considering the question of voyeurism through an internal monologue (2019, 47–51). Coming after so many dream-like passages, the story appears

at first to be yet another visual poem, like a riddle without any obvious solution. But as the story progresses, we realize that people on the street can see the nude man. Further, through the frame of a television broadcast we learn there has been a gruesome murder. At the story's conclusion, the man finally tells us that he is naked not because he wants to make an artistic or philosophical statement, but rather because he needed to burn his clothing to evade arrest. Here the story is revealed not to be an art comic, but rather to be belong to the genre of crime fiction, cleverly playing with the reader's expectations.

I have referred to these two stories as examples of genre fiction, which I think provides an instructive contrast to the more obvious examples of art comics included in *Naked Body* discussed in the foregoing two sections. I have argued that the low legibility of *Naked Body* helped this text not only find an audience in translation (given that as a work of 'art,' it is it relatively immune to being classified as pornography) but also to have helped it avoid censorship within China (given that the audience for this text was, in any case, quite limited). If low legibility entails, as we have seen, high acceptability by social elites, then the reverse, too, is true, with high legibility being associated with low acceptability on the part of those same elites, who – by virtue of their central role in governance, academic research, and education policy – often set the agenda for censorship regimes and moral panic (for an example of this pattern in comics in the United States in the 1950s, as exemplified by the case of the psychiatrist and social critic Frederic Wertham, see Beaty 2005). In China in particular, it has been found that censorship targets the social mobilization of the less powerful rather than satire and other forms of social criticism favored by more privileged groups (King et al. 2013). Both BL and crime fiction are notorious for being banned and censored, for explicit homosexual content in the case of the former (particularly when featuring minors), and for depictions of violence in the case of the latter, with at least one creator who self-published such works having recently been sentenced to ten years in prison (Hernández and Zhang 2018). What this can tell us about the circulation of an anthology like *Naked Body*, similarly self-published and distributed online, is that it was likely helped in so far as the authors could claim to be producing art, and not literature, and could therefore consider their work subject to the more lenient laws governing one cultural form rather than another.

Finally, while we should remain alert to the dangers of drawing a false equivalence between 'soft' and 'hard' mechanisms of social control, which range from social opprobrium on the one hand to fines and arrests on the other, we should not let this deter us from making qualified comparisons between the two. In the case of *Naked Body*, published in the PRC without an official book number, the creators were technically exposing themselves to hard mechanisms of latter type, whereas cultural producers in less authoritarian countries like the US (where the

translation was published) tend to find their exposure limited to mechanisms of a softer sort. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the two mechanisms play a key role in informing the reception of 'Chinese' comics overseas, with readers of translations of these texts unavoidably juxtaposing their own relatively open and free readings with the stultifying context in which these more transgressive works were first clandestinely produced and surreptitiously read. The pleasure that is derived, therefore, has both a primary origin in the texts themselves, and a secondary origin in the conceptualization of these texts as exotic examples of 'banned' literature – just as for readers of *Shanghai Sketch*, the pleasure of surveying the naked female form was doubled by the novelty of catching a glimpse of the *foreign* female form.

Conclusion

Most critically, what the thematic thread of 'naked bodies' in this chapter suggests is the incommensurability of the individual experience to the 'national body' of invented tradition. Readers of *Shanghai Sketch* wanted to "see the world" just as readers of *Naked Body* in English translation hoped to get a glimpse of another, less visible side of China. But in both cases, the view received was, by necessity, a limited one. That we make up our stories to make our way through the world is, for most of us, doubtless an unproblematic assertion. But the idea that we also, at the same time, 'make up' others through the imagined community of shared concerns and interests leads us into markedly murkier waters. If Chinese comics are simply what we say they are, then who is to say that Chinese comics cannot similarly be defined and delimited by state actors in the PRC or Taiwan, whose intentions are more far-reaching (the inclusion or exclusion of one national body from another) and whose qualifications (particularly when policing the line between art and porn) are substantially less catholic? The freedom of self-determination reaches hard boundaries in the association of individuals, and the greater that association, the less free it becomes.

And yet, there is freedom nonetheless in coming together to achieve a common goal. As one of the contributors to *Naked Body*, Inkee Wang (王颖琦), proclaimed on Weibo in response to finding out that the collection was going to be translated into English if it could find enough financial backers, "Help us give more people a chance to see our 'Naked Body'!" ("Update #1: Amazing First Week" 2019) Exposure in this sense becomes doubled: the exposure of an imagined self through the medium of text, on the one hand, and the exposure of a very real group of creators, laboring bodies obscured by the limitations of textual (and digi-

tal) representation. What is obscured, too, is doubled: experimental comics, first and foremost, but China, too, as a vaguely defined other. In bringing *Naked Body* to readers, first in China, and then again to readers outside of China, the cartoonists behind *Naked Body* succeeded in doing much more than just pushing the boundaries of the acceptable and the legible: they stepped outside those boundaries, shrugging them off like a set of old clothes.

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Section 2: **China and Its Margins: Contested Belongings and Legitimacies**

Piotr STRZAŁKOWSKI

Chapter 4
Winnie and a Bun: The ‘Mandate of Heaven’ and the Two Visualizations of Xi Jinping in the Works of Chinese Dissident Cartoonists

Abstract: Winnie-the-Pooh, the honey-loving bear adored by children, and a ‘steamed bun’ (*baozi*, 包子), a popular, affordable breakfast item in China, lead a double life as heavily politicized and censored objects. Digital images of these two seemingly innocuous icons have one thing in common. They have become representations of Xi Jinping and function as vehicles for voicing discontent with his leadership in China. Their purpose is to undermine Xi’s ‘Mandate of Heaven’ by disrupting the public perception of his supremacy in terms of performance, ideology, and charisma. In an era when social media platforms and online chats favor visual satire, reusable grid-like meme formats, simple comparisons, and repetitive stereotypical representations of others, these two visualizations of Xi Jinping have thrived, creating a long-lasting association with him. The study views the two diverse and constantly evolving images as a form of cultural leverage for relatively powerless dissidents, including cartoonists, who attempted and managed to disturb Xi’s sternly guarded image. Furthermore, the deployment of Winnie-the-Pooh and steamed bun metaphors and metonymies serves as a tactic and adaptation to the censorship regime; these cannot be entirely censored and will always be visible, acting as a public secret.

The ‘Mandate of Heaven’ and Political Legitimacy – Past and Present

The ‘Mandate of Heaven’ (*tianming*, 天命) functions in Chinese political tradition as a propaganda tool legitimizing regimes that rule morally and well. This Chinese concept, referring to the divine right to rule, was first introduced during the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 1045–771 BC) to justify its claim over the conquered Shang people by stating that the Heavens renounced the immoral Shang and replaced them with the righteous Zhou (Zhao 2009, 418–422). Confucian scholars developed the concept further, emphasizing the role of intensive education in pre-

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paring emperors for moral and effective statecraft. Although the concept lost much of its significance throughout the twentieth century, it still plays a role in Chinese political culture as it links legitimacy, performance, and dissent (Perry 2015, 309–326).

Crucially, the Mandate of Heaven has been revitalized under Xi Jinping, whose regime has implicitly repurposed the concept as a part of its Confucian-inspired effort to legitimize the 'new Chinese model.' The re-emergence of Confucianism as a major political force and the creation of a new Chinese model stem from attempts to redefine the regime's sources of legitimacy after 1989 and from the revival of Chinese cultural values amidst a rise in the self-confidence of its elite. Notably, contemporary Confucianism rejects Western liberalism and endorses meritocratic elite governance. As such, it partially aligns with the neoconservative support for the Chinese model of authoritarian socialism with elements of the free market (Mulvad 2018, 639–651). Contemporary Confucianism's focus on obtaining moral superiority through education and the elite's duty to secure citizens' subsistence became an important motif in propaganda narratives of the Chinese Communist Party. Additionally, by employing contemporary Confucianism, Xi's regime linked the 'Chinese model' with the traditions of meritocratic imperial rule (Mulvad 2018, 645), thereby stressing the state's historical and moral role in the development of the nation (Kubat 2018, 54–61). This aspect is notable as, in the past, it was emperors who presented themselves as responsible for peace, prosperity, and harmony in society (Jiang 2011, 175–180).

The regime has also nurtured Xi's personality cult and supplemented it with the China Dream propaganda campaign[1] and the Xi Jinping Thought doctrine (Hart 2016, 7–12, Yin and Flew 2018, 88–93). Consequently, the Chinese regime relies first and foremost on performance legitimacy (economic and moral progress), supported by charismatic legitimacy (unique qualities of a leader) and, to an extent, ideological legitimacy (values). It employs different forms of validation since a state cannot survive with a single form of legitimacy, even though one of them may dominate (Zhao 2009, 418, 424).

Conversely, the Mandate of Heaven serves as a mechanism to withdraw legitimacy and foster conflict in the light of a weak regime and leader (Perry 2015, xxiv–xxxi, Zhao 2009, 418–422). This is especially relevant in light of the Chinese state's tendency to view virtually any attempt to undermine its performance and manner of resolving problems as a challenge to its rule (Zhao 2009, 427–429). Consequently, it seeks to control and censor relevant public discourses. Since the

1 Notably, this vaguely understood campaign repurposes Confucian imagery and concepts and focuses on the rejuvenation of China to past greatness.

power transfer cycle has been disrupted during Xi's rule, the regime appears no less sensitive to criticism over its performance.

The Steamed Bun and Winnie-the-Pooh: Evolution of the Imagery and Aims of This Study

In July 2013, Xi Jinping met with Barack Obama. A photograph of their joint walk became a sensation when an anonymous Weibo user juxtaposed it with a strikingly similar image of Winnie-the-Pooh and Tigger (McDonell 2017). A year later, when Xi met with Abe Shinzo, cameras of foreign journalists captured amusing grimaces of their displeasure, thereby prompting metaphorical comparisons with Pooh and Eeyore (Katz 2017). Additionally, images from the Chinese Victory Day parade in 2015 prompted comparisons between Xi and a plastic toy of Winnie-the-Pooh in a vehicle (Wong 2015). Relevant visual metaphors of Xi also emerged against the backdrop of the 2014 Hong Kong protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. Internet users began to share memes of Xi, represented by Winnie-the-Pooh, using phrases such as 'Pooh Flu' or 'Winnie-the-Flu' (Lillo 2020, 426–427) and featuring yellow bears on the Chinese national flag instead of the five yellow stars (Schneider 2021, 314–315).

The personality of Pooh as a literary character has been a subject of scholarly interest, often with the aim of illustrating certain ego states and personality traits (Adams 2009, 237–239). Some academics have even deployed diagnostic frameworks to produce tongue-in-cheek suggestions that Pooh (a "bear of very little brain," Milne 1976, 43) might suffer from a series of conditions, including 'borderline intellectual functioning' sustained head injuries, binge eating, poor diet, obesity, ADHD, and OCD (Shea et al. 2000, 1557–1559). Such demeaning symbolism has been transferred to Xi. Since the bear served as a metaphor for Xi, Pooh's poor judgment and overtly simplistic attitude began to parallel Xi's vague ideas and policies, as well as the unclear philosophy behind the Xi Jinping Thought doctrine. Additionally, Pooh's renowned obsession with honey could represent Xi's fondness for power, money, and food (as evidenced by their comparable postures).

Soon after Pooh representations took off in 2013, another visual metaphor began to represent Xi Jinping – that of a 'steamed bun' (*baozi,* 包子). In December 2013, Xi visited Qingfeng Baozi Restaurant (庆丰包子铺) (Schiavenza 2013). His appearance in the establishment and his supposed queueing for the food may have been an attempt to emulate American presidents eating fast food to show solidarity with the people (Ke-Li 2015, 21–22). However, the publicity stunt backfired, leading to new derisive nicknames such as 'Xi Bun' (*Xi bao*, 习包), 'Lord Xi

Bun' (*Xi Baogong*, 习包公),[2] 'Emperor Qingfeng' (*Qingfeng di*, 庆丰帝), and an 'uncouth bun' (*tubaozi*, 土包子) (Fang 2020, 48).

The intentions behind these two representations appear to be solely satirical and political, and as such, they are widespread in the works of Chinese dissident cartoonists as well. After initially establishing a point about similarities between Xi and Pooh, the imagery such cartoonists used began to evolve, establishing a recognizable link between them. Visual metaphors of Xi as Pooh in their works began to function independently, without the initial two-panel arrangement (i.e., without Xi's actual image). This shift made Pooh not simply a metaphor but also a metonymy signifying Xi and his regime, and even representing online satire directed against him.

It is worth examining the two visualizations of Xi as they show a recent trend in the use of visual metaphors to portray China and Xi's leadership that moves away from old clichés such as the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, pandas, and dragons. These stereotypical representations of China, frequently used by foreigners, promoted racial stereotypes, justified political attitudes, and satirized the nation (Knüsel 2016, 57–63, Songster 2018, 9–33). Studies on the intersection of online satire, popular culture, and censorship in contemporary China have noted the use of Winnie-the-Pooh and a steamed bun as metaphors and metonymies for Xi Jinping. However, they have yet to elaborate on their meaning or choose them as the sole focus of their inquiries.

This study addresses this gap by discussing these two visual representations in the works of Chinese dissident cartoonists through the lenses of metaphor and metonymy.[3] In brief, a metaphor claims that one entity or concept is similar to another. Metaphors may follow and reflect pre-existing social, cultural, or historical conditions, employ stereotypical patterns, and generate new similarities between objects of interest (Kövecses 2010, 33–46, 82, 108–114). Metonymy, on the other hand, substitutes an element of an entity for its entirety, creating a 'through-connection' in a *pars pro toto* manner (Kövecses 2010, 177–193). The focus here is on these two rhetorical devices insofar as they convey popular perceptions about the Chinese leader.

In satire (predominantly focusing on human flaws), metonymy follows a strategy of reductionism directed against antagonists. It separates their motives from their actions to induce a comical effect, especially against incompetent imposters and pompous characters (Eden 1987, 589–592). Such satirical strategies ap-

2 Simultaneously, it is an allusion to Justice Bao (*Baogong*, 包公), an eleventh-century civil servant famous for his moral conduct, whose character featured in literary works and theatrical performances.

3 Scholars have underlined the role of emotions and cognitive mechanisms in the emergence and existence of metaphors and metonymies (McRae and Jones 2013).

pear relevant here since the dissident cartoonists reduce Xi to his two visual metaphors to achieve a disparaging comic effect. Additionally, due to its ambiguous structure, metonymy forms mental stereotypes. It can present an individual sardonically as a socially undesirable person who is unable "to perform politically" and "lacks the prerequisite class membership" (Veale, Feyaerts and Brône 2006, 324). This notion supports the core argument of this chapter, namely that the cartoonists use the two visual metaphors to undermine Xi's Mandate of Heaven and leadership status by popularizing the perception of his inadequate learning and performance.

The notion of repetitiveness in Xi's visual representations aligns with the concept of *(re)making* investigated by Margaret Hillenbrand in her study of the iconic Tank Man photograph[4] taken in 1989. Hillenbrand demonstrates that (re)makings of the Tank Man keep the image memorable, relevant, and visible over time. By renewing the relationship with the past, the reiterations of the Tank Man imagery gain narrative control and keep the information in motion by referencing and reincarnating the censored source image and its reiterations (Hillenbrand 2017). Recreating and reposting help to explain the nature of the Pooh and steamed bun visual metaphors. This chapter views online political caricatures and memes as related genres due to their shared reliance on recognizable cultural references, rapid circulation via social media, exaggeration of reality, comical reductionism, and emotional impact. For the purpose of this analysis, the main difference is the explicit authorship of political cartoons.

By reworking the original memes, dissident cartoonists' use of Pooh and steamed bun visual metaphors may serve as a new reusable tactic of resistance and mobilization (Esarey and Xiao 2008, Chey and Davis 2013, Yang and Jiang 2015), one that seeks to adapt to the strict censorship regime that aims to remove every undesired entry from the already severely limited internet in China (Luqiu 2017, 132–134). Through this imagery, dissident cartoonists arguably unmask the meticulously constructed and strictly controlled image of the leader and reveal his supposedly hidden nature. Although most of the relevant caricatures can be removed from the Chinese internet, the associations they generate cannot be entirely purged for practical and commercial reasons. Consequently, associations provided by the two visual metaphors will function as 'public secrets' (Hillenbrand 2020) that may resurface in unexpected situations (e.g., if yellow bears and steamed buns are available for purchase). Thus, relatively

4 It depicts a lone demonstrator using his body to block the advance of four Chinese tanks and serves as a metaphor for the bravery of the unarmed demonstrators who defied the violent regime. It was taken the day after the massacre at Beijing's Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989.

powerless dissident cartoonists can exert political influence and continue to cast a shadow over the leader of China.

Following Zhao (2009, 418), this study posits that Chinese dissident cartoonists attempt to erode the legitimacy deployed by Xi's regime to seek popular support. They dehumanize the leader of China by linking him with negative connotations associated with the alter egos of Pooh and the steamed bun, thus repeatedly implying that Xi's rule marks the decline of China and its elite. Their visual metaphors diminish the impact of Xi's personality cult[5] and present him as a persona with inadequate learning and, hence, no disposition to rule. Thus, they utilize the concept of the Mandate of Heaven to delegitimize Xi Jinping's position and enhance the significance of the depictions aimed against him by aligning them with the long-established process of denouncing the mandate of a regime in response to the perceived inadequate performance of the leader (Perry 2015, 310–312). Their visual depictions appear to be focused on impacting the perception of Xi's performance, charisma, and ideological authority. Moreover, the cartoonists employ hate-laden words and symbolic curses to underline the perception of the expiring Mandate of Heaven.

This study involved gathering a corpus of visual sources published on X, formerly Twitter, by Chinese dissident cartoonists. Using a range of open-source software, the author scraped time-stamped images published between 2013 and 2022 on relevant social media profiles. Following the analysis of the textual and visual references embedded in the iconography, 180 caricatures that compare Xi Jinping to Winnie-the-Pooh and a steamed bun were identified. This study aims to provide an in-depth interpretation of eight caricatures that are the most representative in light of this overview.

X was chosen to gather a sample of the imagery discussed for several reasons. The social media platform has a large worldwide audience, and, unlike Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of X), it allows Chinese dissident cartoonists to bypass Chinese censorship, publish their political works, and link with Sinophone and other audiences. It features prominent Chinese dissident cartoonists such as Rebel Pepper (变态辣椒) and Badiucao (巴丢草).[6] Rebel Pepper worked for *Newsweek Japan* and *Radio Free Asia*, while Badiucao worked for *China Digital Times* (中国数字时代), *The Age*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. They have published hundreds of visual political commentaries and attracted, respectively, over 500,000 and 125,000 followers.

5 The attempts of Chinese authorities to generate a personality cult of the First Secretary involved creating propaganda and new nicknames such as Xi Dada (习大大, Papa Xi) (Luqiu 2017, Yin and Flew 2018).

6 For more information on these two Chinese dissident cartoonists, see Hillenbrand (2017).

This chapter also discusses the works of prominent and persecuted dissident cartoonist Kuang Biao (邝飚), who once issued his works on Weibo and worked for *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报). Following prosecution and restrictions on his use of social media, Kuang's iconography continues to be shared online by third parties. Among other identified artists who employ these two visual metaphors are Cian Ci (撸一串儿), Octopus Painter (章鱼), Taocomic (成涛), and Shangwutian (尚无天). According to their social media profiles, most of them currently live in exile in English-speaking countries. The two exceptions are Kuang Biao, who presumably still resides in China, and Shangwutian, who ceased to be active on Twitter in 2021 and whose location is unknown.

In the sections below, this study first examines how the caricatures critique issues of progress and values represented by Xi's regime. Secondly, it evaluates how they define the personal qualities of Xi (that said, a full separation between the political and personal critiques is not always feasible). The first strategy visible in the works of Chinese dissident cartoonists is to make a broadly understood point about Xi's ineptitude as a leader, thus inviting the audience to experience a sense of contempt towards him. Images negating Xi's performance and ideological values attempt to showcase that he epitomizes a qualitative decline of the Chinese leadership as understood through the prism of the Heavenly Mandate. Thus, the cartoonists convey an alleged disparity between the previous leaders, the founders of Communist thought, and Xi. In the entire chosen sample of cartoons, this strategy ranges from mild phrasings to blatant obscenity. Due to its marginal nature, the latter does not appear among the cartoons selected for analysis here.

Performative Mandate

Figures 1 and 2 are suitable examples that convey a perception of the decline of Xi Jinping's regime performance. Figure 1, created by Badiucao and titled "Progress", is a sarcastic remake of an icon called the March of Progress that represents the evolution of humanoid species to Homo Sapiens. The March is an easily recognizable image and has regularly been reissued and reworked, yet it is overly simplistic and propagates scientific myths (Feteris, Groarke, and Plug 2011, 67–70). This further underlines the tone of Badiucao's reiteration.

Badiucao's visual metaphor, i.e., Figure 1, created in 2014, starts like the March of Progress but ends with a punchline. A silhouette of a primate on the very left, a remote ancestor of other humanoids, evolves into Xi Jinping, who stands by the counter and holds a tray with six steamed buns. The original idea of visualizing evolution serves Badiucao as an inspiration to ridicule

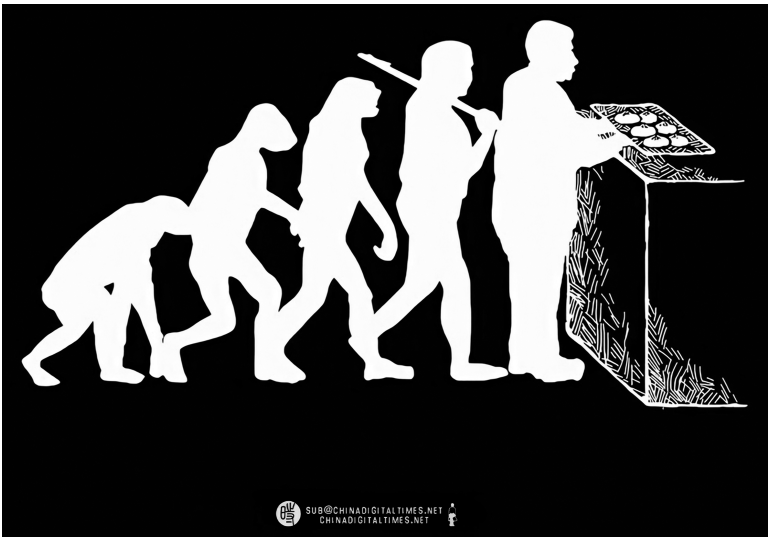

Figure 1: "Progress" (Badiucao 2014a).

the leader of China. Moreover, the contrast appears to make the silhouettes emerge from the darkness like ghosts. Badiucao creates a visual metaphor of the event with the appearance of a negative or an X-ray to reevaluate it and show what is normally hidden from the human eye.

The image contrasts the collective contributions undertaken throughout millions of years by countless humanoids from different species with a single action of Xi. Through this form of absurdity, Badiucao appears to invite the reader to raise questions about the performance and authority of the Chinese leader. The continual progress brought about by countless humanoids appears to have stalled during Xi's reign. The advancement visible in evolution and marked by an invisible upward line above the heads of different species (reminiscent of the stock index) is hindered by the counter of the diner. The silhouette of Xi and the counter with the plate of steamed buns form a metaphor that symbolizes the embarrassing reversion of the vaguely understood trend of development lasting millions of years. Additionally, Figure 1, unlike the original image, employs crude silhouettes, and simple black-and-white aesthetics. The image implies that the only titular progress takes place in the queue for food at the diner. Since the first in the line is Xi, the image may sarcastically visualize Xi's alleged closeness to the people.[7] Additionally, the scene may serve as a reference

7 This aspect is also visible in the bun-inspired slur mentioned earlier, i.e., boor ('uncouth bun'), related to Xi's attempts at positioning himself as a man of the people.

to the statement on the 'dominant position of the people' in the country, as professed by the Chinese leadership in 2014 (Garrick and Bennett 2018).

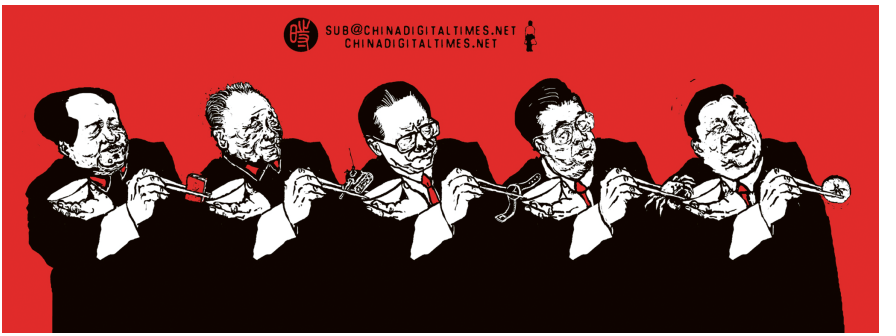

Figure 2: "Share and Share Alike" (Badiucao 2014b).

Figure 2, titled "Share and Share Alike",[8] is another reiteration of Xi-bun metonymy focusing on issues of progress, evolution, and legacy. The red color in the background and on the leaders' ties, corresponds to their political affiliation and presumably the ideologically-inspired persecutions of various political enemies undertaken by consecutive Chinese leaders. The key to understanding its meaning is the phrase 'share-alike,' which refers to the process of reusing original visual messages and adapting creative works with the help of copyright licenses. The license, understood as a framework for morphing and repropagating ideas within certain boundaries, is an allusion to Chinese Communism, which creates a distinct legal and ideological environment for artists and others to 'share-alike.' The Chinese political system has performed multifariously under the guidance of its leaders. Each of them repurposed the regime's distinct goals, created distinct policies, and disseminated their version of the system to the existing factions and the Chinese population to justify their leadership. The legacy and influence of predecessors allowed successors to foster their rule and consequently ensure the survival of the system by morphing it. Crucial in sustaining the regime and perpetuating the Mandate of Heaven was a combination of adequate governing performance, ideological legacy, and charisma of each leader.

The caricature suggests that as Chinese leaders adjust the regime's ideology, their contributions to the system become less valuable and complex than those of their predecessors. Items in the hands of each leader function as metonymies representing their major individual contributions to retain the Heavenly Mandate of

8 The English title provided by Badiucao is not a literal translation.

the party and regime. On the far left of the cartoon are Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping (i.e., two old revolutionaries wearing the Zhongshan suit). With the help of chopsticks, Mao inserts his *Little Red Book*, which functions as a metonymy of his political ideas and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), into Deng's bowl. The book may also allude to Mao's attempts to consolidate power and source political legitimacy at the grassroots level through multiple devastating mass campaigns. Deng reciprocates the burden of Mao's legacy by digesting it and putting a tank, a metonymy of the Tiananmen Square massacre, into Jiang Zemin's (1993–2003) dish. The tank reduces Deng's legacy to the force used to maintain the regime's authority amidst the dissent that spread following his reforms. In turn, Jiang, the first of the technocrats, seeks to retain support for the regime by passing forward a watch. It denotes the rapidly swelling wealth of the elite and corruption, or the establishment of the Three Represents, related to resetting the clock of the power of leaders, and inaugurating term limits. His successor, Hu Jintao (2003–2013), fills Xi Jinping's container with a 'river crab' (*hexie*, 河蟹), derisively associated in online imagery with its homophone (*hexie*, 和谐), Hu's strategic goal: the 'Harmonious Society.' The metonymy of Hu's rule references his legitimacy by establishing links with Confucianism to address social inequality and injustices in China.

Finally, Xi further adapts the doctrines he inherited and offers a bun into the void. It is unclear whether his successor is unspecified or simply nonexistent. Either way, the steamed bun appears as a metonymy that belittles his initial contributions to tackling problems facing China by reducing them to the event at the diner – an event that was supposed to demonstrate a strong bond between Xi and the people at the grassroots level. In this way, Badiucao raises questions about Xi's early-stage performance related to sharing-alike vision and the status of his Heavenly Mandate in comparison to his predecessors, who left major and identifiable repropagations of Chinese Communism.

An additional way of commenting on Xi's performance in office has been to focus on the intellectual standards represented by his regime. An occasion to evaluate it happened after the Literary Symposium on anti-vulgarity and lust in art attended by Xi in 2014. During the event, the leader of China directly praised the works of Zhou Xiaoping, known for his factually incorrect, nationalistic, anti-American, and pro-Xi tirades. For these reasons, Zhou has been derisively referred to as cutlassfish, a fish with a soft, slippery body and elastic spine. Xi's public praise of Zhou ruffled Chinese intellectuals; they understood it as a sign of the leader's declining intellectual standards and the push towards a new dictatorship (Bei Daijin 2014, Los Angeles Times 2014).



Figure 3: "Cutlassfish Bun" (Rebel Pepper 2014).



Figure 4: "The Apex" (Kuang Biao 2014).

Translation: The second year, the sixth month, and the 28th day of [Emperor] Qingfeng

The cartoon representation of that event, Figure 3, features a steamed bun with Xi Jinping's face and a cutlassfish stuffing functioning as a metonymy of Zhou Xiaoping. The image metaphorically conveys that Xi has a maggot-shaped cutlassfish that fills his brain. The depiction of a fish that lives at great depths symbolizes a close assimilation between Xi's thoughts and those represented by Zhou. The piece questions Xi's intellectual integrity by underlining his employment of 'yes men' and his strong connection to discredited public figures, thereby lowering the standards of the public debate. This all appears contrary to the meritocratic Confucian principles guiding the Mandate of Heaven. This aspect appears further emphasized by Xi's transmuted face which bears marks of leaden self-satisfaction and deprivation of thought as he gazes uncomprehendingly into the void. Finally, in the top left corner of the image, the cartoonist has depicted his artistic signature 'flipping the finger' to further reinforce disgust towards Xi.

This example helps to show that Chinese dissident cartoonists utilize (in)famous events to underscore the faults and incompetence of Xi and his associates. An additional reworking of the Zhou event is Figure 4, titled "The Apex." It was created by Kuang Biao on 28 June 2014 (i.e., the second year, the sixth month, and the 28th day of [Emperor] Qingfeng, which is a pun on the restaurant mentioned above). The piece resembles a reworking of a traditional Chinese ink-wash painting. In the middle, the reader finds Zhou writhing outside the water to raise Xi-bun as high in the air as he can on top of his nostrils. The behavior conceptualizes promoting, elevating, and praising the leader of China together with his ideology and era. However, it also looks absurd and farcical, like a ball-balancing act performed by a circus animal. Figure 4 suggests that Zhou's performance, astonishingly, brings attention to selected issues whilst hiding other problems. Consequently, the image connotes the 'carnivalization' of the Chinese administration related to a decline in its performance. Relying on people with questionable qualities such as Zhou to shore up support for the regime reflects unsuccessful attempts to reverse the declining Mandate of Heaven. The contrast between the revered aesthetics of traditional Chinese paintings and the odd behavior of Xi and Zhou underscores the satirical tone of the image.



Figure 5: "Too Young, Too Simple!" (Rebel Pepper 2019).

Translation (top to bottom):

Element 1: [The Temple of] Toad Worship
Element 2: "Too young, too simple, sometimes naïve."
Element 3: "I will do whatever is in the interest of my country even at the cost of my own life; I would never shrink back because of personal weal and woe."

Other ways of questioning Xi's fitness to wield the Heavenly Mandate include one-to-one comparisons between the current leader of China and one of his predecessors. This is visible in Figure 5, created by Rebel Pepper in 2019. The image issued by the author on X and by *Newsweek Japan* and titled in English "Too Young, Too Simple!" references the toad worship culture (Fang 2020) focused on Jiang Zemin. The memes about 'worshipping' Jiang Zemin emerged around 2014–2015, initially as a form of criticism against Jiang but soon after as a way of reverencing Jiang and proxies to mock Xi Jinping. The origin of these memes appears to be Jiang's metaphorical nickname, toad (*ha*, 蛤), derived from his toad-like appearance due to wrinkled skin, bulky glasses, facial expressions, and peculiar clothing. According to Fang, the iconography portraying Jiang as an amphibian is intended to indirectly mock Xi's uniform facial expres-

sions, perceived lack of talent, unsophisticated ways of communication, overall crudeness, scarce international experience, and controversial educational record (Fang 2020,48–53). The latter refers to controversies over, for example, the length of Xi's education (Chan 2022, 96–105) and alleged misconduct during his doctorate (Hancock and Liu 2019).

The visual criticism manifests itself in the asymmetrical composition of Figure 5, most of which deals with Jiang rather than Xi. Although Xi is in the foreground, the arrangement appears to symbolically push him aside, thereby suggesting the status of his Heavenly Mandate. In the center of the image, we find "[the Temple of] Toad Worship" (*ha mo*, 蛤膜). The building's style imitates classical Chinese architecture and is surrounded by multiple elements referencing toads, functioning as metaphors. On the roof of the shrine, instead of dragons are toads. In front of the building, instead of lion guards are two sculptures of Jiang with toad-like legs. The words displayed on lampoons mean "too young, too simple, sometimes naïve" (*tu yang tu sen po, shangtai na yifu*, 图样图森破, 上台拿衣服). They are Chinese transliterations of English words spoken by Jiang in October of 2000 during a tirade against a Hong Kong reporter. The situation demonstrated the experience and charisma of the former general secretary, thus inspiring the creation of memes. The other inscriptions reuse a Chinese poem by Lin Zexu (1785–1850) underlining the ideas of selflessness, sacrifice, and patriotism required to wield the Mandate of Heaven and hold a high public office (Sinwai 2019, 256–257). In this context, the verse appears as a praise of Jiang's performance during his leadership and of his toleration of satire which demonstrates his ability to adapt to circumstances and turn them in his favor. Additionally, inside the temple is a simple altar with a photograph of the former leader in front of which people pray to extend Jiang's life by a single second. The "toad worship" refers to remaking and sharing memes with Jiang, see above. As the process occurs, Jiang observes it with a keen interest and a smile on his face, signifying his acceptance of it. Therefore, Figure 5 presents Jiang as a role model.

Unlike him, Xi Jinping stands nearby and looks askance at the scene with anger and contempt. He forcefully holds a wriggling Winnie-the-Pooh, who functions as a metonymy of the online satire directed against Xi. The Chinese leader covers Pooh's mouth to prevent the bear from retelling jokes and starting a similar 'worship' of his personality based on humor rather than coercion. The contrasting approaches of the leaders showcase that Xi is narrow-minded, overtly sensitive towards himself, and cannot inspire others as Jiang did. The decision to censor Pooh, apparently due to personal concerns, can be seen as evidence that Xi as a leader is unable to overcome personal biases in decision-making. Instead, it displays Xi as easily emotionally hurt by satire and reveals insecurities that impact the focus and performance of the regime. Since the image considers aspects of Xi's personality, it serves as a good transition to discussing the Mandate of Heaven in the context of charismatic legitimacy.

Charismatic Mandate



Figure 6: "Xi is Going on a Bear Hunt" (Badiucao 2017).

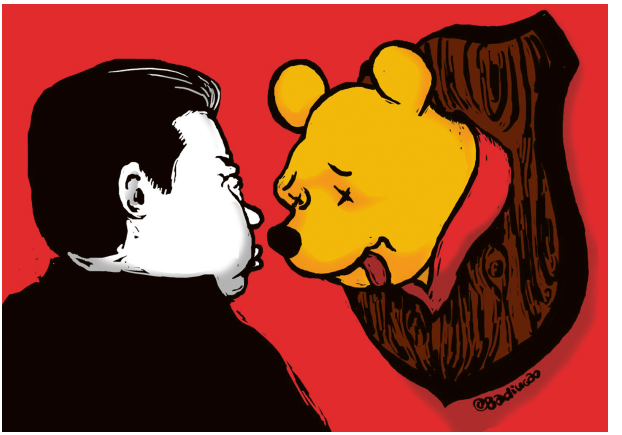

Figure 7: "Winnie the Trophy" (Badiucao 2017).

Two closely related cartoons by Badiucao (Figures 6 and 7)[9] satirize the ban on Winnie-the-Pooh visual metaphors issued by Chinese authorities. On a superficial level, the cartoon in Figure 6 ("Xi is Going on a Bear Hunt") resembles a conven-

9 The two English titles provided by Badiucao are not literal translations.

tional post-hunting photograph composed of the weapon, its user, and the victim. The triumphant leader of China poses with the recently used rifle behind the corpse of a dead Winnie-the-Pooh (a metonymy representing online anti-Xi satire). What stands out is the difference in color between Xi and Pooh. The slain bear with sticking-out tongue is paradoxically radiant, while Xi appears monochromatic, cold-blooded, and deprived of life. The contrast reflects the difference in their levels of charisma. The once-joyful and cheerful yellow bear still shines with a high level of warmth. The bleak and dismal leader of China appears to have little to no charm and tries to kill his alter ego as he cannot withstand the criticism and satire directed against him.

Expanding on notions in Figure 6, a closely related cartoon, Figure 7, titled by Badiucao "Winnie the Trophy," presents a scene after the hunting trip. The head of Pooh hangs on the wall as a trophy. Xi stands and stares into it. He recalls the hunt and once again confronts his enemy. The behavior appears primeval and carries connotations of conquering opponents and possessing their strengths by having them within reach. The PRC leader confronts himself by staring at his dead metonymy, which may symbolize his future or a body of censored satire about him. The exchange of gazes between the two generates a circularity. The loop may metonymically represent an endless course of remakes of memes about Xi, followed by censorship and official propaganda. It resembles a ritualized staring contest that interchangeably impacts the public discourse. Hence, each new reworking relies on metaphoric analogies and metonymic reductions to sustain self-referential systems of satire and propaganda in a way akin to two opposing semiospheres, as theorized by Lotman (Nöth 2006, 260–262).

While the process occurs, the satire distracts the leader of China and further provokes him to keep going after the reproductions. The cartoonists may hope that Xi is keeping up to date with his alter-egos. Yet, by doing so Xi appears to be gradually more focused on himself rather than on matters of national importance. This, in turn, raises questions about priorities in his judgment and makes him less admirable.

The last example of reworking of a theme or event featured in this chapter, and one of the most blatant and graphic curses directed towards Xi Jinping, was created by Shangwutian, a less-known dissident cartoonist whose style often relies on elements such as gore and profanity. The artist employs a palette of colors reminiscent of a hellscape meant to denote political life in China and reference Chinese history. As such, Shangwutian reappropriates the established way of criticizing current leadership by comparing it to the imperial order (Wagner 2022, 236–246).

A newer cartoon in the sample analyzed here, created by Shangwutian (Figure 8) and titled "Steamed Bun Hangs Under a Crooked Tree", alludes to two



Figure 8: "Steamed Bun Hangs Under a Crooked Tree" (Shangwutian 2018).

events. The first is the constitutional amendment, proposed in 2018, which removed Xi's term limits, allowing him to serve indefinitely. The second event is the crooked tree incident that erupted after tourists left half-eaten steamed buns in small plastic bags hanging on a branch of the crooked tree in Jingshan Park, where the last emperor of the Ming dynasty (Chongzhen, 1627–1644) hanged himself. The story became viral as a policeman connected the facts and detained the tourists. The policeman was also allegedly detained for creating a public scandal and, as some joked, "leaking the state secrets" (Voice of America 2018). This case demonstrates a wide recognition of Xi visual metaphors and the over-sensitiveness of the current state apparatus. This encourages mockery and damages the image of its leader.

Figure 8 reimagines the famous crooked tree in front of a hellscape accompanied by mountains and an ominous sunset. The area appears so inhospitable that the tree has lost all its leaves. This is a reference to air pollution and the atmosphere of political life in China. Underneath the tree lay multiple bones, perhaps belonging to the emperor or other officials. Among them are also half-eaten steamed buns, referring to the famous leftovers mentioned above. In the works of Shangwutian, small damaged, bitten steamed buns are sarcastic representations of regular citizens with more flaws than their leader. The bun-faced emperor, who stands for Xi, is dressed in attire that could belong to Chongzhen of the Ming dynasty but also strongly resembles that of Qing emperors. Xi hangs on what appears to be a plastic rope made of takeaway bags holding the infamous buns. He sweats, wriggles, and tries to stop himself from choking by grabbing the rope as if he were hung by the public, or tourists, on the tree. Below him weeps a miserable-looking Wang Qishan, the vice president of China, dressed in attire and headwear characteristic of a minister during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), which might be a reference to the foreign origins of the Communist ideology subsequently adapted to Chinese socio-political circumstances. Thus, the clothes serve as a metaphor that likens the Communist leadership to past feudal regimes to highlight its despotism and backwardness, and it attempts to counter the image of Xi as the man of the people. Furthermore, he appears as an outlandish creature who is not supposed to wield the Mandate of Heaven.

The reference to Chongzhen's death carries ambivalent connotations due to the disputed status of the Ming dynasty in Chinese history. Chongzhen was the last emperor of this ethnic Han-Chinese dynasty, which carried positive notions of loyalism. Also, the Ming Dynasty, associated with the apogee of the classical culture and its decline, which resulted in a period of national weakness, carries negative connotations. Additionally, the story of the Ming dynasty is largely about the Heavenly Mandate itself. Its rule began after a rebellion of Han peasants and ended with the suicide of Chongzhen following internal problems and the Manchurian Conquest of China (1618–1644/1683). The story of the Ming Dynasty may serve as a reference to the Chinese Communist Revolution (1927–1949), which gained increased momentum following Mao's emphasis on the peasantry. By extension, Shangwutian implies that Xi has gained an emperor-like status that may lead to the loss of the regime's Mandate. Thus, the image invites the reader to feel hatred towards the leader of China and enjoyment at the prospect of his demise.

Conclusion

The Winnie-the-Pooh and steamed bun metaphors center on eroding Xi Jinping's legitimacy and accomplishments. They can be linked to a series of political events that transpired in the initial phase of his leadership. These events provided Chinese online users and dissident cartoonists with an incentive to voice their discontent with the regime, enabling them to fashion metaphors and metonymies that have shaped the general perception of Xi. Despite efforts to censor such imagery, the connection between Xi and his two symbolic counterparts remains unshaken.

This chapter presents two sets of findings regarding the depictions of Xi as Winnie the Pooh and a steamed bun. Firstly, by applying theories related to the Mandate of Heaven, this study interprets dissident cartoonists' visual satire as a factor that challenges Xi Jinping's legitimacy. The regime constructs the 'new Chinese model' and attempts to establish authority and garner support by aligning itself with Confucian values of education and merit-based governance (Jiang 2011, 175–180, Kubat 2018, 54–65, Mulvad 2018, 639–646). However, as this study has argued, this association has generated a vulnerability because the Mandate of Heaven can be revoked if the ruler is perceived as governing ineffectively and corruptly (Zhao 2009, 424–428). Dissident cartoonists have exploited this loophole through their online satire aimed at undermining Xi's legitimacy, which upholds his Mandate of Heaven. Their works assert that Xi's leadership signifies China's decline and that of its ruling class. While the satirical patterns above prove pertinent as they distill Xi into merely two visual metaphors, generating an adversative comic effect by depicting Xi as an undesirable public figure lacking learning, competence, and effectiveness.

Additionally, this chapter perceives the Pooh and steamed bun metaphors as reusable, adaptable, and recognizable forms of resistance and mobilization, providing direct identifiers of opposition. This aligns well with theories on the constant recreation and reposting of information to keep it 'in play' and memorable, as demonstrated by Shifman (2014) and Hillenbrand (2017).

Further research may evaluate the link between imagery used to represent Xi, the ruling elite, and the state of Chinese society. To understand the interaction between the Chinese official culture and the visual culture generated by the dissident cartoonists, researchers could focus on gathering a greater body of iconography. One of the pathways for researchers would be to examine the interaction between the Chinese official culture and the visual culture generated by the dissident cartoonists. Researchers may also consider whether the two visual metaphors created by dissident cartoonists respond to the commodification of online activism (Wallis 2011, Zhang and Fung 2013), especially in the context of profanity embedded in caricatures.

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Chapter 5
Comics Adaptation as Resistance to ‘All-under-Heaven:’ A Case Study on How Hong Kong Comics Engage in the City’s Political Movements

Abstract: How have Hong Kong comics engaged with socio-political movements opposing Beijing’s political influence in the twenty-first century? Given the global significance of Hong Kong’s comics industry and its impact on the city’s identity formation, this question is highly relevant. This chapter argues that an expression of that engagement is the adaptation of Chinese classical literature, particularly narratives that embody the legitimation theory of Chinese empires: the ‘All-under-Heaven’ ideology. To support this argument, the chapter first examines the history of Hong Kong comics, the development of the city’s resistance to Beijing’s authority, and the resurgence of the ‘All-under-Heaven’ ideology in contemporary China. It then establishes an interpretative framework that integrates insights from comics studies, adaptation studies, and Sinophone studies to explain how these adaptations might resonate with Hong Kong readers and their experiences of resistance. Finally, through an analysis of two Hong Kong comics – Cheng Kin-wo’s *Investitures of Gods* and *Westward* – the chapter demonstrates how adaptations like these not only validate Hong Kong’s resistance but also transform the traditional justification of imperial power into a critique of contemporary Chinese authority.

Introduction

What role do Hong Kong comics play in the city’s socio-political unrest in the twenty-first century? For scholars of Sinophone comics, this question warrants attention for several reasons. First, Hong Kong developed a comic book industry earlier than other Sinophone societies, establishing a unique tradition within the medium. Second, Hong Kong possesses a distinctive identity shaped by its historical trajectory, and comics serve as significant expressions of this identity (Wong 2017, 386). Third, the deterioration of Hong Kong’s relationship with Beijing in the twenty-first century parallels the rise of Sinophone studies, which examine the

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dynamics between imperial centers and colonized peripheries in the Sinophone world. This colonizer-colonized relationship has long been overlooked due to the lack of "recogni[tion of] a different mode of colonialism [. . . that] may be called 'continental colonialism'" (Shih 2013, 2), referring to China's historical domination of its peripheral regions, at least before the demise of the Qing Empire in 1911.

Such recognition has increasingly surfaced in the discourse of Hong Kong activists (Cheung 2020, cited in Wong 2022, 8) as they challenge Beijing's policies toward the city. Scholars of Hong Kong studies have also taken note of these socio-political movements (Ip 2020, 89), which have reshaped the city's collective identity. Among younger generations, a stronger sense of local identity has emerged (Kung 2022, 184–185). Examining the role of Hong Kong comics in the city's resistance to Beijing's authority thus provides critical insight into how this comics tradition contributes to Hong Kong's evolving identity in relation to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the twenty-first century.

Building on these considerations, this chapter explores three key questions: How does twenty-first century Hong Kong reflect the center-periphery dynamics of China's 'continental colonialism,' as highlighted in Sinophone studies? How have Hong Kong socio-political movements contributed to the city's identity formation and transformation within this framework? And how do Hong Kong comics continue to represent and construct a local collective identity in response to these socio-political movements?

This chapter therefore joins the chapter of Strzałkowski, which examines the interactions between textual content of comics and socio-political contexts in Sinophone societies. While Strzałkowski's study focuses on dissident cartoonists' satirical portrayals of Xi Jinping as an act of defiance, this chapter investigates how one Hong Kong comic author adapts classical Chinese literature to undermine Beijing's claims to legitimacy over the city. Given the conflicting political ideologies and legitimacy discourses upheld by Hong Kong and the PRC, this chapter argues that Hong Kong comics perform a discursive challenge to Beijing's nationalistic discourse, which seeks to justify the state's authority.

The nationalistic discourse that the Hong Kong comics challenge, I argue, is *tianxia* (天下, All-under-Heaven). Developed by Chinese scholars of political philosophy and related fields, this discourse promotes China's civilizational superiority over the West by proposing an alternative world order distinct from the current Westphalian system, in which states are formally equal and possess sovereignty. According to the *tianxia* discourse, global harmony can be achieved by subordinating state sovereignty to a universal institution that governs international affairs with the collective interests of all nations in mind. Such a world institution, in turn, would derive its legitimacy from the will of all peoples, aligning with the traditional

Chinese concept of the Mandate of Heaven (天命, *tianming*) – the divine source of legitimacy for Chinese imperial houses.

Hong Kong comics challenge the *tianxia* discourse for three primary reasons. First, the *tianxia* discourse has gained increasing prominence in the PRC, spanning both popular culture and official political ideology, while Hong Kong has intensified its resistance to Beijing's rule. Second, the discourse serves to justify the 'one country, two system' framework, which governs the institutional relationship between Hong Kong and China. Finally, it appropriates China's imperial past to legitimize the PRC's claims to global dominance in the contemporary era. In this sense, 'All-under-Heaven' represents precisely the type of hegemonic narrative that Sinophone studies seek to critique—and the ideological target of Hong Kong's socio-political resistance.

This chapter examines two works of Cheng Kin-wo: *Investitures of Gods* (Cheng 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) and *Westward* (Cheng, 2015–2018), because they offer a critical response to the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse. Before explaining how Cheng's works subvert this narrative and reinforce Hong Kong's resistance, the next section outlines the broader socio-political context in which Hong Kong comics, Hong Kong's resistance to the PRC, and the *tianxia* discourse intersect. Section 3 presents the study's methodological and conceptual framework, which explores how comics encode social and cultural elements into their narratives to contest the *tianxia* discourse and justify Hong Kong's opposition to the PRC.

Comics, Resistance, and 'All-under-Heaven' in Hong Kong: Reviewing the Context

The role of Hong Kong comics in the city's socio-political resistance in the twenty-first century is shaped by their position as the origin of Sinophone comics, Hong Kong's resistance to the PRC, and the ideological differences between the two. This contextualization will delineate the contemporary state of Hong Kong comics, the relations between Hong Kong and the PRC, and the concurrent rise of the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse in China. These elements highlight the central points of contestation with which Hong Kong comics engage.

Understanding the current state of Hong Kong comics requires a brief historical overview. Hong Kong has the third largest comic industry, after the United States and Japan, experiencing two major peaks: the first from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, and the second from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s (Wong 2018, 15, 39). The city encountered comic culture in English as early as 1867 and began to publish Chinese cartoon strips in journals in 1898 (Lent 2015, 53). From the

1930s onward, comics magazines appeared alongside newspaper comic strips (58–59). In the post-World War II era, the industry expanded significantly, with the 1950s marking its first major surge. By the late 1960s, the martial arts (武俠, *wuxia*) genre dominated Hong Kong's comic scene (Lent 2015, 57, Lent 1999, 112), while science-fiction and spy stories also gained popularity (Ng 2003).

The rise of Hong Kong comics can be attributed to several factors: improvements in production through assembly-line techniques (Lent 2015, 58), influence from Japanese manga (Wong 2006, 32–36) and American cartoon, thematic exchanges with local popular literature and films in genres such as gangster fiction, sci-fi, and martial arts (Lent 2015, 61), the post-World War II baby boom (Lent 2015, 54, Wong 2018, 20), and the influx of talent and financial resources from the PRC due to the political turmoil (Wong 2006, 30),

The development of Hong Kong comics has thus been shaped by external factors. In response, Hong Kong comics have often reflected these influences, expressing, for example, resistance to Japanese expansionism in the 1930s and 1940s, and to communist ideology in the 1950s and 1960s (Mather 2017, 79). Given that the consumption of comics contributes to the construction of readers' worldview (Fung, Pun and Mori 2019, 129) and identity, a framework of cultural *production-consumption-identification* can be used to interpret Hong Kong comics (Fung and Pun 2021, 294).

A key focus of scholarly inquiry is the relationship between the values represented in Hong Kong comics and the shifts in the city's collective identity. During the second heyday of Hong Kong comics in the 1970s and 1980s, a distinct Hong Kong identity emerged (Wong 2017, 387). In the 1980s, the martial arts genre in both comics and cinema reinforced this identity (396). In the 1990s, the success of Cowman's *Teddy Boy* (1992–2020) further enriched Hong Kong's identity by integrating local elements (such as scenery, characters, and social life in the gangster story) with universal values like "freedom, equality, and righteousness" (Fung and Pun 2016, 423). Following the PRC's resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, comics adopted the Chinese illustrative style (e.g., ink wash painting) and increasingly incorporated 're-Sinicized' narratives, themes, and characters. This shift, paradoxically, fostered a more localized identity (Fung and Pun 2021, 296–299). The comics examined in this chapter emerged in this period, taking an alternative approach by legitimizing local resistance through adaptations of Chinese classics and engaging in discursive struggles. To understand this approach, one must comprehend Hong Kong's history of resistance to the PRC.

As noted, Hong Kong comics contribute to the city's identity formation by responding to external forces and expressing universal values intertwined with local identity. As Wong argues, drawing on Abbas's concept of 'culture of disappearance,' (a sense of trauma combined with the desire to explore and preserve local identities that remain elusive in view of Hong Kong's handover to the PRC;

1997, 11) this entails a "process of negotiating the mutations and permutations of colonialism, nationalism and capitalism" (Wong 2018, 16). This study narrows its focus to the role of socio-political movements that resist the PRC, viewing them as a specific form of Wong's conceptualization of 'negotiation,' namely, collective resistance to the mutation.

Chronologically, Hong Kong comics have engaged with socio-political movements shaping the city's identity. In response to the 1989 pro-democracy movement and the Tiananmen massacre, Hong Kong citizens launched 'Operation Yellow Bird' to help Chinese activists escape, continuing until 1997 (Ho 2019, 52). From 1997 to 2020, the annual 'June Fourth candlelight vigils' played a key role in Hong Kong's identity formation (Kung 2022, 184). Other major events include the 2003 protest against the implementation of Article 23 of the *Hong Kong Basic Law* (see Ho 2019, 40),[1] the 2012 protest against the Moral and National Education curriculum (Rowen 2020, 103–104, Cheng 2020, 27), the 2014 Umbrella Movement against the *Decision on Hong Kong*[2] which was widely perceived as an institutional design to exclude pro-democracy candidates from the elections (Vines 2021, 130–131), and the 2019 anti-Extradition Law movement (Hongkonger 2021, 2).

Since 1989, Hong Kong's socio-political resistance has been centered on its relationship with the PRC. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the PRC has hardened its stance towards Hong Kong, employing 'United Front' tactics to transform Hong Kong's identity into a Chinese nationalist one (De Giorgi 2019, 305, Lo, Hung and Loo 2021, 33). The 'United Front,' a strategy originating from the Soviet Union, forges alliances with a supportive majority to suppress a hostile minority, with the Communist Party retaining control over defining allies and enemies (De Giorgi 2019, 303; e.g., Bulag 2019, 150). This ideological campaign positions Hong Kong identity in opposition to Chinese nationalism (Lo, Hung and Loo 2019, 23). As the Chinese nationalist identity is also constructed through discourse, one wonders what the content of this identity is and how it is at odds with Hong Kong's identity.

As outlined above, the intensification of the confrontation between Hong Kong and the PRC constitutes the main theme in Hong Kong politics in the post-Tiananmen era. However, from the PRC's perspective, this period coincides with China's rise following its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001.

1 The 1 July March was organized annually after the PRC's resumption of its exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997 and ended in 2020.

2 The *2014 NPCSC Decision on Hong Kong*, officially the *Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on Issues Relating to the Selection of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region by Universal Suffrage and on the Method for Forming the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in the Year 2016*, is more commonly known as the *31 August Decision*.

However, as China's rise took place in the post-Mao and post-Tiananmen era, a discourse distinct from Maoist communism is needed. To legitimize this ascent, the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse has gained prominence.

The discourse takes the general approach of appropriating traditional Chinese thought in constructing a 'quintessentially Chinese' worldview that allows for an alternative world order to be envisioned that is superior to the western-originated international system. According to Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang (趙汀陽), 'All-under-Heaven' in classical Chinese thought refers to the world order where all hearts of all peoples of all lands support one sovereign of the world (Zhao 2011, 28). The sovereign of the world, in the form of a world institution (24), is thus more legitimized than any sovereign state and more capable than the state-centered Westphalian system in tackling global problems. Zhao justified this vision by emphasizing the civilizational difference between the West and China, which traditionally values "all-inclusiveness" (33–40), "non-compulsoriness" (54–57), and "turning foes into friends" (22, 87). Therefore, Zhao argued that the realization of the 'All-under-Heaven' order provided by the Chinese civilizational wisdom is a desirable option to ameliorate the US-led liberal international order.

Chinese scholars have extended Zhao's ideas to international relations theory, proposing theses such as relation theory (Qin 2018) and moral realism (Yan 2011), and to re-characterize China as a 'civilizational state' (Zhang 2012, also see Coker 2019) or the 'pivot between land and ocean' with the mission of liberating the world (Shi 2018). This spreading of the discourse in Chinese academia has naturally attracted scholarly attention and provoked debates. While some view the discourse as a form of Chinese 'cosmopolitanism' (Tong 2006, 310, Wang and Han 2016, 60–62) that historically served the stability of East Asia (Kang 2007, Rofel 2012), others critique it as a conceptual romanticization of the coercion and conversion of minorities (Kim 2016, 75, Callahan 2010, 209), indicating that it "parallels and embraces" the PRC's official discourse (Acharya 2017, 822) and justifies the rule of the 'Confucian-Leninist elite' (Callahan 2008, 754–756).

While the debate over the discourse has been passionate, how does it relate to Hong Kong? It directly impacts Hong Kong by legitimizing the 'one country, two systems' framework. According to Zhao Tingyang, it was the Chinese wisdom that institutionally designed "one country, multiple systems," which has allowed for the incorporation of non-Chinese minorities into the territory since the time of the Han Empire (Zhao 2019, 36–42). Following Zhao, Jiang Shigong (2017) further justifies the takeover of Hong Kong as "proof of justice of Heaven" (15), associating it with Mao Zedong's reflection on "the fate of 'All under Heaven'" (59), and declaring the CCP's "mission and responsibility for 'All under Heaven'" (62). From this perspective, the socio-political resistance of Hong Kong citizens has become an obstruction to "the justice of Heaven," and a distortion of "the fate of

'All-under-Heaven'," and has prevented China from fulfilling its 'mission and responsibility for All-under-Heaven.'

Finally, the discourse also involves identity formation in the PRC. Beyond academia, 'All-under-Heaven' is the central theme in Zhang Yimou's martial arts movie *Hero* (2002), which advocates world peace through the unification of states (Berry 2006, 165, Guo 2010, 30), and through violence if necessary (Wang 2010, 46). A similar justification of violence under the pretext of the good of the world can be found in movies such as *The Lost Bladesman* (Mak and Chong, 2011). By reinforcing Chinese nationalist identity with the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse, these cultural products effectively delegitimize Hong Kong's socio-political resistance. The question, then, is: how do Hong Kong comics respond to this discourse? To answer this question, I propose an interpretative framework in the next section.

Discursive Resistance to 'All-under-Heaven:' Some Methodological Remarks

The preceding discussion has clarified that the role of Hong Kong comics in the city's socio-political resistance lies in their intervention in the struggle over discursive power by offering a counter-narrative to the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse. To elucidate this intervention, it is necessary to examine the comic texts produced for this purpose. Such textual analysis requires an interpretative framework that defines its key elements and principles, identifying the conceptual nexus essential for the interpretation. This framework encompasses both the methodology guiding the interpretation of comics and the theoretical perspective that facilitates the identification of core concepts shaping the coding of the comic texts and the social context.

To this end, I draw on insights from comics studies, particularly regarding how the meanings of comic texts are co-constructed by authors and readers through the decoding of shared cultural codes. I situate Hong Kong comics within a context that simultaneously resists the political aspirations of the PRC while embracing both Chinese cultural traditions and universal values. Subsequently, I elucidate the political significance of this context through the lens of Sinophone studies that reconceptualize China's relationship with its margins.

Regarding the role of readers in meaning-making, Scott McCloud, in his seminal *Understanding Comics*, describes readers as the comics artists' "silent accomplice" and "equal partner in crime," actively participating in the process of meaning construction (McCloud 1993, 68; also see Kelp-Stebbins 2018, 211). Readers fulfill this role by making *closures* in the narrative gaps between panels, connecting images into a coherent and meaningful sequence (Hatfield 2022, 269, La Cour,

Grennan and Spanjers 2022, 55). Thus, a comic reader is an active agent collaborating with the author: while the author translates the story into a series of images, the reader links these images into a narrative (Hatfield 2009, 135). In doing so, the reader engages with the visual and linguistic codes embedded in the comics (Bramlett 2021, 180–182). These codes are often contextually specific – readers unfamiliar with a particular socio-political environment may struggle to grasp certain visual and linguistic nuances that are readily understood by those within the context. The ability to decode these embedded meanings implies a shared identity among the readers. In comics studies, this shared identity often manifests in fandoms centered on particular genres, authors, or characters. Within the scope of this chapter, it pertains to the identity of Hong Kong citizens resisting a state that appropriates the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse for its own legitimation.

Although the process of meaning-making in comics involves both encoding and reader-driven decoding, the present analysis focuses not on individual readers but on the elements encoded in the comics, the mechanisms of the decoding, and the conditions that facilitate this process, namely, the context of Hong Kong's resistance to the PRC. Given that the comics under examination challenge the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse from a Hong Kong perspective, it is imperative to delineate this perspective and explore how Hong Kong's context is demarcated in relation to it.

Hong Kong's resistance to the PRC presents a challenge to conventional theoretical frameworks for interpreting the city's collective identity. This identity is clearly distinct from the PRC's version of Chinese nationalism, which is articulated through the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse. Hong Kong's differentiation from the state's monolithic conception of Chineseness situates the city within the broader category of Sinophone societies. According to Shih Shu-mei, Sinophone societies are either "Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside China" or "ethnic minority communities and cultures within China where Mandarin is adopted or imposed" (Shih 2013, 11). Shih introduced the concept of Sinophone to address the inadequacy of the commonly used term 'Chinese' in capturing the historical, political, and cultural particularities of these communities. These particularities, reflected in the diverse identities of Sinophone societies, are frequently obscured by Chinese nationalism, which mobilizes a "narrative of victimhood" for "legitimizing the rising tide of Chinese nationalism from the Republican revolution through the present day" (2). This nationalist narrative omits the imperial dimensions of Chinese history, which Shih characterizes as "continental colonialism" (1–2). Recognizing the 'continental colonialism' allows Shih to highlight the political implications of the Sinophone concept: just as Anglophone and Francophone denote the "legacies of British and French imperialism" (1), Sinophone indicates the legacy of Chinese imperialism.

Shih's argument is corroborated by recent scholarship on China's imperial history (e.g. Perdue 2005, Borjigin 2004, Mosca 2021, Andrade 2008, Yang 2008). The key question, then, is how Hong Kong's resistance aligns with this theoretical framework. As previously discussed, contemporary Chinese nationalism is expressed through the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse, which appropriates traditional Chinese political theories to justify PRC governance, including the 'one country, two systems' framework for Hong Kong's incorporation. By framing this arrangement as a continuation of China's historical practice of 'one country, multiple systems,' the discourse quates Hong Kong's integration with that of other regions historically absorbed into China. Consequently, Hong Kong can be politically situated alongside other Sinophone societies, with the city's resistance representing a specific instance of the broader dynamic of the 'Sinophone periphery versus the Chinese center.'

How Hong Kong Comics Subvert Sinocentrism and Overthrow 'All-under-Heaven'

If the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse embodies Chinese nationalism that justifies the suppression of Hong Kong's socio-political movements, then Hong Kong comics, as part of the city's resistance, must actively engage with this discourse. Since this discourse appropriates traditional concepts from Chinese intellectual history, it is precisely these concepts and the historical narratives surrounding them that Hong Kong comics seek to intervene in.

The significant trend in Hong Kong comics is the adaptation of Chinese history within the martial arts genre. For instance, Tony Wong Yuk-Long published eight series under *The Legends of the Sons of Heaven* (Wong 1993–), which recount the stories of the founders of Chinese empires. However, I have chosen to focus on Cheng Kin-wo, as he demonstrates a stronger awareness of comics as a medium for textual intervention in Hong Kong's resistance to the PRC. Moreover, Cheng's recognition at the International Manga Award in 2018 attests to his significance within contemporary Hong Kong popular comics.

The two works discussed here were published by Bookone (壹本創作), the independent publishing house Cheng founded in 2006. Among his numerous works, the political sci-fi series *The Great Warlord* (2014–2015) subtly critiques the PRC's authoritarianism and questions the efficacy of the 'love and peace' approach to civil resistance. Similarly, *North Defectors* (2012) tells the story of refugees fleeing North Korea, a narrative that may also allude to historical instances of Chinese people escaping the CCP's rule to seek refuge in Hong Kong (see Chen 2014). Many

of Cheng's works emphasize conflicts between self-proclaimed authorities and demonized oppressed groups, conveying a strong message of rebellion.

The two works analyzed in this chapter, *Investiture of the Gods* (*IOG*) and *Westward* (*W*), are based on two *lianhuanhua* (連環畫, 'palm-size booklet') comics published in 1920s Shanghai with identical or similar titles. As Wong (2018, 18–19) argued, the *lianhuanhua* comic tradition of 1920s China laid the foundation for Hong Kong comics. The discussion here will demonstrate that Cheng's works exemplify how a local reinterpretation of Chinese classics can deviate from and subvert the hegemonic worldview in traditional Chinese narratives.

Both *IOG* and *W* are adaptations of classical Chinese novels that blend history and fantasy. In essence, they are adaptations of adaptations. According to Linda Hutcheon (2013), adaptation is not merely a faithful representation of an earlier text but a process of the "adapter's creative/interpretation" (18) in which the adapter actively reshapes the narrative. The interpretation also generates intertextuality, allowing the audience (or comic reader, in our case) to recognize familiar elements from other texts (21). This intertextual recognition is precisely what Cheng's adaptations enable for Hong Kong readers: they invite readers to reinterpret the classical works that have long been monopolized by the Chinese nationalist narrative. To understand how Cheng's adaptations resist this nationalist narrative, one must first examine how the original novels themselves adapted historical accounts, and then analyze how Cheng modifies their fictional worlds to challenge the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse.

The original *Investiture of the Gods* (by Xu Zhonglin, 2002 [1550s]) is based on historical accounts of the Kingdom of Zhou's (BCE 1046–256) overthrow of the Kingdom of Shang (BCE 1600–1046) and its subsequent rise as the dominant power in the Central Plain (middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River). Classical Chinese philosophy and orthodox historiography interpret this transition as the transfer of the Mandate of Heaven. The concept of the 'Mandate of Heaven' was thus theorized by classical Chinese thinkers as the source of legitimacy of the emperor – the *tianzi* (天子, Son of Heaven). Since the transition of hegemony from Shang to Zhou, the doctrine of transfer of the 'Mandate of Heaven' has been mobilized to justify the competition over the status of the royal/imperial house. The orthodox Chinese historiography, composed of successions of empires, is premised on the doctrine of transfer of the 'Mandate of Heaven.' In the transition from Shang to Zhou, the Zhou king condemned the last Shang king as the "great offender [of Heaven]" and framed his conquest as an act of "executing Heaven's great punishment" (Gentz 2017, 183–184). The novel romanticizes this transition by incorporating Daoist deities and monks, reinforcing the notion that political legitimacy is divinely sanctioned.

The other novel, *Journey to the West* (Wu 1977–1983 [c. 1592]), fictionalizes the historical journey of the Tang dynasty (618–907) Buddhist monk Sanzang, who

traveled to India to retrieve Buddhist scriptures. In the novel, he is accompanied by three humanoid disciples, including Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, who possesses supernatural powers. Sun, originally a rebellious figure, is punished by the Heavenly Court and imprisoned for five centuries before being granted conditional liberation on the premise that he aids Sanzang's pilgrimage. Both novels share a common thematic structure: submission to divine authority, Heaven (天, *Tian*), which, in the texts before Confucius' time (e.g., *Spring and Autumn Annals*, *Book of Documents*), referred to the supreme deity, *Tian* (天, Heaven; Pines 2002, 101–102), who decides on the transfer of the 'Mandate of Heaven.' The two novels partake in the formation of the 'All-under-Heaven' narrative in Chinese intellectual history.

Cheng's adaptations radically invert these themes by reconfiguring the dieges-es (or storyworlds) of the original novels. In both comics, he divided the universe into three realms where three humanoid species live: the gods (*IOG*) or 'heavenly gods' (*W*) in heaven, the mortals in the human world, and the 'demons' (*IOG*) or 'Asura' (*W*) in the underworld, who are fallen gods. In these adaptations, the fallen gods regard the ruling gods as sworn enemies and stage revolt against them. Given that the gods in the original novels are synonymous with legitimate authorities, the fallen gods' rebellion challenges the legitimacy of the ruling order.

Through this diegetic arrangement, Cheng more concretely subverts the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse. In *IOG*, this challenge is particularly explicit in its reinterpretation of the Shang-Zhou transition. First, Chen establishes connections between his storyworld and orthodox historical accounts by incorporating traditional motifs, such as the Phoenix (the immortal bird) that assists the founder of the Shang Kingdom, a reference to the *Book of Songs*,[3] which states that "Heaven bade the dark bird / To come down and bear the Shang" (Waley trans. 1987, 275). Chen also integrates other historical figures in *IOG*, including kings of Shang and Zhou, as well as Wugeng, the hero of the *IOG*.

With these connections, Cheng reinterprets the political meanings of the Shang-Zhou transition. In classical historiography, the Shang king is overthrown because he loses the Mandate of Heaven. In *IOG*, Cheng reframed the event and explained that Heaven punishes Shang King because he refuses to serve the gods through imperial expansion and enslavement of the conquered. Here, the gods are depicted as the colonizers of humanity, and the Zhou Kingdom that succeeds Shang becomes merely a new puppet regime of the gods (Figure 1).

3 The *Book of Songs*, along with the *Book of Music*, *Book of Rites*, *Book of Changes* (a.k.a. *I-Ching*), and the above-mentioned *Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Book of Documents*, constitute the Six Canons (六經 *Liu jing*) of the Confucian tradition. All of them were written before Confucius's time.



Figure 1: The Zhou king becomes the 'Son of Heaven' by offering voluntary servitude to the gods in waging 'just' war against the Kingdom of Shang (Cheng 2010 1(1), 17). © Cheng Kin-wo 2010, reprinted with permission from Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation.

Translation (right to left, top to bottom):

Panel 1: The Zhou king steps on the hilltop with a military dog. Speech bubble: "Arf! Arf!"
Panel 2: Zhou king's eyes gazing at the Shang capital. Speech bubble: "Chaoge City is right before us."
Panel 3: The site of Chaoge City. Speech bubble: "And I can sense its prosperity even from here."
Panel 4: The messenger of the gods approaches the Zhao king from behind him. Speech bubble: "Congratulations, your majesty. Tonight is the night, for great achievement. Hehe ..."
Panel 5: The messenger of the gods continues his comment. Speech bubble: "You submit to the will of Heaven, inflict punishment on the tyrant, and manifest justice on Earth. God willing, the day you complete the task, you shall be titled 'Son of Heaven', so the world learns about your great virtue!"
Panel 6: The Zhou king replies with contempt. Speech bubble: "... 'Son of Heaven?' Hey ... I merely replaced the Shang king as the new servant to the gods."

Thirdly, by repositioning the historical transition from Shang to Zhou, Cheng further discredits the traditional account, framing it as the victor's distortion of history and, therefore, an imperialist narrative (Figure 2).

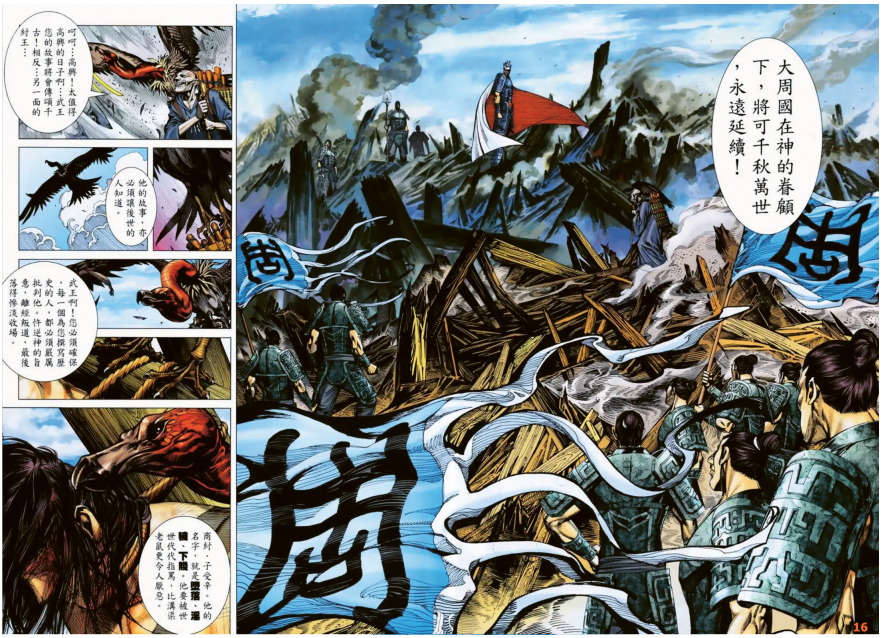

Figure 2: Cheng's criticism of the orthodox Chinese historiography as imperialist narrative (2016 1(7), 15–16). © Cheng Kin-wo 2010, reprinted with permission from Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation.

Translation (right to left, top to bottom):

Panel 1: The messenger of the gods continues to proclaim the blessing bestowed on the Zhou Kingdom. Speech bubble: "Under the grace of the gods, the Zhou Kingdom shall endure thousands of generations until eternity!"
Panel 2: The messenger of the gods continues. Speech bubble: "Hey hey … wonderful … What a wonderful day! Your story, Your Majesty, will be sung until the end of millennium! On the contrary … the Shang king …"
Panel 3 and Panel 4: The messenger of the gods continues, and a vulture appears in the sky. Speech bubble: "His story must also be passed on to future generations."
Panel 5 and Panel 6: The messenger of the gods continues, and the vulture descends on the cross. Speech bubble: "Your Majesty, you must ensure that every one of your historians will write about him with most severe criticism. By rebelling against the gods and deviating from the right way, he died miserably."
Panel 7: The messenger of the gods continues, and the vulture move its head towards the head of the Shang king on the cross. Speech bubble: "The Shang king, Zi Shouxin, his name shall be the degraded, debased, fallen one. He shall be scorned for all generations, loathed more than the rats."

These narrative arrangements invert the conventional understanding of the Zhou as a righteous force, divinely mandated to end the tyranny of the Shang king. Since the Zhou Kingdom established the 'All-under-Heaven' system, with the Zhou king as the 'Son of Heaven,' Cheng's narrative effectively undermines the Chinese historiography rooted in this ideological framework. Building upon this, Cheng conceptualizes the *IOG* series as a saga of a slave uprising against the gods, led by Wugen, the son of the Shang king. Wugen, having survived the Zhou army's massacre with the aid of his goddess mother, embarks on a transformative journey. Therefore, *IOG* functions as a 'story of initiation' (*Bildungsroman*), depicting the hero's evolution from an outcast into a leader of humans, 'demons', and rebel gods against the imperialist deities. Wugen's hybrid nature symbolizes the in-betweenness that is central to Hong Kong's identity, and his trajectory echoes Hong Kong's resistance. For Wugen and the 'demons,' the ultimate adversary is the supreme deity, Heaven. Consequently, the *IOG* series presents a narrative of defiance against divine authority.

W, in contrast, is conceived as a sequel to the classic novel *Journey to the West*, which narrates the Tang dynasty monk Sanzang's journey to India to retrieve the original Buddhist scriptures. However, *W* subverts this tale by depicting Sanzang's return of what he took back to India, and the comic replaces the Buddhist scriptures with the goddess of the eternal flame of the universe. Rather than delivering the flame to the Tang court, Sanzang instead takes it to the Heavenly court, ruled by Sakka, who seeks to consume it for his own power. Finally, unlike the original novel, where Sanzang and his disciples successfully fulfill their mission and attain deification, *W* reimagines the ending: the Monkey King refuses to surrender the eternal flame to Sakka and the celestial deities and is consequently executed. Sanzang, out of fear for divine authority, instead of standing up against the gods for the Monkey King, chooses compliance rather than resistance, accepting material rewards while harboring an internal sense of guilt.

These narrative choices set the stage for *W*, which begins with the gods' efforts to reclaim the eternal flame and Sanzang's attempt at redemption by escorting it back to India, an act of revolt against the gods. Here, Cheng once again reverses the framework of the classical novel, portraying the gods as predatory and oppressive while delegitimizing the existing cosmic order. The theme of resistance to traditionally sanctioned power is thus a unifying motif in both comic series. The question that follows is: how does this theme of resistance relate to the relationship between Hong Kong and the PRC?

Both series explicitly connect their themes of defying traditional authority to the dynamics between Hong Kong and the PRC by encoding in the narratives references that are closely connected to Hong Kong's socio-political movements.

These codes range from the names of the characters to the dialogues and the visual designs, reinforcing Cheng's justification for Hong Kong's resistance.

Regarding the naming of the characters, in *IOG*, Cheng named the leader of the 'demons' 'Walker-against-Heaven,' underscoring the theme of defiance against divine authority. Walker-against-Heaven assumes leadership after the death of his predecessor and brother, 'Wider-than-Ocean-Clearer-than-Sky' (海闊天空), which is the title of a well-known Cantonese pop-rock song by the Hong Kong band Beyond. In the 2010s, the song became one of Hong Kong's 'unofficial anthems' in socio-political protests, particularly during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. The fallen rebel leader bearing the name of the song directly alludes to Hong Kong's resistance and identity.

The other case of embedding socio-political references is observable in the 'demon' general's comment about 'men of Middle Earth.' The demon general considers men of Middle Earth as "cowards and prepared to believe anything," and states that "one cannot awaken someone pretending to be asleep" (Figure 3). This statement directly references a widely circulated commentary from the 2012 protest against the Moral and National Education module, written by a Hong Kong resident who had emigrated from the mainland. The article not only criticized the proposed curriculum but also denounced patriotic education in the PRC as a mechanism for producing compliant and deceitful citizens (Hu 2012).



Figure 3: The demon general criticizing the cowardice of men in Middle Earth Cheng 2013b 3(16–17), 25. © Cheng Kin-wo 2010, reprinted with permission from Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation.

Translation (right to left, top to bottom):

Panel 1: The demon general speaks. Speech bubble: "You cannot awaken someone pretending to be asleep."
Panel 2: The demon general continues, and those he refers to look at him. Speech bubble: "They are not deaf to warnings. They merely choose to believe in something seemingly pretty and comforting."
Panel 3: The demon general continues, and those he refers to look at him. Speech bubble: "However unreal, full of loopholes it is, they still believe in it. There is only one explanation for such absurd behavior."
Panel 4: The demon general continues. Speech bubble: "Cowardice. Men of the Middle Earth fear challenges and truth. They therefore have to numb themselves with belief, in order to escape the hardships of reality. That's why the lies of that religion prevail here. Pathetically, in the end, they will realize that nothing changes."

Beyond referencing the 2012 protest, the *IOG* series critiques Chinese society's obedience to authority, as reflected in Wugen's description of men of Middle Earth as people who "rejoice in being slaves."

In contrast, Cheng imbues the speech of the 'men of Middle Earth' with language commonly associated with nationalist rhetoric, using expressions such as "blood is thicker than water" to accuse Wugen and the 'demons' of establishing an independent city-state at the border of the Zhou Kingdom. This narrative element clearly parallels Hong Kong's position vis-à-vis the PRC: a city with a distinct system separate from the state, which embodies the 'All-under-Heaven' ideology. However, the *IOG* diegesis refutes this nationalist accusation by depicting the Zhou Kingdom as a puppet state subjugating humanity in service of the gods. In response, Wugen asserts that the only way to resist the gods' power and injustice is to abandon fear: "we shall win when all stop fearing the gods" (Cheng 2013a, 25).

With this belief in victory through fearlessness culminates in a pivotal battle, Wugen utilizes the demon's 'soul power' to lay a decisive blow against Heaven. In this sequence, Cheng recreates scenes from the street protests from 2012 to 2014 (see section 2), while simultaneously appropriating and subverting the opening line of the PRC's national anthem: "Rise, you who will not be slaves!" (Figure 4 to Figure 5)[4]

4 This appropriation of the PRC national anthem for supporting the protest of Hong Kong citizens was also made by netizens after the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Protest. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_C_-HUJoGUM (accessed 31 Jan 2023), and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RDB58J3Zjo&t=2s (accessed 31 Jan 2023).



Figure 4: Cheng's recreation of the protest scenes in Hong Kong from 2012 to 2014 and the ironic reference to the PRC's national anthem (Cheng 2013c 2(57), 8). © Cheng Kin-wo 2010, reprinted with permission from Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation.

Translation (right to left, top to bottom):

Panel 1: Wugen calls on the demons who have lost the fighting spirit. Speech bubble: "Rise! You who will not be slaves!"
Panel 2: Wugen continues, while the demons start to listen to him. Speech bubble: "Don't cave in! Don't accept defeat! You are not ants to be stepped on!"
Panel 3–5: Wugen continues, while the demons start to help each other stand. Speech bubble: "The gods can hurt your body, but they cannot destroy your soul!"
Panel 5–6: Wugen continues, while the demons start to help each other stand. Speech bubble: "Join your angry souls together!"
Panel 7: The demons lock their arms together.

These pages demonstrate the justification of Hong Kong's resistance to the state. By recreating the scene of the protest in the definitive battle against the oppressive gods and their supreme leader Heaven, Cheng appropriates the Chinese classics and the political legitimation therein, and applied such legitimacy to the protests in Hong Kong.

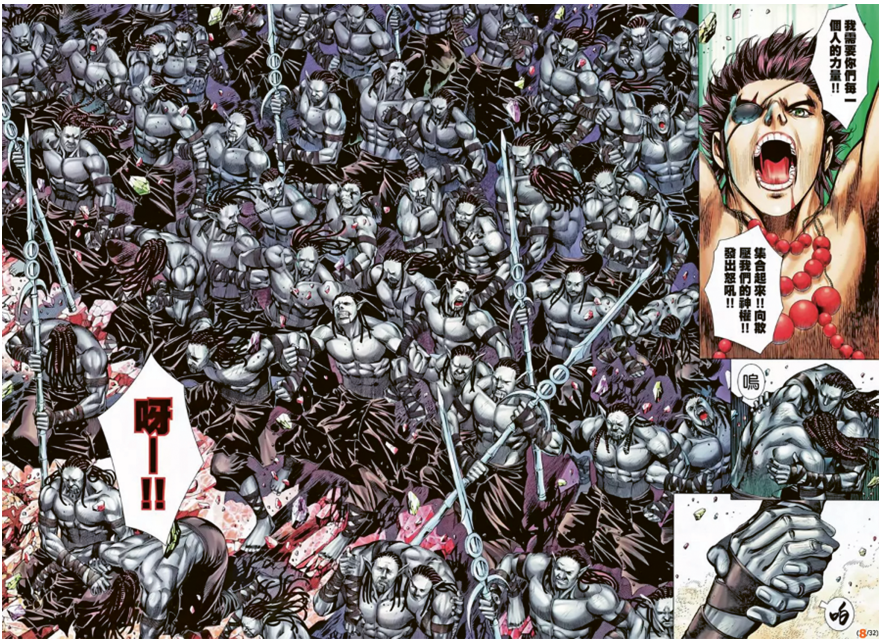

Figure 5: Cheng's recreation of the protest scenes in Hong Kong from 2012 to 2014 and the ironic reference to the PRC's national anthem (Cheng 2013c 2(57), 9–10). © Cheng Kin-wo 2010, reprinted with permission from Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation.

Translation (right to left, top to bottom):

Panel 1: Wugen calls on the demons who have stood up with their arms locked together. Speech bubble: "I need the power of each and every one of you! Together! We roar to the gods and their oppression!"
Panel 2: One demon supports another standing up. Speech bubble: "Ouch"
Panel 3: A demon shouts.
Panel 4: Hands of two demons, when one pulling the other up. Speech bubble: "Pah!"
Panel 5: The demons, in formation, roar. Speech bubble: "Whoah!"

Conclusion

This chapter has examined two comic series by Cheng Kin-wo, analyzing how Cheng justifies Hong Kong's resistance to the PRC by adapting two Chinese classical novels. Cheng's adaptations use diegetic designs to transform the themes of the two Chinese classics from advocating obedience to challenging the authority of Heaven. Additionally, his adaptations encode textual references to represent Hong Kong's experience in socio-political movements. I have interpreted the theme of disobedience to Heaven within the framework of Hong Kong's resistance to the 'All-under-Heaven' discourse and analyzed the intertextual references to Hong Kong's protests through the role of the comic reader as a co-creator of meaning. In this way, I have demonstrated that Cheng narrates stories of resistance against oppressive authorities: the demons' battle against the gods is framed as justified, and this justification is extended to Hong Kong's resistance against the CCP, which is allegorized as the authority of Heaven and the contemporary embodiment of the 'All-under-Heaven' order. Through this reinterpretation, Cheng thus subverts the 'All-under-Heaven' ideology and characterizes Hong Kong's protest as a pushback against the PRC's 'continental imperialism' that Sinophone studies point out.

In so doing, Cheng continues the long-standing role of Hong Kong comics' role in shaping the city's identity, a tradition that dates back to their emergence in the late nineteenth century and their rise in popularity from the 1950s onward. Specifically, this tradition has been marked by the association between local culture and universal values. While Cheng replaces local cultural elements with themes from Chinese intellectual history (such as those found in the two classical texts he adapted), he aligns them with the same set of values emphasized in other Hong Kong comics, including liberty and righteousness. By blending these universal values with a subversion of traditional Chinese political ideals that venerate imperial authority, Cheng's works actively challenge the 'All-under-Heaven.'

The future of such resistance, however, remains uncertain. In the post-Covid political climate, where the PRC assumes more centralized control at home and adopted increasingly confrontational policies toward the West, Hong Kong's identity, formed through its contestation with the PRC, faces stronger suppression. A clear manifestation of this trend is the tightening control over public expression, including Hong Kong's comic industry. The implementation of the *National Security Law* in 2020 exemplifies these shits, and in 2022, Cheng's publisher, Bookone, also declared the dissolution of its editorial team. How will Hong Kong comics continue to engage in Hong Kong's identity formation and its socio-political resistance in this new context? This remains an open question for future investigation.

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Chapter 6
'Taiwan's King of Comics' Liu Xing-qin and Sinophone Culture

Abstract: Liu Xing-qin has been heralded as Taiwan's 'national treasure' for his contribution to comic art. Since the 2000s, the term *bentu* (本土) or 'local' Taiwanese culture has been associated with Liu in various newspaper reports and research articles, and they often cite Brother Asan and Great Auntie, two of his most popular characters created in the 1960s, as representative examples of his *bentu* work. This chapter analyses Liu's Brother Asan and Great Auntie travel series to interrogate how the concept of *bentu* has been applied retrospectively to his comics. We argue that rather than promoting the Taiwan nationalist *bentu* concept, Liu's comics represent Taiwanese culture as a more complex Sinophone culture, in which Taiwanese local cultures are tightly interwoven with China-centric values. While these works reveal the author's affection for Taiwanese culture, they also reflect implicit bias against people from rural Taiwan, which largely conforms with the Kuomintang's Chinese nationalist ideology. We suggest that the resurgence of Liu's comics can be explained by the rise in *bentu* consciousness in the 2000s, when the Taiwanese government and society devoted themselves to building a new national identity couched in nostalgic memories of local Taiwanese culture in the 1950s and 1960s.

Heralded as "Taiwan's King of Comics" (Chang 2001), Liu Xing-qin (Liu Hsing-chin, b. 1934) is arguably one of Taiwan's most famous comic artists. Taiwan has undergone dramatic political shifts and cultural transformations since the publication of Liu's first comic in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, Liu is the only Taiwanese cartoonist whose works have been continuously circulated from the Kuomintang (KMT) authoritarian regime (1949–1987) when the ideology of Chinese nationalism dominated society, to the post-martial law democratic age when the discourse of Taiwanization gained momentum. Since the 1950s, he has published over two hundred comic books, and his comic strips regularly appeared in major newspapers. His long-standing success is evident in the numerous awards he has won, including two Lifetime Achievement Awards for comics in 2002 and 2010. In 2003, the Liu Xing-qin Comic Museum opened near his hometown Dashanbei, a Hakka village in Hsinchu County, and his most well-known comic book characters have been used by local governments to promote tourism (Huang 2016). In 2007, Tai-

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wan's Hakka TV station aired an animated cartoon series based on Liu's beloved characters.

Liu's comics have been acclaimed for various reasons under different governments. Early in his career, when the KMT categorized comics as part of children's literature, Liu's works were well-regarded for their pedagogical value (Chen 2017). Since the 2000s, Liu and his works have often been praised for preserving and promoting *bentu* (本土) or 'local' Taiwanese culture, and many academics as well as the Taiwanese media have consistently characterized Liu's comics as *bentu* (Chen 2017, Huang Zhen-nan 2021, Gao 2012). However, *bentu* is a concept applied retrospectively to Liu's works, because it did not become popular until the 1990s, in line with the rise of Taiwanese nationalism. In fact, when Liu's comics first appeared in the 1950s, Taiwanese local culture and identity were suppressed by the KMT government.

Despite Liu's importance in comic production in Taiwan and his status as "Taiwan's National Treasure" (Huang Zhen-nan 2021), there is relatively little scholarly research on his works (Gao 2012, Xu 2017, Huang 2016). Because Great Auntie (大嬸婆) and Brother Asan (阿三哥) are Liu's most popular comic characters (Lent 2015, 98), this chapter analyzes the Brother Asan and Great Auntie travel series published in the 1960s: *Brother Asan and Great Auntie Tour Taiwan* (hereafter *Tour Taiwan*), and *Brother Asan and Great Auntie Visit Taipei* (hereafter *Visit Taipei*). The texts were first released as comic strips in the *Taiwan Daily News* (台灣日報). Liu was commissioned by this newspaper when it was first established in 1964 to draw a daily comic strip focusing on Taiwan's local culture. The comics were published in book form in 1968. In 2001, Linking Publishing, one of Taiwan's key publishers in the humanities, republished Liu's comic book series, an indication of the importance of Liu's work in contemporary Taiwan. The light-hearted travel series relates how a pair of friends, Great Auntie and Brother Asan, who come from the countryside, travel around the island on a limited budget. During the days when public transportation was inadequate and tourism was not popular, Liu's comics introduced readers to parts of Taiwan that they might not have had the chance to visit.

Although Liu's Great Auntie and Brother Asan travel series are set in Taiwan and feature Taiwanese protagonists, they do not fit into understandings of *bentu* consciousness in contemporary Taiwan. We argue that rather than promoting the Taiwan nationalist *bentu* concept, Liu's comics represent Taiwanese culture as a more complex Sinophone culture, in which Taiwanese local cultures are tightly interwoven with the KMT-fostered China-centric values. While these works reveal the author's affection for Taiwanese culture, they also reflect implicit cultural bias against Taiwanese people from rural areas, which largely conforms with the KMT's Chinese nationalist ideology. We suggest that the resurgence of Liu's com-

ics can be explained by the rise in *bentu* consciousness in the 2000s when the Taiwanese government and society devoted themselves to building a new national identity couched in nostalgic memories of local Taiwanese culture from the 1950s to the 1980s (Li 2006). The continuous promotion of Liu's comics encourages Taiwanese readers to see *bentu* characteristics in his works, even though his comics primarily show his conformity to Chinese nationalism blended with his affection for his homeland. Thus, his title of 'local king of comics' can be seen as a projection of Taiwanese society's longing for autonomy in the post-martial law context.

Liu Xing-qin and Taiwanese Comics

Comics are called *manhua* (漫畫) in Taiwan, a word which uses the same characters as the Japanese term *manga*. Most researchers trace Taiwan's comics history to the Japanese colonial period when Japanese comics magazines were introduced to the island in the 1910s and 1920s (Hong 1994, Lee 2012, Mo 2021). In 1916, Taipei's largest bookshop, Niitakado Book Store, stocked around 1200 to 1300 Japanese books, including comics (Lee 2012, 171). In 1921, Taiwan's largest newspaper, *Nichinichi Shinpō* (日日新報), started publishing comics that addressed social phenomena or current events. From 1933, its evening edition incorporated a regular comic strip column featuring work by Japanese cartoonists (Lee 2012). During this time, comics became a part of popular culture in Taiwan.

In the 1990s and 2000s, when Taiwanese scholars devoted themselves to developing new cultural-historical discourses about Taiwanese identity, the term 'Taiwanese comics' was applied as a category to frame comics produced in Taiwan in national terms. The Taiwan Creative Content Agency website defines the unique style of Taiwanese comics as being "rooted in our [Taiwan's] rich history and cultural diversity" (TAICCA 2022). While the label 'Taiwanese comics' implies a nationalist claim, comics published in Taiwan over the last century also demonstrate how Taiwan as a Sinophone community has accommodated multiple cultures because of its colonial experiences under Japan and the KMT, upon which a new hybrid culture, Taiwanese culture, was formed. Shu-mei Shih defines the Sinophone primarily as "Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China" (2013, 30). According to Shih, "the Sinophone is a place-based, everyday practice and experience, and thus it is a historical formation that constantly undergoes transformation that reflects local needs and conditions" (2013, 33). Changes in Taiwanese comics over time reflect characteristics of transformation and hybridity in Taiwanese culture (see Lee 2024).

Liu was born during the Japanese colonial rule, but because he spent his childhood in rural Hsinchu County, it is uncertain whether Japanese comics had much impact on him. He has never mentioned their influence on his work. In fact, Liu's art style is more akin to American comics such as Mort Walker's *Beetle Bailey* (1950–present) rather than Japanese ones. He acknowledged that the inspiration for his comics came from American propaganda that was distributed during the Second World War (Lee 2002, 24). Furthermore, Liu's comic books reflect negative views about the Japanese. For example, in *A Story of the Small Village* (Liu 2012; a comic book first published in Taiwan in 1984), set in the last few days of the Japanese colonial period, all the Japanese characters are portrayed as arrogant and discriminatory of Taiwanese, and unwelcomed by the villagers.

Liu's long career parallels the trajectory of the varying reception of comics in Taiwan in the post-Second World War era. In 1949, the KMT's nationalist government was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and moved to Taiwan, which significantly changed the direction of Taiwanese comics. Japanese comics were banned,[1] and mainland Chinese cartoonists dominated newspapers. Anti-communism and Sinicization were major themes in their work (Zhang 2011, 355–356). Local Taiwanese comic artists also started to create stories set in China (or imagined China), such as Chen Ding-guo's (Chen Ting-kuo, 陳定國) series of Chinese heroines and Ye Hong-jia's (Yeh Hung-chia, 葉宏甲) *Zhuge Silang* series (諸葛四郎) (Lent 2015, 99). The 1950s to the early 1960s was regarded as the golden age of Taiwanese comics, as many newspapers featured daily comics and various comic magazines for teenage readers were published (Mo 2021, 59, Lent 2015, 99).

Liu produced his first comic book in 1954 when he was working as a primary school teacher. His comics were immediate hits. Notably, Liu claimed that he began drawing comics to combat what he perceived to be the negative influences of China-published 'palm-sized booklets' (*lianhuanhua*, 連環畫)[2] on school children. These books primarily focused on stories of knight errants in the martial arts genre (*wuxia,* 武俠). Liu was convinced that after reading these books, children would indulge in an "unrealistic" world (Chang 2001). Between 1955 and 1964, over eighty percent of comics sold in Taiwan were knight errant stories (Lee 2002, 26). Although they were banned by the KMT government in primary schools, they were still widely circulated. In contrast to the knight errant comics, which are set in ancient China or a fantasy land, most of Liu Xing-qin's comics are semi-

1 Some magazines still published Japanese comics, but the authors' names were modified into pen names or non-Japanese names, to avoid government censorship (Lee 2022).

2 These books were also called 'little people's books' (*xiaorenshu*, 小人書) because they were only half of the standard book size.

autobiographical and drawn from childhood memories. Brother Asan is based on himself, and his mother is the prototype of Great Auntie (Chang 2001). Liu's comics stood out for their exclusive focus on the everyday lives of Taiwanese people.

The Brother Asan and Great Auntie travel series was published when the KMT government implemented the censorship law on comic books in the 1960s. All comics had to be submitted to the Ministry of Education for review before publication. Reviewers were responsible for ensuring that the comics did not violate national policies, social security and ethics, would not be detrimental to teenagers' mental and physical health, or promote superstition (Lian and Huang 1962, 4). Only around one in ten manuscripts was deemed publishable (Cai 2018). As a result, the Taiwanese comic industry declined rapidly. Numerous comic publishers were forced out of business, and many Taiwanese cartoonists changed career paths. Remarkably, Liu's comics were still regularly published in mainstream newspapers. Liu's close relationship with prominent Mainlander[3] cartoonists such as Liang Zhong-ming (Liang Chung-ming, 梁中銘) may partially explain why he remained unscathed during this bleak period (Lee 2022). Chen De-xin argues that the pedagogical value of Liu's comics, as well as his conformity to KMT's policies, allowed his comic career to continue during the martial law period (2017, 159).

Although illustrations of local landmarks in Taiwan were mostly prohibited in texts published during the martial law period (Lin 2021), Liu's Brother Asan and Great Auntie travel series, which focuses on Taiwan's locales, was the rare exception. In fact, Liu's comics were supported by the KMT government, as he won the government-sanctioned National Award for Arts in 1972. After the lifting of martial law in 1987, along with the relaxation of censorship, Taiwanese comics flourished in the 1990s. Despite the increase in the number of comics that have been produced by Taiwanese cartoonists, Liu is still regarded by many as "the master of Taiwanese comics" (Gao 2012, 16).

Chinese Nationalism, Taiwanese Nationalism, and Sinophone Theory

After the end of the Second World War, Taiwan was 'returned' by Japan to China, which was then led by the KMT's nationalist government. The KMT was defeated by the CCP in the Chinese Civil War and retreated to Taiwan in 1949 with around

3 'Mainlanders' (*waishengren*, 外省人) refers to the Chinese migrants who moved to Taiwan from Mainland China during the Chinese Civil War between 1945 and the 1950s.

1.5 million war immigrants. The exiled KMT government claimed to be the only legitimate government of mainland China temporarily based in Taiwan, and it imposed martial law on the island, which lasted for thirty-eight years. The KMT systematically promoted Chinese nationalism in Taiwan. Taiwan residents were educated to love mainland China, see Taiwan as part of China, and identify as Chinese. Mainland Chinese culture was elevated as a superior culture while local Taiwanese culture, including languages and lifestyle, was seen as inferior. China-centric ideology is often reflected in literary works published during the martial law period, especially those by authors with mainland Chinese family backgrounds. In many of these texts, Taiwanese characters' imperfect Mandarin or their use of other languages is presented as evidence of their lower socioeconomic background and cultural inferiority (Huang, Phyllis 2021, 40). Because of the KMT's "cultural imperialism" (Roy 2003, 96), promoting local Taiwanese cultures was regarded as rebellious or even traitorous.

After the lifting of martial law, Taiwan transformed from an authoritarian to a democratic society from the late 1980s onwards. With the decline of the KMT's power and its Chinese nationalist discourse, as well as the increasing contact between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC), more and more Taiwan residents recognized their cultural identity as distinct from that of people in mainland China. Many started to call themselves Taiwanese rather than Chinese. It is generally believed that a distinct sense of Taiwanese identity emerged in the late 1970s when writers argued whether they should focus more on local Taiwanese themes rather than those of mainland China (Hsiau 2005, 132–135). The Taiwanization discourse became popular in the 1980s and 1990s. *Bentu* literally means 'local soil' or 'local land,' and Taiwanization suggests recognizing and acknowledging the culture formed and developed in Taiwan, rather than simply seeing Taiwanese culture as a peripheral of mainland Chinese culture. It reveals the Taiwanese people's self-confidence in seeing Taiwan as a cultural and political subject. The popularity of *taike* (台客, literally 'Taiwanese guest') culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the mainstream media demonstrated the Taiwanese people's newly developed pride in local Taiwanese cultures, as it was a term "used by Mainlander Chinese to disparage Hoklo (or Minnan) Taiwanese who behaved, spoke, dressed, or otherwise bore the unsophisticated mannerisms of the Taiwanese countryside" (Ho 2009, 566). 'Taiwanese guest' culture subverted the stereotype of Taiwanese culture constructed by the KMT.

The term *bentu* also reflects the political connotation of Taiwan nationalism. As John Makeham states, "in Taiwan, indigenization [Taiwanization] has functioned as a type of nationalism that champions the legitimacy of a distinct Taiwanese identity, the character and content of which should be determined by the Taiwanese people" (2005, 1). To construct Taiwanese nationalism, it became neces-

sary to eliminate the China-centric ideology that the KMT propagated, since it was regarded as evidence of the ruling party's colonialism in Taiwan (Jacobs 2012). As A-chin Hsiau observes, Taiwanization discourse, especially that in literature, tends to authenticate "a specific form of Taiwanese identity through constructing a pattern of 'de-Sinicized' and 'nationalized (Taiwanese)' historical narrative" (2005, 127). Shu-mei Shih also highlights the exclusion of Chinese elements from Taiwanese culture and identity. Shih states that in post-martial law Taiwan, Taiwanese culture is often regarded as standing in opposition to the 'Chinese' culture which the KMT fostered, and thus "there is a tendency to excise indiscriminatingly what is 'Chinese' from all aspects of Taiwan culture" (2007, 122). She argues that the removal of Chinese cultural elements is a result of a conflation of Sinophone culture with Chinese culture, noting "[w]ith the Sinophone, it is the local translation, revision, and reinvention of Chinese culture that is of importance" (2007, 122). In the social context of Taiwan, Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese nationalism may seem contradictory, but Shih's idea of the Sinophone encompasses both. Sinophone studies focuses on the trajectory of overseas Chinese communities' cultural transformation. Therefore, different relationships between Sinophone communities and mainland China are all regarded as a part of Sinophone culture. As Shih states, the Sinophone "can be a site of both a longing for and rejection of various constructions of Chineseness; it can be a site of both nationalism of the long-distance kind, anti-China politics, or even non-relation with China, whether real or imaginary" (2013, 33).

In post-1949 Taiwan, mainstream society has oscillated between the preference for 'Chineseness' and 'Taiwaneseness.' The pendulum swings are particularly noticeable in politics and literature. Liu's success can be regarded as an example of how politics influences a text's perceived value. Considering that Liu is a Taiwan-focused cartoonist who published primarily during the KMT's authoritarian regime and that his works were recognized by both the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, founded in 1986) and the KMT, it is reasonable to argue that both the earlier acclaim for his comics' educational value and the current praise of his works as *bentu* are partial interpretations of his work. Only certain facets of his comics that the different political authorities wanted to promote to readers were highlighted. The praise for the *bentu* characteristics in Liu's comics is arguably a subjective projection of the political authorities' and contemporary Taiwanese readers' zealous affect toward Taiwanese nationalism onto the author's work. Brian Massumi remarks, "the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *effect*" (1995, 84), meaning that there is no straightforward connection between "the actual thing" and point of view (1995, 96). In "The Affective Atmospheres of Nationalism," Closs Stephens posits that "nationality is often— if not mostly— experienced as a feeling" (2016, 2). Therefore, while Liu's comics are

mostly devoid of *bentu* content, it is unsurprising that they evoke a *bentu* atmosphere for contemporary readers. Through close textual analysis, this chapter demonstrates that Liu's Brother Asan and Great Auntie travel series reflects a sense of cultural hybridity. While the comics' focus on Taiwanese themes challenges the KMT's China-centric ideology, Liu's narratives of Taiwan convey more Chinese nationalist sentiments than Taiwanese ones. As such, the extent to which Liu can be regarded as a representative 'master of *bentu* culture' is debatable.

Brother Asan and Great Auntie Travel Series as Sinophone Comics

Liu has revealed in interviews how American comics influenced him, which points to colonial legacies in his work, for even though the United States never formally colonized Taiwan, American troops were stationed on the island for twenty-five years after the Second World War. Most of the pages of the Brother Asan and Great Auntie comic books feature a sequence of six panels and borders of a similar size. In some instances, such as chase or fight scenes, there are only four or five panels on a page. The characters' sizes are roughly the same from panel to panel, and their bodies are usually visible at full length or in three-quarter view, and sometimes from the waist up. Liu rendered his characters with simple, yet effective lines and his style is cartoonish rather than photo-realistic. His work follows the principles of simplification and exaggeration that are characteristic of caricature (Witek 2012, 28). Liu also utilizes symbols used in traditional humor cartooning, particularly emanata. Great Auntie and Brother Asan's adventures in Taiwan are depicted with speed lines when the friends chase after drivers or vehicles, while dust clouds accompany them when they trip and fall. Sweat drops are also frequently seen emanating from Great Auntie when she is tired or scared. The humor in Liu's series relies on exaggerated gestures and extreme emotions such as outrage, shock, and frustration. There are many instances of slapstick comedy. The stories are narrated in the third person but there are very few instances of caption boxes; the plot is driven by dialogue. There are almost no variations in font style or font size in the verbal text, except on a few occasions when the protagonists laugh or yell.

Visit Taipei and *Tour Taiwan*, which are episodic and repetitive at times, focus on how the friends make money through various schemes and sheer good luck, which enables them to travel around Taiwan without having to save up for their transport and accommodation costs. Whenever they face an obstacle, which is usually focused on not having enough finances to travel or eat, they rely on an

attitude of 'going with the flow' and exemplify the saying "fortune favors fools." Through misunderstandings, good timing, and thinking on their feet, they can escape unscathed from villains and the police whenever they encounter difficulties. Liu's characterization of Great Auntie and Brother Asan bears striking resemblance to the 'two fools' trope in Li Xing's film *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan* (1959) (Shih 2018, 127). Brother Wang and Brother Liu were modelled off Hollywood's comedic duo Laurel and Hardy. As Liu's comic strips were published when Li's box office hit and its spin-offs were extremely popular in Taiwan, it is likely that Liu's travel series was inspired by the film. Like Brother Wang and Brother Liu, Great Auntie and Brother Asan are portrayed as 'nobodies' with contrasting body types. Great Auntie is plump like Brother Wang while Brother Asan is skinny like Brother Liu. A few plot points in the travel series are the same as some in Li's film, such as the storyline of how the comedic duo evade men who have tried to rob them (Chen 2017, 183, Hong 2011, 50).

Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan "functions as a lubricant to ease the racial conflicts between the original island residents and the immigrants from China after 1949" (Jessie 2017, 203) by portraying Brother Wang and Brother Liu, a Mainlander and a Taiwanese, enjoying a wonderful friendship. As Evelyn Shih argues, the success of the film was "due to the fact that it spoke to the social anxieties of the broader Cold War period in Taiwan, both those related to class and those related to ethnic inequalities" (2018, 129). The film projected a state imagery of Taiwan exhibiting harmonious ethnic unity during a time of ethnic tensions between Mainlanders and native Taiwanese. In *Visit Taipei* and *Tour Taiwan* no characters are specifically referred to as Mainlanders, although most ethnic groups in Taiwan are included.[4] While Li's film aimed to underplay the ethnic tensions between Taiwanese and Mainlanders, Liu's travel series emphasize the cultural inadequacies of the Taiwanese characters from rural areas.

From the 2000s, Liu's Great Auntie and Brother Asan comics were often praised for highlighting Hakka culture. The Hakka Affairs Council recognized Liu with a Hakka Contribution Award in 2008. An article published by the Council describes Great Auntie as an ordinary Hakka woman, "hard-working, unpretentious, and kind" ("Liu Xing-chin" 2019). The article glosses over the fact that while she is mostly kind, she is also impulsive, prone to violence, and frequently loses her temper. Moreover, Hakka culture is not particularly evident or promoted in the travel series. Great Auntie's ethnicity is never clearly introduced, although it might be surmised that she is Hakka based on the way she is

4 Since the early 1990s, Taiwan's population has been generally categorized into four ethnic groups: indigenous people, the Hoklo, the Hakka and Mainlanders.

dressed. Throughout the series, she wears a floral print long-sleeved collared shirt that resembles a traditional Hakka upper garment and black pants. A woman in her fifties, Great Auntie hails from Dashanbei, a remote Hakka village. Yet readers might assume that it is a Hoklo village, as over seventy percent of Taiwan's population is Hoklo. Furthermore, Liu used mostly standard Mandarin Chinese in the texts and Great Auntie utters only a few Hoklo terms or idioms (Chen 2017, 189). In *Tour Taiwan*, Great Auntie is even characterized as more Hoklo than Hakka, as evidenced in the scene where they are in Chungli and overhear two women chatting. Great Auntie observes, "Their Taiwanese is different from ours."[5] Brother Asan replies, "Most of the people living in Chungli are Hakka" (Liu 2001b, 33). This statement clearly marks the Hakka women as different from the two friends. Liu could be praised for highlighting different Taiwanese dialects, which showcases the hybrid Sinophone culture of Taiwan. However, the ambiguous portrayal of Great Auntie and Brother Asan's ethnic background suggests that when Liu created the characters, he did not intend to emphasize their ethnicity but tried to underscore their identity as people from rural Taiwan.

Instead of promoting Hakka culture, the comics contain problematic passive ideologies that are sexist, ageist, and classist. According to Peter Hollindale, passive ideologies are the unexamined assumptions and values that are "taken for granted" which are communicated through "the texture of language and story" (1992, 30). These covert ideologies are conveyed through the various interactions that Great Auntie and Brother Asan have with different people they encounter. Liu includes some scenes of Taiwan's indigenous people in *Tour Taiwan,* but they reveal Han-centric prejudice because the indigenous people are positioned as the inferior group. When Great Auntie and Brother Asan arrive at Sun Moon Lake, they notice some young indigenous women dressed in their traditional attire, offering to have their photo taken with tourists for five dollars. Great Auntie competes with the women by renting one of their outfits and pretending to be an old indigenous woman. She offers a discounted price for a photo opportunity (Figure 1). Initially, the men push her aside because they are attracted by the beautiful women, but Great Auntie whispers to a man's wife that he is taking advantage of this photo opportunity to sexually harass the young indigenous woman. The wife pulls the man away and other men decide to take a photo with Great Auntie to avoid conflict with their wives. This incident reveals both ageist and sexist attitudes towards indigenous women.

5 No English version of Liu's graphic novels is currently available. All the translations from Chinese to English are ours in this chapter.



Figure 1: Great Auntie offers photo opportunities dressed up as an old indigenous woman (Liu 2001b, 181). Reprinted with permission from UDN Group.

Translation (right to left, top to bottom):

Panel 1: Great Auntie: I want to rent a costume. Brother Asan: ?
Panel 2: Great Auntie: Come, I will take a photo with you, only three dollars per photo!
Panel 3: Great Auntie: Come! Whatever pose you want. You can hug me or carry me on your back.
Panel 4: Great Auntie: I know how to smile too, and know how to pose. Man: Please stand further away, ok?
Panel 5: Brother Asan: Give up! Everyone likes to take photos with young ladies, who wants to take a photo with an old woman like you?
Panel 6: Great Auntie: That means I am making a loss!

Great Auntie, a non-indigenous woman, does not feel guilty about interfering with the livelihood of indigenous Taiwanese, who have historically been oppressed. After making money from the photoshoots, Great Auntie tries to lure the tourists away from an indigenous dance performance by imitating their dance. There is another incident that includes stereotypical images of indigenous Taiwanese. When they arrive at Ali Mountain, Great Auntie devises another money-making scheme by trying to trick the Americans she takes on tour into thinking they are paying to enjoy an 'authentic' dance performance. She engages in cultural appropriation by violently plucking the feathers off a chicken, putting a colorful blanket over her shoulders, and drawing some black lines on her face to mimic facial tattoos. She says to herself, "everyone calls me a *fanzi* [番子, derogatory term for either an ethnic minority or a foreigner], so I don't need to put much makeup on my face to look like a 'high mountain person' [i.e. indigenous Taiwanese]" (Liu 2001b, 289). The Americans are entertained by her unrhythmic dance. An indigenous man who joins the dancing asks her which tribe she's from, and she answers, "Taipei." This is ironic since she's neither an indigenous woman nor from Taipei. There are no repercussions for her actions, and the indigenous man is portrayed as good-natured and willing to dance to entertain foreigners. In these scenes, Liu draws upon superficial understandings of Taiwanese indigenous people and perpetuates stereotypes about them.

Liu reveals his pride in Taiwan's agricultural work through Great Auntie. In *Tour Taiwan*, when American men think that two women who wear bamboo hats and have covered-up faces are bandits, she tells the tourists that they are women who are preparing to work in the fields. She explains that they are protecting themselves against the sun and is infuriated when one of the men starts taking photos of a young woman changing out of her work clothes. Great Auntie states, these "model youth" are engaged in "the most sacred job: tilling the fields" (Liu 2001b, 260). In *Visit Taipei*, she wonders why people in Taipei sell "frivolous" things, and when asked what she thinks should be sold, she responds with some agricultural tools such as a sickle and hoe (Liu 2001a, 110). These statements ac-

knowledge the contribution of Taiwanese farmers. Because the series was published during Taiwan's transition from an agrarian society to an industrialized one, the comics reflect the tension between the country and the city.

Contemporary Taiwanese critics often identify scenes in Liu's comics which highlight local cultures such as local delicacies and folk religions as Liu's contribution to *bentu* culture. However, aside from positive narratives of Taiwan's agriculture, Liu's portrayals of other parts of local Taiwanese culture are mostly ambiguous, superficial, and at times serve as a mouthpiece of the KMT government. Some of the places visited by the characters are the same as the ones highlighted in Bai Ke's film *Descendants of the Yellow Emperor* (1956). Ssu-Fang Liu Jessie points out that the characters' travel in *Descendants of the Yellow Emperor* "does not aim at understanding the island itself, but encodes Taiwan into a Chinese grammar that designates a mode of vanishing Taiwan's colonial history and replacing it with Chinese accounts" (2017, 203). Like the teachers in Bai's film who travel to the south of Taiwan, Great Auntie and Brother Asan spend time in Tainan and Jiayi. Great Auntie insists on going to Zheng Chenggong's temple in Tainan to worship him.[6] Brother Asan takes tourists to a temple dedicated to Wu Feng (1699–1769), a Qing dynasty Han merchant,[7] stating that it would be embarrassing not to pay respects to this "important man" who "sacrificed himself for others" (Liu 2001b, 269). However, while *Descendants of the Yellow Emperor* is a didactic film that incorporates lessons about Zheng and Wu to promote a message that Taiwan's history is "an integral part of the grand history of the Chinese nation" (Hong 2011, 40), Liu's series glosses over these historical figures and their complex place within China and Taiwan's history, presenting them simply as part of local Taiwanese culture. Great Auntie's insistence on worship whenever she sees a temple is depicted as amusing. In addition to Zheng, she prays to Guanyin (the bodhisattva of compassion) and Buddha. She even worships the ancient Ali Mountain 'god tree' (a cypress tree more than 3000 years old) because she thinks anything named 'god' must be worshipped (Liu 2001b, 280) (Figure 2). Instead of showcasing the complexity of Taiwan's religious culture, the text frames Great Auntie's worship as blind belief without a core value, in which gods function only to serve her desire for money.

6 Zheng Chenggong (1624–1662), also known as Koxinga, was a supporter of the Ming Emperor in resisting the Manchus. He established control over Taiwan, defeating the Dutch occupiers, and many settlers in Taiwan regarded him as a hero.

7 According to legend, Wu Feng, a Han person, sacrificed his life to discourage the practice of headhunting by indigenous Tsou (Cou) people. Many Taiwanese now regard this story as a distortion of Taiwanese indigenous culture because it is narrated from the Han perspective.



Figure 2: Great Auntie and American tourists at Ali Mountain (Liu 2001b, 280). Reprinted with permission from UDN Group.

Translation (right to left, top to bottom):

Panel 1: Tourist 1: Our tour guides are so interesting. Tourist 2: We are lucky that they provide some entertainment, or else the long train ride would be unbearable.
Panel 2: Tourist 1: Rare top notch tour guides.
Panel 3: We are almost there.
Panel 5: Great Auntie: Come quick! God tree! God tree!
Panel 6: Brother Asan: Great Auntie, why are you getting off the train? Great Auntie: If it is a god, it should be worshipped!

Locations featured in the series are most often just backdrops for Brother Asan and Great Auntie's various antics. In *Tour Taiwan*, the natural beauty of Lion's Head Mountain, the breath-taking views along the Southern Cross-Island Highway, and the flower festival in Yangming Mountain are some of the many sites that are promoted as wonderful sight-seeing spots. Readers are told through the speech bubbles that the places are beautiful but must use their imaginations to visualize the settings. They are chosen strategically to enable the inclusion of information about the KMT's contributions to Taiwan's infrastructure. In *Tour Taiwan*, Brother Asan explains that the late Vice-President Chen (Chen Cheng, 1898–1965) visited the US and told them that prior to the construction of the Shimen Dam, women were unwilling to marry someone from the area because it was difficult to access water. Young men are grateful for the dam because it means they have more marriage prospects. Liu even inserts himself into *Tour Taiwan* when Brother Asan mentions that he once heard over the radio "Mr. Liu Xing-qin reporting on the famous food of each locale" (Liu 2001b, 229) (Figure 3). Great Auntie and Brother Asan love food and try out these dishes as they travel around Taiwan. Nonetheless, while Taiwanese landmarks and local cuisine are presented in a positive light, the local cultures are secondary, since most of the narratives focus on the duo's ignorance.



Figure 3: Great Auntie and Brother Asan discuss food in Zhanghua (Liu 2001b, 229). Reprinted with permission from UDN Group.

Translation (right to left, top to bottom):

Panel 1: Brother Asan: Bagua Mountain is the only fun place in Zhanghua. Great Auntie: There's not much on the streets either.
Panel 2: Brother Asan: There's not a trace of the con men we are after. Great Auntie: Let's try to find them again!
Panel 3: Brother Asan: I don't think there's much to find. Great Auntie: Let's find something to eat!
Panel 4: Great Auntie: Do you know what good food there is in Zhanghua?
Panel 5: Brother Asan: Oh yes, I once heard on the radio Mr. Liu Xing-qin reporting on the famous food of each locale.
Panel 6: Brother Asan: He said that Zhanghua's meat balls and 'mouse' noodles were delicious. Great Auntie: Who would have thought that that guy was a glutton!

In *Visit Taipei*, readers are positioned to laugh at Brother Asan and Great Auntie as their 'country ways' are contrasted to the more sophisticated urbanites they encounter. In one instance, the two characters are unable to figure out how a turnstile works when they try to enter an airport to watch the planes take off. When they sit down at a fancy restaurant in Taipei, Great Auntie tries to order "pig's lungs stirred fried with pineapple, glutinous rice wrapped in pig's intestines . . ." (Liu 2001a, 30). These are all examples of Taiwanese dishes that would not be typically found at a high-end restaurant. The startled waiter tells her that they do not serve these dishes. Illiterate Great Auntie then randomly points to an item on the menu, which turns out to be coffee. She dislikes the taste and questions why she has been served medicine when she is not sick. When the bill arrives, Great Auntie tries to pay with fake paper money that a boy gave her, not knowing how to identify real currency. Similar examples of her ignorance can be found throughout the books. She thinks to herself, "Taipei people are so wasteful. Mannequins aren't afraid of the cold; why should they wear clothes?" (Liu 2001a, 110). When Brother Asan explains that they are modeling the latest fashion, Great Auntie responds proudly that her outfit has been popular for over sixty years. Although her comments might subtly critique Western influences on Taiwan (like coffee, fashion, and consumerism), she is presented as mostly motivated by the desire to make money, suggesting her cultural inferiority.

Money is a major theme of the travel series. Great Auntie's negative characteristics are magnified in her money-making schemes, and her actions are designed to elicit laughter from readers. Although she claims that money is worldly, she spends most of her time trying to earn money through unethical means, such as trying to be a tutor for a child from a rich family even though she is illiterate, or pretending to be a blind masseuse. At the Taipei Zoo, she charges two dollars for people to gawk at her and subjects herself to comments such as "so round, she looks kind of like a potato" (Liu 2001a, 57). Often, she is paid not for services ren-

dered but is offered money for her to go away because she is terrible at what she does. In *Visit Taipei*, a man who wanted a massage was so tormented that he gave her money to stop. Great Auntie is not averse to using people for money. When she witnesses a couple canoodling in the dark, she decides to take "love tax" from them by accusing them of having no sense of shame (Liu 2001b, 202). She delights in disrupting their peace for an easy way to make money.

Ultimately, Great Auntie and Brother Asan are flat characters who remain unchanged. They can be regarded as caricatures of Taiwanese from rural areas, exhibiting characteristics of the 'bumbling fool' trope. Instead of promoting Hoklo or Hakka culture, the texts highlight the cultural incompetence of the two friends, ascribing it to their rural upbringing. The travel series highlights the differences between rural residents (who were mostly native Taiwanese) and urbanites, using the duo's ignorance as a didactic point to illustrate how the KMT government has successfully transformed Taiwan into a modern society.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the seemingly conflicting values of Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese nationalism intertwine in Liu's comics. The Brother Asan and Great Auntie series gave voice to characters who were normally not represented during the 1960s by depicting the perspective of 'ordinary' Taiwanese. The two characters are portrayed as optimistic, yet the comics undermine this depiction by emphasizing how they are under-educated people who do not understand the urban lifestyle and social norms. While Liu's insistence on depicting Taiwanese characters and experiences as well as his positive representation of Taiwanese landmarks and agriculture reveals his affection for the island, his ambivalent characterization of Great Auntie indicates that, as a Hakka-Taiwanese, Liu was influenced by the KMT's China-centric ideology. His representations of locality bear resemblance to the portrayals of Taiwan's landmarks in films such as *Descendants of the Yellow Emperor,* as these narratives were developed within the framework of Chinese nationalism and serve to promote the KMT's policies. The representation of the indigenous people in the comics also reflects the KMT's Han-centrism by perpetuating problematic stereotypes. It might be argued that Liu's works reveal the collective experience of a large portion of Taiwanese people who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s: they hold affection for the place they were born and raised in but did not have confidence in the local culture, since they were taught to view it as inferior to mainland Chinese culture, and the Chinese nationalist ideology as modern and advanced.

The recognition of the value of *bentu* in Taiwan after the 2000s marks a shift in understandings of Taiwanese identity. 'Taiwaneseness' is no longer associated with someone who is culturally incompetent and 'uncivilized.' Instead, rural Taiwanese culture and lifestyle are now increasingly embraced. This newly developed confidence in Taiwanese culture explains why Liu's works have witnessed a resurgence in popularity. Brother Asan and Great Auntie have been printed on posters, made into statues that are displayed in public transport stations, and the museum devoted to his works is a popular place for adults to bring children. However, these can be interpreted as part of a project of affective nationalism. As Michael Skey argues, "it is through people's daily engagements with, and mutual recognition of, these everyday symbols, institutional arrangements, familiar places and social practices that having a nationality and being part of a national community [. . .] makes sense" (2011, 152). By promoting Liu's comic characters as representatives of *bentu* culture, the Taiwanese government aims to create a new sense of national belonging as the public engages with these *bentu* symbols. This action also underscores the nation as an ongoing construct.

Considering Taiwan's acclaim for Liu's contribution to Taiwanese culture in the past two decades, it is important to re-evaluate his comics by positioning them in their historical context and reconsider the cultural values conveyed in Liu's travel series. *Visit Taipei* and *Tour Taiwan* represent neither pure Chinese nationalism nor Taiwanese nationalist *bentu* consciousness. They reflect Taiwan's Sinophone culture, revealing a post-war cartoonist's complicated sentiments toward China and Taiwan. They show how a Taiwanese author's affection for local culture can be developed in the social context of Chinese nationalism. Liu's travel series do not demonstrate his *bentu* consciousness as much as contemporary readers' affective responses to nostalgic comics with Taiwanese characters in them. However, it is Liu's devotion to Taiwanese themes and the affective appeal of his books that makes the later local-centric reading possible.

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Section 3: **Routes and Roots**

Martina CASCHERA

Chapter 7
Sinophone Comics as a Thirdspace. Two Case Studies from the Italian Context

Abstract: This chapter employs David Der-wei Wang's post-loyalist conceptualization of the Sinophone (2014) as "a critical interface" to investigate the sentiment towards China and Chineseness expressed in Matteo Demonte, Ciaj Rocchi, and Yi Yang's graphic novels published in Italy. Demonte and Rocchi's semi-autobiographical work, *Primavere e Autunni* (*Springs and Autumns*, 2015), retraces and problematizes the story of a man from Zhejiang – Demonte's grandfather – who establishes roots in Italy. *Easy Breezy* (2021), Yi Yang's first graphic novel as the main author, is a fictional work that tells the story of two young adults running for their lives in a small Chinese town. The first part of the chapter proposes a theoretical reflection on the concept of 'Sinophone comics' as articulated through the notion of Thirdspace (Bhabha 1994, Soja 1996), which, in my contention, helps to integrate the postcolonial approach associated with the notion of Sinophone and Thirdspace on the one hand, and with visual and multimodal (i.e. comics-specific) methodologies on the other. The following sections of my contribution aim at applying this theoretical framework to a comparative analysis of the two graphic novels, to explore how Sinophone creators can narrate and elaborate on multifaceted, non-monolithic notions of China and Chineseness.

Introduction

While Shu-mei Shih's Sinophone is "against diaspora" and in favor of *luodi shenggen* (落地生根, establishing roots) (2013, 25), David Wang's 'post-loyalist' is somewhere or somewhen else, but not willing to let their Chineseness go (2013; 2014). Post-loyalism as "a critical interface" (Wang 2014) to investigate the sentiment that many authors seem to maintain towards China and Chineseness, proves appropriate to examine the works of Matteo Demonte, Ciaj Rocchi, and Yi Yang. The former two are Italian graphic designers and animators who have been working together for more than a decade, specializing in reality-based comics and animations that investigate the Chinese diaspora and its impact on the Italian society, economy and culture. In 2015, they started a journey to discover Demonte's family roots through the character of Wu Lishan, based on Demonte's grandfa-

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ther. A semi-autobiographical graphic novel, *Primavere e Autunni* (*Springs and Autumns*, following the Chinese classic *Spring and Autumn Annals*),[1] retraces and problematizes the story of a man from Zhejiang who establishes roots in Italy. The volume was published by BeccoGiallo, a small yet renowned publisher specializing in *graphic journalism*, i.e., comic books that are "mainly focused on the narration of real, often historical, facts" (Peterle 2017, 142). Due to this editorial framework, the reader expects this work to be a reality-based, if not a documentary comic book.

Yi Yang (杨一, b. 1994) is a Chinese comic artist working for Bao Publishing, one of the most prominent Italian comic book publishers, specializing in authorial graphic novels. She arrived in Bologna to study art conservation and restoration, but then changed to a comic art curriculum at the Fine Art Academy. *Easy Breezy* (Bao Publishing, 2021), her first graphic novel as the main author, is a fictional work that tells the story of two young adults running for their lives in a small Chinese town. The book is inserted in the *Bao* (宝, 'treasure') series, dedicated to Chinese publications, so that the reader expects it to be created by an author of Chinese origin who writes and draws about China. The novel tells the story of Li Yu and Yang Kuaikuai, two teenagers who accidentally save a younger girl (Yun Duo) from a cruel kidnapper and then try to return her to her family. During the escape, they hit many locations, looking for a safe place for Yun Duo, and while conflictive at the beginning, the two boys ultimately develop a solid friendship. Very successful in Italy, *Easy Breezy* was also translated into French and Spanish.

In the first part of the present contribution, I will propose a theoretical reflection on the concept of 'Sinophone comics' as articulated through the notion of Thirdspace (Bhabha 1994, Soja 1996), which, in my contention, helps to integrate the postcolonial approach associated with the notions of Sinophone and Thirdspace on the one hand, with visual and multimodal (i.e. comics-specific) methodologies on the other. When applied to comics, the concept of Thirdspace allows to reflect on the need of postcolonial subjectivities to create a space of marginality, of "radical openness" (Hooks 1989, 19), where to live and thrive. In the specific case of Sinophone comics, it proves useful for analyzing how Sinophone subjectivities are textually expressed and mediated, i.e., how the authors' relationship with Chineseness is staged – literally, since the comic book page rebuilds spatio-temporal coordinates through its layout. The following parts of the contribution aim at applying this theoretical framework to the analysis and comparison of *Pri-*

1 The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a historical record of the State of Lu, where Confucius was born, covering the period from 722 to 481 BCE.

mavere e Autunni (henceforth *Primavere*) and *Easy Breezy*, to explore how Sinophone creators can narrate and elaborate on multifaceted, non-monolithic notions of China and Chineseness.

'Sinophone Comics:' Thirdspace as a Space for the Sinophone

In the increasingly globalized world of the last decades, postcolonial issues started to emerge, influencing the course of Chinese studies. In 2013, Shu-mei Shih inflamed a still ongoing debate on the notion of 'Sinophone,' asking for postcolonial adjustments in the newly born 'Sinophone studies' (*huayu yuxi*, 华语语系), with the aim of fostering "the study of Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness" (2013, 25), i.e., "communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China, where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted" (2013, 30). Shih's "against diaspora" stance means refusing to maintain an attachment to an ideal motherland and establishing roots in the adopted country. Other scholars, such as Wang (2013, 2014), maintain that Sinophone studies should also tackle authors who live in China and write in Mandarin, as well as authors who do not speak Chinese but are not ready to relinquish their Chineseness (Wang 2014). Wang thus proposed 'post-loyalism,' a more inclusive literary construct that focuses on the Sinophone as a psychological condition rather than political identity (Shi 2021, 313). The psychological emphasis implied by the post-loyalist approach helps it depart from what Shih sees as unavoidable unless the subject stands against diaspora: "the politics of homeland, cultural authenticity, ethnocentrism" (Chen 2015, 53). Thus, the post-loyalist articulation of the Sinophone could be used as "a critical interface to question the tenacious idea," the "morbid sentiment" many authors share towards China and Chineseness (Wang 2014). As Wang explains, while the loyalist "pines deeply for a home now destroyed" and the inhabitants of which are now "long dead but still haunt his consciousness," the post-loyalist "thrusts these specters onstage" (2013, 101). The stage, in the present case, is the comic book, and the label 'Sinophone comics' contributes in recognizing the heterogeneity of Sinophone cultural production.

The Sinophone brings an inclusive framework to the field of comics studies, enabling to compare works that resist strictly national or linguistic labels while still retaining features shaped by specific socio-cultural contexts. 'Sinophone comics' define works from the "margins of China and Chineseness" (Shih 2013, 25), as well as post-loyalist oeuvres previously defined as diaspora or migrant literature.

Therefore, Sinophone comics can include comics written in Sinitic languages as well as Anglophone, Francophone and Italophone works which show a considerable amount of Sinitic language (mainly Mandarin) 'incursions,' made by authors of Chinese origins or descent (i.e. the products of Chinese diasporas). I argue that, in the polycentric context of global literature, the post-loyalist Sinophone could be employed as a critical tool to study the specters and explore the specific temporal and spatial condition of their onstage performance.

To explore and explain the way Sinophone post-loyalist comic artists convey their negotiations through a specific form of world-building, the concept of Thirdspace comes to hand. Space and language constitute the "two main axes that provide the coordinates for Chinese migrant literature" (Codeluppi 2020, 194). What Soja defines as Thirdspace, however, is a peculiar kind of space that incorporates Homi Bhabha's reflection on the need of a critical thirding that "draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories" (Soja 1996, 5). Bhabha's Thirdspace is a space for hybridity "where all binary divisions and antagonisms, typical of modernist political concepts [. . .] cease to hold" (Buden et al. 2009, 201). Instead of the old dialectical concept of negation, it presents the idea of negotiation or cultural translation. The space born out of this negotiation can be interpreted as "both Western and Other and also properly neither, something that falls in-between" (Buden et al. 2009, 201). Similarly, Soja's Thirdspace is a "recombinatorial and radically open perspective," a critical strategy of "thirding-as-Othering" that responds to binarisms by "interjecting an-Other set of choices" (Soja 1996, 5). It is a counter-hegemonic space of negotiation, contestation, and rearticulation (Sibley 2001).

Additionally, Soja describes the Thirdspace from a geographical perspective "as a creative recombination and extension" that builds on a Firstspace, focused on "the 'real' material world," and a Secondspace perspective, which "interprets this reality through imagined representation of spatiality" (Soja 1996, 10). The Thirdspace is a "fully *lived space* [original emphasis], a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency" (Soja 2000, 11). Therefore, the Thirdspace of Soja includes but exceeds a strictly geographical perspective: being both imaginative and real, it represents a form of spatial awareness that can be applied to the analysis of textual spatialization and to the textual representation of intradiegetical space. Spatializing textual phenomena have been discussed for literary genres such as short stories and novels (Bhabha 1994). This essay will show how the concept of Thirdspace can be applied to other textual forms of fiction, such as comics, which play with space in a particularly complex way.

A reflection on spatializing strategies in comics could start from the reader's relationship with the text allowed by the page layout. While the readers of a

novel are bound to follow a precise (word) order to make sense of it, in a graphic novel they can travel the page to make sense of the text. Guido Ostanel, one of the owners of BeccoGiallo publisher, believes that "when the author of a comic book proposes a sequence to his/her readers, s/he always leaves a wide margin of responsibility to them" (Peterle 2014, 140).

Will Eisner, who defined comics as 'sequential art,' again discursively binding it to both time and space, also maintained that, even though "the artist must [. . .] secure control of the reader's attention and dictate the sequence [. . .], there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first" (1990: 40). The described freedom of the reader is possible because comics is a 'spatial medium' (Horrocks 2004): comic artists actually rebuild the space, both within and between the panels. Scott McCloud stresses the spatial dimension of time in comics, where "both past and future are real and visible and all around us" (1994, 104). Dylan Horrocks maintains that the aim of comic artists is not only telling a story, as it is undertaking a process of world-building. For him, "it's about making a place in which to explore ideas, experiences and their meanings" (2004). Sometimes even intradiegetically, 'embedded' authors comment on the very process of world-building they are involved in, including the audience in this process. The readers too have the opportunity to explore the newly created space, letting their eyes wander on the page. A theoretical link between this comics-specific concept of space, the postcolonial stance embraced by Bhabha and Soja and the features of the Sinophone is provided by the field of 'comic book geographies' (Peterle 2017, Dittmer 2014).

'Comic book geographies' conceive the comic book, especially its recently defined form of graphic novel, as a "'place of mediation' among authors [. . .], subjects/protagonists of the story and readers" (Peterle 2017, 124). This postcolonial perspective posits that comics do not offer solutions but open discussions that take shape through medium-specific world-building. In this essay, embracing Soja's concept of Thirdspace in the framework of the postcolonial critique proposed by 'comic book geographies,' implies addressing the spatial features of comics-making on the representational level, with the objective of exploring and mapping Sinophone post-loyalist authors' world-building through comics. I will show how the comics-specific peculiarities of Sinophone post-loyalism take shape through visual strategies mostly related to panel and page layout, and the inherent linguistic choices.

Methodology

Scholarly and general interest in the European Chinese diaspora "has steadily increased over the last two decades, corresponding to the evolution of international migration" (Chang 2012, 179). As a wider phenomenon, Chinese migration to Italy proves difficult to analyze because "Chinese migration to Europe, as a whole, lacks a central narrative" (Chang 2012, 179)[2]. The selected case studies epitomize this complexity and well represent the condition of the Sinophone. Matteo Demonte, Ciaj Rocchi and Yi Yang (the narrating subjects) are all situated in Italy but belong to different subgroups. Demonte is an Italian citizen of Chinese descent, while Yi Yang is now part of the educated elite coming to Italy for their studies (Ceccagno et al. 2008, Pedone 2014, 2018). Defining both Demonte (an Italian author of Chinese descent) and Yi Yang (a transcultural author) as Sinophone authors allows unifying diasporic and transcultural approaches and retrieving the tools to compare these works. From a sociological perspective, the narrated Sinophone subjects belong to different subgroups too. The first is a migrant worker from a little town in Zhejiang province, and his life and deeds have been framed in a wider context of the vast Zhejiang community in Italy. He is portrayed as speaking both Chinese and Italian. Conversely, Yang's young Chinese characters are (still) completely immersed in a mainland China scenario. They speak Italian, though, since the graphic novel was originally published in Italy and written in Italian. The Sinophone Thirdspace is articulated as a locus of expression of these hybrid identities, and visually represented for the reader.

To explore this (third)spatiality, my textual analysis focuses on framing, a notion that allows to understand the comic book as an organized nested system of 'spatio-topical' entities (Fisher Davies 2018), the broader and most comprehensive one being the multiframe. Even though Groensteen defined it as the way a "page divided up into a certain number of framed subspaces" (2013, 135), the multiframe is more than just 'a page:' "[t]he strip, the page, the double page, and the book are multistage multiframes, systems of panel proliferation that are increasingly inclusive" (2007). (Re)framing is a kind of textual spatialization that shapes discourse levels, also called 'laminations' or 'enclosures,' so that different subjectivities, temporalities and spatialities can coexist in the same multiframe. According to Fisher Davies, "[e]nclosures project the discourse of the creator: into enclosures the creator draws the world, the strip of experience, that the comic represents and within that, the characters project their own worlds, thoughts, memories, in a rich lamination of experience" (2018, 286).

2 For a comprehensive view of the phenomenon, see Thuno et al. (2025), Liu and Wang (2020).

Analyzing the representation of the intradiegetic space is deemed necessary in Sinophone comics. In the context of 'comic book geographies,' the spatial element in postcolonial world-building is considered from an intra-diegetic standpoint by "focusing on the representation of spatial phenomena in the contents" (MacLeod 2014). Being a situated[3] analysis, the following addresses the representation of landscapes and architectural elements related to 'China' (the motherland) or 'Italy' (the present location of the narrating/narrated subject). I will take into account both single panels and sequences to explore the way authors frame the experiences and re-create 'Chinese,' 'Italian' and 'Sino-Italian' spaces, consequently engendering a Sinophone Thirdspace.

Given that individual panels can also be "contextually read as spatiotemporal references" (Natsume 2010, 41), the two functions of the frame, selection and organization (Moerneaut et al. 2020), are explored through an analysis of the graphic rendering of spatial features and the selection and spatial organization of culturally charged elements therein.

Within the panels, I will analyze angles, viewpoints and enclosure 'nesting' that engender discursive laminations, since it is crucial to understand the author's communicative intentions by looking at the adopted perspective and the subjects and objects foregrounded, backgrounded or omitted (Moerneaut et al. 2020). The selection and organization of culturally charged elements in the comics page is another pivotal aspect to take into account while dealing with Sinophone authors, since the integration of 'Chinese' elements can be considered as a strategy of "projecting text-worlds" into the text (Fisher Davies 2018, 290). Authors choose what to locate and the salience of represented objects in their newly built world, despite any claim of truthfulness: both authors and readers are aware that "representation necessarily involves selection, perspective and interpretation" (El Refaie 2010, 167). When the 'text-worlds' projected are 'China' in 'Italy' or 'Italy' in 'China,' the authors' choice of displaying specific objects and symbols and their salience between the panels concurs in building for the reader a Sinophone (third)space.

As for the sequences, which are "a series of scenes linked or connected by a single idea" (Field 1995, 86), dynamic changes in spatial representation in panel transitions are hereby considered as a way of delimiting lesser narrative units within a sequence (i.e. the scenes). Comics creators work with the gutter (the space between the panels) to suggest and disrupt temporality and enhance emo-

3 The term 'situated' is used according to Shih, as "a situated literature in a given time and place," "a place- based practice" (2013, 717).

tional response (McCloud 1997) and may deliberately manipulate panel arrangement to (mis)guide the pattern of reading (Fisher Davies 2018, 290).

In this (Third)spatial construction, the reader is constantly interpellated to participate in performing, negotiating, or resolving a psychological identitarian struggle. To address the way the authors prepare the stage for readers to experience their Thirdspace, the analysis also focuses on visual modality. Michael Halliday (1977) states that language is organized around, as Sindoni efficiently summarizes, "a small number of discrete cluster systems with strong internal interconnections" (Sindoni 2011, 40), which are what he will later call 'metafunctions,' a term "adopted to suggest that function was an integral component within the [Functional Grammar] theory" (Halliday and Mathiessen 2004, 31). The interpersonal metafunction is "language as action" (Halliday and Mathiessen 2004, 30). It enacts social roles and constitutes social experience (Sindoni 2011, 40), while 'modality' describes the "interpersonal metafunction whereby the speaker expresses his or her judgment of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he or she is saying" (El Refaie 2010, 164). In visual socio-semiotics, this notion is employed to investigate "the degree to which a representation is to be taken as true or real" (van Leeuwen 2005, 160), an important factor to consider in the case of (semi)autobiographical accounts (*Primavere*) and fictional works that carry subjective projections (*Easy Breezy*). To measure visual modality (i.e., the degrees of representational realism), I will focus on markers such as contextualization (background representation), depth, color differentiation, saturation, modulation, and illumination (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 160–162).

Lastly, the interrelation between words and images (which informs the language of comics) is deemed a crucial locus of Sinophone representation. Words are therefore treated as an integral part of the panel and page layout.

Referentiality, Spatial Symbolism and Subjectivity

Primavere represents the beginning of a journey to discover Demonte's family roots and routes. Based on documentary evidence, the real-life Wu Lishan launched different activities and started a family in Milan, thus seemingly succeeding in establishing roots. Did he stop looking back at his motherland? Rocchi/Demonte give their own answer. They appear to tell Wu's version of the story, but as the reader discovers on the last page, the story is retold by Demonte's grandmother. Therefore, Rocchi/Demonte force "absence" into "presence" (Wang 2013, 102). Unable to capture Wu's first-hand experience of the 'homeland,' the authors are "still able to fabricate one, creating an affinity to a historical—nay, de-

sired—object that [they] seek to recover or restore" (Wang 2013, 102) for the sake of storytelling and the restoration of memory. In this nested recollection, the intra-diegetic subjects' first-hand diasporic thoughts and memories are unrepresentable. Their spectres can be animated in the comic book 'space,' turning it into a Thirdspace. While Wu Lishan re-builds his motherland in his dreams, Rocchi/Demonte are in fact rebuilding his dream-like fantasy and remapping his life path, which unravels itself connecting China and Italy. I agree with Scibetta that *Primavere* is a "mixture between historical and fictional reconstruction [. . .] given the historical accuracy of the authors' research at the basis of their work," but I don't think that the fictional part is "a minor aspect" (2023, 63). In fact, I maintain that the very balance between reality and fiction, carefully constructed linguistically and visually, is what allows us to define this text as a Thirdspace. The authors make "claims to verifiability and referentiality" (Suleiman 2000, 544) that are grounded on individual experience and documentary evidence, but the "coercive fictitious content of comics reportage" (Ahrens 2019) is easily detectable.

In the initial pages, the first-person narrator establishes himself as a personally involved, intra-diegetic voice, even though Demonte appears only twice throughout the book, as a baby held by his grandfather (2015, 121) and grandmother (2015, 128). This stance is further strengthened by the conclusion, which provides Demonte's testimony on the origins of this graphic novel. The paratexts that follow (2015, 128–137), i.e., one post-scriptum, three essays, and many photographic documents, provide the documentary ground on which to define this work as a reality-based biography. As for the framing, the adopted frontal perspective (subjective angles and canted framing do not occur) would suggest an "objective" stance (Moernaut et al. 2020), and the choice of using real photos as the basis for character designs enhances indexicality. For example, Wu Lishan's portrait, often inserted in the novel, is based on a photographic document also exhibited on the book's last pages as proof of the authors' documentation process.

Nevertheless, symbolism often intrudes and steadily guides the choice of culturally charged elements. Historicity and the documentarian attitude are disrupted through redrawing and re-contextualization of the photographic elements, allowing them to acquire a subjective aura. Architecture is detailed and shaded, but also projected against flat backgrounds, and its color is unmodulated. A similar process of balancing occurs with the choice and the arrangement of culturally charged objects and scenarios that possess or acquire a strong symbolic power: the 'motherland,' Qingtian, is rendered as unreal, suspended in time and isolated in space, painted in bright colors that both convey a feeling of (post-loyalist) enchantment. The marginality of the represented village (Figure 1) gives shape and colors to the liminal condition of the migrant and the subaltern (Hooks 1989, 19).



Figure 1: Depiction of Qingtian (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 12). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (top to bottom):

He left Qing Tian, a small mountain village in Eastern China (It.);
Qingtian (Ch. and It.).

In Figure 2 there is another creative use of the mono-frame panels where a *real-and-imagined* space is accurately rebuilt. China is represented as a dream-like place, both suspended in time and rooted in history. This balance between historicity and fiction is also displayed by the relationship between text and image.



Figure 2: Wu Lishan's letter to his family (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 87). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (top to bottom):

Dear parents, brothers and sisters. I'd heard about the political changes in my dear country, and I suspected that something like this was happening. Maybe, I had just hoped that the corner of Paradise between Qing Tian and Rui An, that edge where I ran, played and grew up, stayed intact. That remained as my eyes caught it when I said goodbye to you and started my journey. My heart cries for what we loved and lost, for the ancestors' land stepped over by the army that did not free it, but sacked it instead, in the name of an ideal that I find hard to share. I'll try to help you as I can, by sending you money. Besides this, I cannot but hope that hundreds of flowers blossom on our land, because the clan's strength has always been the land.



Figure 3: Wu Lishan sails to Hong Kong and Europe (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 8 and 9). ©Rocchi and Demonte.



Figure 3 (continued)

Translation:

Page 8: He sailed to Hong Kong.
Page 9: Then, from there he left for Europe.

The evocative symbols of Spring, youth, immortality and purity are arranged in an idealized rural setting. In this panel, concrete and abstract visual elements dialogue with the romantic and nostalgic tone of Wu Lishan's letter to his parents. Notably, the land Wu mentions in the closing sentence occupies more than a half of the entire frame and is thus stressed both visually and verbally as a crucial component of Wu's China. Other splash-pages dedicated to the re-construction of 'China' show a combination of flat and tridimensional elements, so that the naturalistic rendering of landscape is disrupted by the didactic and emotive necessity of displaying cultural symbols. The 'Chinese' spaces thus acquire a Thirdspace quality: they are both real and imagined, lived and remembered by the narrated subject.

Movements and distances are also represented symbolically, both within the panels and in sequences. In the scene-to-scene transition shown in Figure 3, Wu travels from Qingtian to Hong Kong and from Hong Kong to Europe. This kind of transition, which "transports us across significant distances of time and space" (McCloud 1994, 71) consists in the juxtaposition of two panels where tridimensional renditions of 'traditional' vessels dialogue with the bidimensional graphic styles of the waves and the low visual modality of the background. Notably, the differences between the vessels, the overall organization of the represented space (the object placement and the orientation), and, most of all, between the color palettes succeed in recreating the feeling of a major shift in time and space.

Rocchi/Demonte's tension between subjective, dream-like, symbolical and factual representations of China is expressed by the concomitant use of architectural elements and maps. Map-like Chinese territory recurs when the narrator lectures the reader on the historical events occurring while Wu was living in Italy. During the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Civil War (1946–1949), China is represented as a flat territory colored in sharp blue for regions ruled by the Nationalist Party (KMT), and red for the zones led by the Communist Party (CCP). Figure 4 exemplifies the recurring visual rendering of China-as-a-map: the saturated, unmodulated bright colors of the map serve as a bi-dimensional background for characters/objects that possess a higher visual modality. This specific splash-page represents the consequences of the Anti-Japanese War and stands as an example of visual narration within the panel.

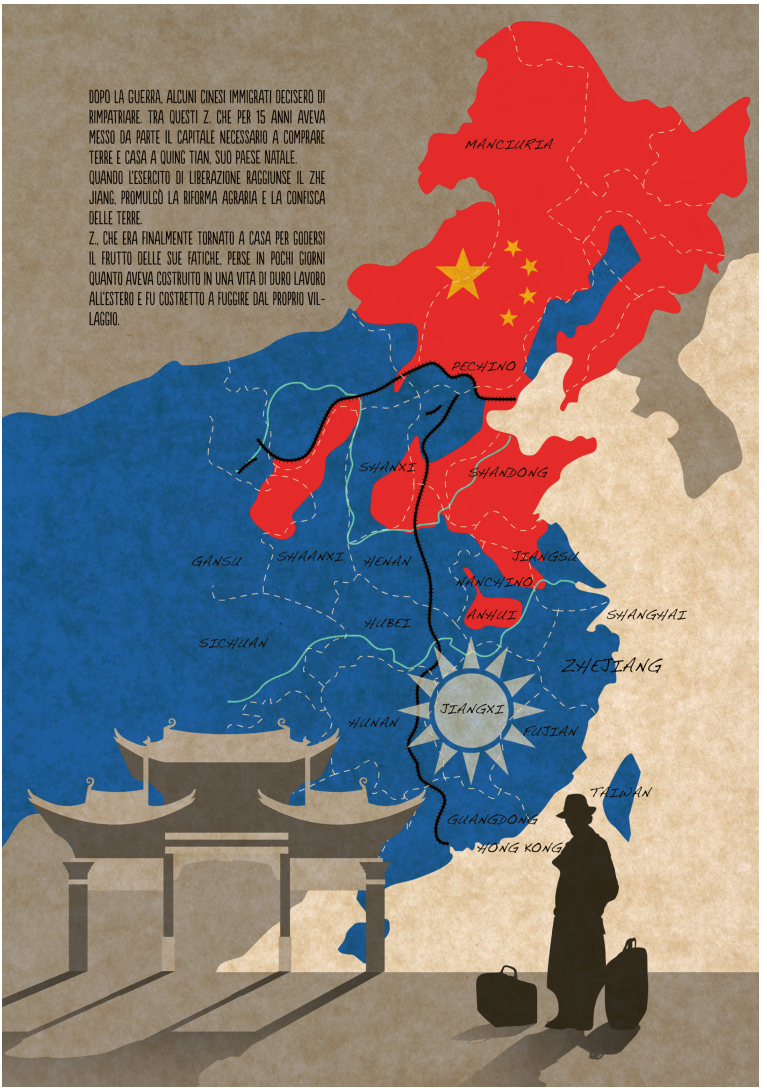

Figure 4: Chinese map with architectural and human (Mr Z.'s) silhouettes (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 65). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation:

After the war, some Chinese migrants decided to go back to China. Among them, there was Z. who, for 15 years, saved money to buy land and a house in Qingtian, his hometown. On reaching Zhejiang, the Liberation Army promulgated the land reform and land confiscation. Z., who had finally come back home to enjoy the fruits of his work, lost in a few days all he had built in a life of hard work abroad, and had to flee from his village.

Here, the relationship between verbal and visual is one of enhancement (Martinec and Salway 2005), since the text provides additional circumstantial information to the image, i.e. more details on both the history of China during the 1950s, and the story of Mr Z. Besides narrating historical events, the visual component exploits the Thirdspatial function of the comic book: it stages the liminal condition of the Sinophone by letting Mr Z. hang on the edge between two pages and two worlds.

Cartography and urbanistic views recur through the pages of *Primavere*. The authors often combine tridimensional photographic elements and bi-dimensional spatial rendering, also recurring to the insertion of city maps. Figures 5 and 6 allow the comparison of different approaches to spatial representation.



Figure 5: Milan railway station (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 14). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation:

In 1931, Milan was a fast-growing city. The new railway station was inaugurated that very year. It was a monumental building. Those who arrived in Milan had the impression of reaching a great international capital.



Figure 6: Wu Lishan's encounter with Mr Z. (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 12). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 1: That should be my fellow countryman. (Ch. and It.)
Panel 2: Mr. Z. lived in a *casa di ringhiera* in Canonica street n. 35.
Panel 3: Do you want some tea? (Ch. and It.)
Panel 4: Mr Z. had arrived during the 1920s. He had established the first Chinese community in Canonica street. Text 2: Milan's Chinese were all fellow countrymen from the district of Qingtian. They were the most active in peddling fake pearls, before, and silk ties, later.

When the panel shown in Figure 5 appears, young Wu does not know the metropolis well, thus the space is (re)presented to the reader both as a tridimensional reproduction and as an icon. To this iconographical representation, a radical attachment to Chineseness is affixed and expressed through the insertion of the sinograms that surround the date '1931' and work as an anchorage to the Sinophone reader. The Italian spaces are consistently represented in an accurate and/or naturalistic way. The typically Milanese housing style called *case a ringhiera*, working-class two-roomed apartments with shared balconies with railings, is a case in point (Figure 6). Conversely, the precise rendering of Qingtian's borders, its cartography, or architectural specificities, are never displayed: in the last frame of the panel in Figure 6, the village of Qingtian appears as a dream-like blurred territory. This symbolic attitude is unavoidable, since the real space is unrepresentable.

In *Easy Breezy*, a fictional work, referentiality and symbolism are represented differently, leaving greater room for subjectivity. Yang operates a triple distancing from the narrated events (in space, in time, and in language), and this choice impacts referentiality. The author sets the story far from where she is (in Italy), but exactly where she used to be (in China), thus proposing a spatio-temporal reconstruction of her youth. However, and notably, the fact that her Chinese characters speak Italian projects the diegesis onto the present, dismantling consistency (and referentiality), and building up hybridity. The choice of setting the story in China, guided by both the desire to portray a familiar place and the feeling of awkwardness towards setting a story in Italy (Yang and Caschera 2021, Yang and Bonzi 2023), results in the creation of a Sinophone Thirdspace for the Italian readers. While applying framing analysis on panel/page layout, with a focus on spatial features such as landscapes and architecture and on the selection and organization of culturally charged visual elements, an analysis of the salience and frequency of visual elements has been carried out with the aim of clarifying what the author deems significant in her newly-built 'China.' Referentiality, in this case, is based on first-hand memories. The unnamed, imagined Chinese city

where the story is set is thus both real and imagined. It serves as a composed space of negotiation of a relationship with China and Chineseness that is complicated by the author's choice to study, live, and pursue a career in Italy, as well as to write and draw for Italian readers.

In *Easy Breezy*, the variety of angles and distancing choices, from the bird's eye to the bottom-up view, the deforming perspective, and the close-ups, inform the cinematic quality of the text. In many sequences, the author quickly changes the reader's location in the space she is creating, shifting from a more objective to a decisively subjective perspective. This enhances the text's emotional power, while carrying away from cultural reflection (or even shock). The whole plot roughly follows the conventions (Umberto Eco would say the 'intertextual frames') of a road movie so that the author can display dynamic changes in spatial representation: in many sequences, what the reader mainly sees is the landscape surrounding the vehicle the protagonists are travelling in and its interior. In these sequences, Yang willingly accelerates and decelerates the rhythm of narration by employing 'action-to-action' as well as 'aspect to aspect' panel transitions. The latter are "most often used to establish mood or a sense of place [. . .], time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations [. . .] Rather than acting as a bridge between separate moments, the reader here must assemble a single moment using scattered fragments" (McCloud 1994, 79).

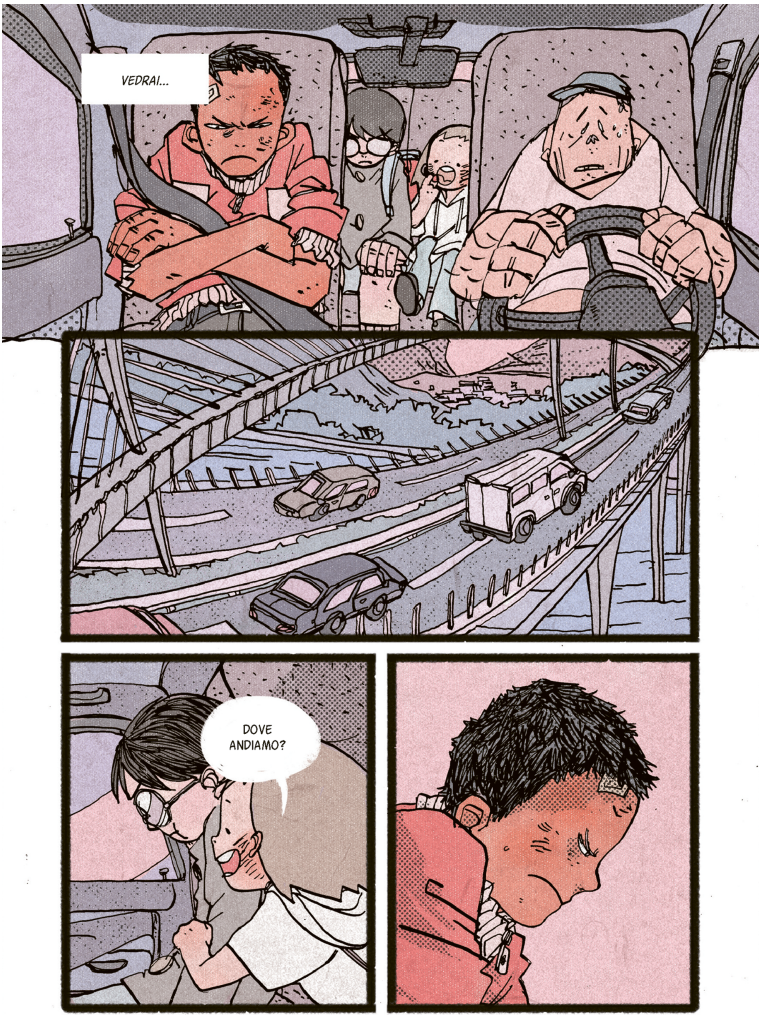

Figure 7: The crew on their way to Yun Duo's home (Yang 2021, 77). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation (top to bottom):

Panel 1: You'll see . . .
Panel 3: Where are we going?

Through the panel shown in Figure 7, it is possible to acknowledge Yang's switching from interior to exterior spaces. Thanks to the alternation of high and low visual modality techniques (e.g. the presence or absence of background and depth that affect referentiality), the interior can be perceived as both narrow and large. It changes depending on the characters' mood: inside the van, the crowded space is emptied by projecting the character onto a monochrome backdrop, a technique that lowers visual modality and is frequently displayed in manga. As for the exterior, the expressionist (deformed and curved) lines define urban architecture's lower visual modality and concur in evoking an emotional or sensual response. At the same time, the author sets up a very articulate landscape, which suggests that this Thirdspace represents a combination of many realistic Chinese spots. A technique employed in the road movie sequences to enhance readers' emotional response is what McCloud defines as 'subjective motion.' Observing an object in motion is involving, but being that object (i.e., being in the driver seat) is even more so (1994, 114). From a car window, the reader experiences a city provided with a river, many bridges and skyways, and those construction sites (Figure 8) that typically crowd Chinese cities.



Figure 8: Running from the kidnapper (Yang 2021, 39). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 1: How much do you weigh? You're light as a feather!
Panel 2: I'm good.
Panel 4: Men at work (Ch.); Honk honk (Ch., onom.)

Aspect-to-aspect transitions allow the comics author to manipulate the narrative pace and enhance discursive complexity. The specific multiframe shown in Figure 9, which occupies an entire page and recurs twice in the book, functions as a mood setting and as a metaphor of spatial movement and temporal discontinuity among intertwined plotlines. The inclusion of other kinds of landscapes, as this bird-eye view in Figure 9 shows, further clarifies the features of a multifaceted Sinophone space. This objective angle on a medium-sized city full of typically Chinese traditional architectural elements combines natural referents in low visual modalities and culturally charged ones rendered in a higher visual modality, thus displaying a dialogue between referentiality and subjectivity.



Figure 9: 'Chinese' landscape as a recurring frame (Yang 2021, 20). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation (top to bottom):

Panel 1: Yeah …
Panel 2: Crack (Ch. onom.)

Yang's ability and penchant for articulating both interior and exterior spaces reveal the idiosyncrasies of her world-building. This Thirdspace is fresh and alive under the reader's eyes, not merely functional to the main narrative but ever-changing according to the emotive needs. For this reason, in *Easy Breezy*, some locations are significant *per se*. Enclosures, such as balloons and panels, are employed to communicate this salience. If arranged in a multiframe, they perform the task of projecting the discourse of the creator and, at a second level, the discourse of the characters (Fisher Davies 2018, 287). The 'cemetery sequence,' partially shown in Figure 10, is a case in point. When the girl asks to visit her grandmother, the boys agree, deeming it a safe place. In the cemetery scene, however, they discover that Yun Duo brought them to her place of eternal rest.



Figure 10: Everybody singing on the hill (Yang 2021, 114). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 2: This ...
Panel 3: night ...

Yun Duo's enthusiasm 'drags' the other characters up a hill, where the grandmother is supposed to live. When the characters reach the top and discover her tomb, the narration pace slows down to the point it is perceived as suspended. The characters are then portrayed as singing all together (Figure 10). Through an 'aspect-to-aspect' panel transition, Yang displays their subjectivities (each character is driven by different thoughts and memories) and stages their becoming a family. This type of panel transition also causes an effect of 'momentaneity,' "a multi-layered reception of the [...] space and the characters as located both in the same temporality and apart at the same time" (Natsume 2010, 42). This sequence stands out for letting the readers pause and enjoy a Sinophone Thirdspace where human and natural elements dialogue, based on a syncretic conception of human-nature relationships. After climbing the hill, the little conflicts among characters are resolved, and they are portrayed as close to each other, unifying their voices together with the wind, a culturally charged element representing a Daoist and Buddhist reference. The way the spatial features are rendered and the (human and animal) characters are arranged, is crucial to convey this message of unity and hybridity: the bottom-up movement towards the top, allowed the characters to ascend to a *utopia* where city life is far away, time is suspended and barriers are lifted.

Framing Cultural and Linguistic Chineseness

Interspersed throughout the novels, there are many visual 'cultural elements' referring to Chineseness. These elements, which include linguistic signs, inform the very nature of the Sinophone Thirdspace and are inserted in both abstract and lived spaces. In *Primavere*, the 'lived' cultural elements represent the way Wu's bonds are built through spatialized performances (eating), which also convey a sense of place attachment. The Chinese restaurant *La pagoda* (The Pagoda) and the factory are spaces that visually tend to satisfy the post-loyalist tension towards something the protagonist cannot reach, and the reader can only experience through hybrid representations. In a sequence dedicated to Wu's life at the workplace, the central, most significant frame shows the very heart of Chinese conviviality: food. Here, the sinogram meaning 'food' is juxtaposed to the plate, full of rice and condiments. At the end of the sequence, Wu's family appears: his wife rendered as a silhouette, her dark space superimposed on a bright scene. The men at the workplace are speaking Chinese while eating Chinese food as a way of preserving their heritage and keeping the bond alive, when she disrupts the scene both visually, with her silhouette, and linguistically, conveying an Italian greeting. Through food and language, this scene stages the will to maintain an attachment to the past while rooting in the present.



Figure 11: Chinese food in Milan (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 97). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

In 1962, *La Pagoda*, the first Chinese restaurant, was opened in Milan, in Fabio Filzi Street, by Jiang Fuiming, one of the most successful Chinese wholesalers and Wu Lishan's associate in bag production.
Braised dumplings, steamed dumplings, spring rolls, grilled dumplings (It. and Ch.).
The restaurant was an efficient means to let the migrant Chinese population into Milan culture. As part of the food habits of Milan citizens, the Chinese restaurant favored the inclusion of the Chinese community in the city.

The choice of opening The Pagoda is visually framed as a desire to connect China and Italy. Through the splash-page shown in Figure 11, Rocchi/Demonte arrange this symbolic unity by creating a Thirdspace where typical Chinese dishes are floating above Milan's postcard-like skyline. Here, the representation of Milan is realistic, while food's arrangement in space seems to be more 'romanticized' in visual style, suspended out of time. The cultural elements are explained through tags for the non-Sinophone reader to understand and for the Sinophone to recognize. Notably, enclosures are employed to carry sinograms. Rocchi/Demonte's display of isolated didactic elements makes it easier to detect what represents an explicit reference to Chineseness.

Conversely, for *Easy Breezy* which is set in China, everything in this Thirdspace should be acknowledged by the reader as a re-construction of a Firstspace, i.e. first-hand experienced space. Food culture occupies a salient position as in *Primavere*, but in just a few scenes and to communicate a casual, familiar vibe, a sense of ease: Rocchi/Demonte use food as a collective ritual whilst Yang uses it as an authenticity enhancer.

The specificity of Yang's diegesis is her distancing the narrative in time, since, as in many Sinophone post-loyalist texts, temporality is strictly linked to memory. Therefore, what could be deemed in the analysis as an undoubtedly culturally charged element is what she extracts from the precise chronotope of her youth. *Easy Breezy* is set in late 1990s China, when there were no smartphones and small shops offered telephone services; Mickey Mouse backpacks were common, and Casio watches were a hit for young boys. The 'consumerist nostalgia' of these global brands/logos could be easily acknowledged and shared by the Italian reader, but there are many objects they would not be able to recognize (e.g., a tin of soya milk, a common drink in China but not in Italy). These culturally charged objects, as well as the untranslated inscriptions disseminated throughout the texts, prove the author's unwillingness to explain the context to the reader, who is left to directly experience her Thirdspace. Here, according to Buddhist sensitiv-

ity, there is no clear separation between the species, especially from an emotive standpoint. The salience of animal characters and references is confirmed by the frequent verbal and visual continuity between species. The evil antagonist addresses the boys as 'kittens' and 'bunnies,' while describing himself as a wolf. As for the visuals, Yun Duo and Yang Kuaikuai are portrayed as sharing or projecting their feelings and desires onto different animals (i.e. penguins and swallows).

The presence of sinograms as part of the panel and page layout is the most visible feature of the Sinophone Thirdspace. Rocchi/Demonte insert non-simplified characters in almost every panel and their presence should be considered as part of the whole layout. Preferring the traditional characters signals the intention of recreating an authentic linguistic scenario, since Wu and his co-villagers left China when the linguistic reforms were only being preliminarily discussed. Besides, it is a way of textualizing the temporal and political distance from the contemporary PRC. In *Primavere*, each person or cultural item is provided with both their Italian and Chinese names, and the sinograms are regularly inscribed in enclosures that produce multiple laminations. By means of the textual sections, not always inscribed in a frame but often superimposed on the background, the apparently objective narrator aims to explain Chinese culture to the readers, thus disrupting the main narrative. Chineseness enters the represented Italian space though objects, symbols and sinograms, which are located in hybrid spaces framed and re-framed by geometrical patterns. Notably, superimposition itself is very consistent with traditional Chinese spatial imagination. This process of spatio-temporal construction can well be detected if the frames are not considered in isolation, but as meaning-making enclosures inhabiting the entire page.



Figure 12: Wu Lishan arrives in Milan (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 13). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 1: Do you need a taxi, Mr Chinese? (Milanese dialect)
Panel 2: Let me see … (Milanese dialect)
Panel 3: Yes, it's at *Scigolatt* district.
Panel 4: Mr Zu, Italy, Milan. Address: no. 35 Canonica Street.
Panel 6: At that time, Canonica street was part of a district located just outside the city walls, known as "*Scigolatt* district" [district of the onions], the greengrocer district, a working-class area traditionally populated by artisans and merchants. The district's feature, its old courtyards, its *case di ringhiera*, the small workshops, the old and affordable prices, facilitated the integration of Chinese migrants
(*Scigola*: onion, in Milanese dialect. *Scigolat*, onion sellers, greengrocers)

In Figure 12, the central round frame is nestled among rectangular ones, subverting the relationship between the sky (round) and the earth (squared) in Chinese traditional symbolism. The object portrayed in this central frame is a piece of paper with few lines written in Chinese. The paper, folded for a long time, now shows orthogonal lines that give a sense of paper-related materiality and act as frames. The (material) lines that time left on the paper are visually matched by those of Milan's city-map reproduced in the frame below: Wu's rickshaw, projected on the map as the Chinese characters are on the folded page, is both real and imagined. The Chinese writing system is pervasively present in this double-page spread in Figure 13. Here, the reader can experience multiple laminations, represented by the organization of people, objects, and textual enclosures and sinograms.



Figure 13: Wu Lishan's letter to his family in Qingtian (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 20–21). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation:

Dear parents, brothers and sisters, I write to you from Italy, where I finally settled. Now I have a house and a job, and I have met other fellow countrymen who came here before me. I've learned Italian just as much as I can now to make myself understandable and move around this city so different from Qingtian. Despite this news, I always think of you and I try to picture you in a New China that is quickly changing. News of the advancement of the Revolutionary Army reached this distant place, so that I sometimes wonder whether with this Nationalist passport I could go back to my homeland and find you all! Or whether, instead, the political turmoil changed my little life once and for all. I wanted to convey my affection and let you know that, despite the distance, I always carry you in my heart.

Zhejiang's cartographic rendering is enclosed in the upper right, but Chinese territory is just one of the elements chosen to remind the reader about Wu's origins. The 'cultural elements' (Qing era[4] robes on his ancestors, traditional architecture, an envelope letter written in Chinese) carry a symbolic but also a documentary

4 The Qing dynasty lasted from 1644 to 1911.

value: the letter as well as Wu's portrait are also shown in the paratexts as evidence of a first-hand relationship between the authors and the narrated material. This reference to the pre-PRC times indexes to non-modernity and can be interpreted as an attachment to an unretrievable past. In this multiframe, Rocchi/Demonte show how a migrant is never a blank slate. The process of negotiation between past and present, Chinese and Italian identity is highlighted by building a Thirdspace where multiple discursive laminations coexist: the Italian language text, enclosed in a white rectangle, tries to give justice to both the real (China, Chinese culture) and the imagined (re-enlivened through memories and synthetized for the Italian reader).

In *Easy Breezy*, sinograms in the inscriptions carry the most important deictic value. Two languages, Italian and Chinese, had to be integrated in order to make sense and make the story credible (readable) in the media context of its reception. Chinese characters speak Italian and their dialogues are framed by speech balloons, a second-degree lamination. In the 'outer space,' the first-degree lamination (the creator's 'direct' discourse), all the linguistic components are in Chinese. Onomatopoeias, always written in Chinese and not translated, are also integrated in the landscape and superimposed on characters, objects, and architecture. This requires an additional effort from the reader, who is called to infer and actively (re)create the sound in their own language. Besides onomatopoeias, sinograms are inserted in any kind of inscriptions, from billboards and shops to traffic signs, thus informing and constituting the landscape (Figure 14). In these inscriptions, the verbal and visual dimensions completely overlap, and the linguistic element becomes untranslatable. This absence of translation contributes in communicating truthfulness and referentiality, while also signifying the inaccessibility of this Sinophone Thirdspace.

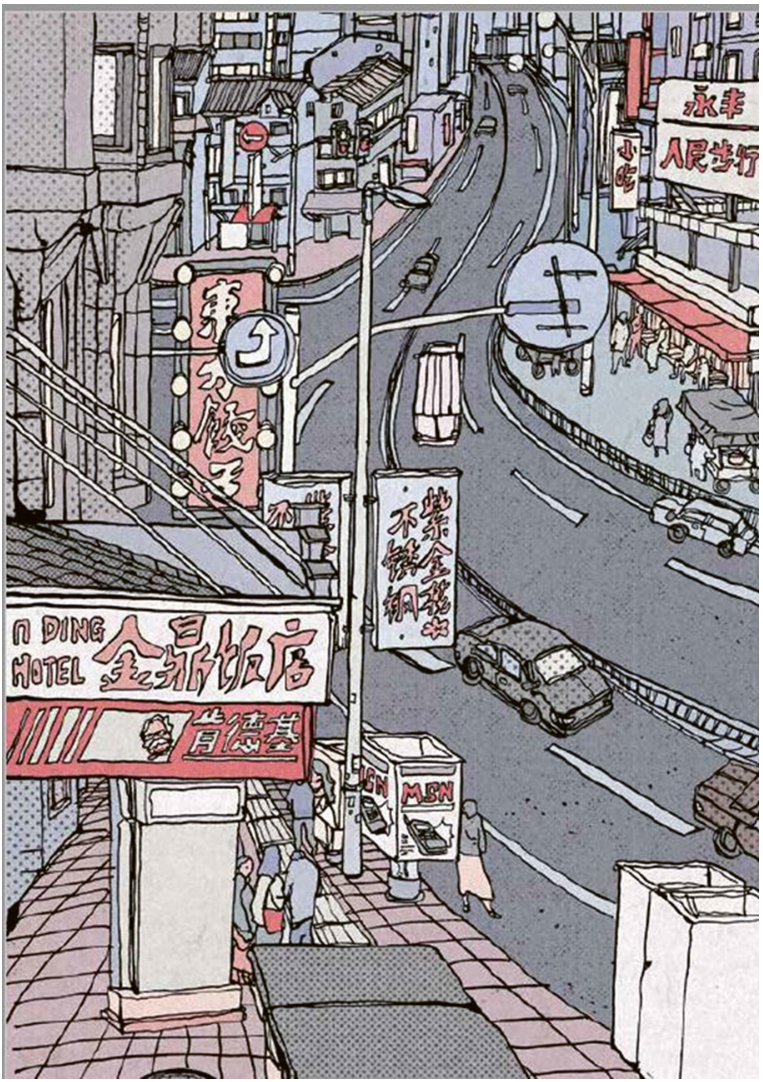

Figure 14: 'Chinese' cityscape (Yang 2021, 96). ©Bao Publishing.

Sinograms take part in the spatial organization and in its saturation. Furthermore, cooperation between logographic script, panel layout and images builds a subject-specific spatiality. As shown in Figures 8, 9, and 14, inscriptions and onomatopoeias are handwritten: hand drawing not only modalizes the text as personal (Fisher Davies 2018, 291), but also emphasizes its being mediated and therefore, 'translated' by the Sinophone author. The subjectivization of the space is carried out through Chinese script and different kinds of laminations. Besides onomatopoeias and inscriptions, language as perceived by the characters informs an additional kind of lamination that textualizes Sinophone issues. A case in point is Yang's use of the 'nerdy' Yang Kuaikuai, to let the reader see the world through the mediation of his glasses. When Yang Kuaikuai's glasses are shown reflecting the object he is looking at, i.e. a book of *Yuwen* (语文, 'written language' or 'language and literature'), the sinograms are translated in Italian with the word *Cinese* (Chinese) in a dialogue on the next page, even though the original phrase bears no reference to Chineseness. It is possible to infer that the space occupied by the glasses on the comic book page – which is, in fact, a frame – serves as an enclosure through which Yang shows the Italian reader her world and her youth. The choice of not superimposing a translation onto those sinograms, again, enhances the indexical effect and the aesthetic value of the oeuvre, but does not favor intercultural communication. Not able to make sense of these signs, the sinograms could cause a sense of estrangement in the reader, leaving them lingering on the threshold.

While sinograms carry an explicit cultural weight, it is not so easy to decipher the Sinophone post-loyalist value of the omnipresent lines (rounded, crooked, chaotic) that are able to fill the representational space, as they do with the shadows in Figure 15. Yang's space is crowded by these signifying lines. This 'saturation anxiety' concurs in creating a highly personal Sinophone (Third)space and works in the opposite direction of the sinograms, provoking an emotional response in the reader.



Figure 15: At the scrapyard (Yang 2021, 51). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation:

Here we are!

Conclusions

The examined case studies, which differ in genre and style, have been chosen to test whether the theoretical framework of Sinophone post-loyalism and the analytical tools of framing analysis and visual socio-semiotics allow for comparison and for making sense of various communicative choices. Besides having been created by an author of Chinese descent (*Primavere*) and of Chinese nationality (*Easy Breezy*), these works share the intention of indexing China/Chineseness by creating a Thirdspace where relevant issues engage in dialogue. Rocchi/Demonte's work was edited and published as a historically accurate and socially significant reality-based comic book, a genre that programmatically draws on facts and representation of real places. Therefore, their China tends to convey objectivity as well as maintain a distance from the facts, even though (re)told by a relative. Nevertheless, the analysis has shown that the authors disrupt verisimilitude and referentiality through graphic strategies that help represent a subjective truth and create a dream-like effect. *Primavere*'s Thirdspace is well-balanced, tidy, wide and bright. A general stiffness of composition, rendered by 'rational' and 'timeless' lines (McCloud 1994, 124–125), characterizes the relationship between verbal and visual resources, too.

As a work of fiction, Yi Yang's book provides a different perspective on the Thirdspace. It is an entertaining graphic novel that does not make any truth claim, but its spatio-temporal features draw from first-hand memories and actual experiences of China in the 1990s (and beyond), spatio-temporally distant from the context of publication. Compared to Rocchi/Demonte's narrative, Yang's is shorter and faster: while *Primavere* spans five decades, the whole plot of *Easy Breezy* unravels in a few hectic days. The cinematic quality contributes to accelerating the novel's rhythm, reducing the reader's opportunities of pausing on the images, if they are not 'compelled' to do so through aspect-to-aspect transitions. Yang visually includes readers in the frame, guiding their attention by employing a wide range of angles and distancing techniques, not afraid of displaying a highly dynamic subjective style.

In *Primavere*, multiple 'voices' and realities are created by different kinds of laminations, which underscore the role of displaying the Sinophone nature of the text. The story is mostly narrated through the authors' voice, and the re-enactment of the past through dialogical scenes, although present, does not have a substantial narrative role in the economy of the text and does not reduce the distance between readers and text: it is a space where history is narrated while a story is staged. Sinograms in the texts and their translation are mainly inscribed in explanatory enclosures, and the apparent boundaries of these texts reveal the aim of clarifying (or even controlling) the Sinophone element. These choices re-

flect a precise and conscious aim to transform the comic book into a space for negotiation of identities and cultures that the reader is welcomed to observe or even study, but rarely invited to enter. The marginal space reconciles and synthesizes the two souls of the graphic novel: its being a post-loyalist product that carries an emotive weight, and at the same time a documentary work, a socio-cultural testimony that stands alone as historiographical material for the readers to study. Conversely, Yang's authorial voice can't be heard through enclosures, but pervades the space through her handwriting and drawing style, which also enhances the readers' emotional response. She chooses to exclude them linguistically, by reserving the diegetical (Third)space to Sinophone readers.

The culturally charged elements inserted, sinograms included, are displayed and employed in different ways. Rocchi/Demonte's work includes didactic and educational 'cultural elements:' sinograms are translated, and culturally charged objects are contextualized with short explanatory tags and notes. Yang's references to realia draw mainly on a shared East-Asian imaginary – typical of a post-eighties generation socio-linguistically defined as *balinghou* (八零后) – that does not need further explanations. This signals a resistance against assimilation and domestication: her (generational) memory and the insertion of her actual experience in a text is exactly what the Sinophone means, an unsolved discussion with 'Chineseness.'

China as rebuilt in both selected graphic novels (only in a few panels, in *Primavere*, and as the only setting of the story, in *Easy Breezy*) is obviously not the actual China (Firstspace), but is not a merely ideal China (Secondspace) either. By the same token Italy, as represented in *Primavere*, is not 'just' Italy. Besides and notably, more than Italy and China, *Primavere* tends to represent very specific localities, Qingtian and Milan, since the book emphasizes Milanese regional elements (housing styles and dialect), thus signaling that the narrated hybridity is not only in between two countries, but also in between two specific regions.

The analyzed Thirdspaces are places where Italy and China visually and linguistically meet, combine, discuss and produce meaning. It is possible to see China and (regional) Italy dialoguing through the pages of *Primavere*, due to the parallel use of Chinese and Italian sentences in dialogues and tags, written with a digitized font. One cannot experience any trace of Italian Firstspace in *Easy Breezy*, and the way the author deals with the typeset Italian language and the handwritten sinograms on different laminations does not communicate an intercultural aim. The complexity of Yang's relationship with China and Chineseness as an author situated in Italy has to be read considering her intra- and extra-diegetical spatial dislocation. Yang's 'China' is dismantled and re-arranged through the lens of memories and finally staged for the Italian readership, thus it becomes a composite Thirdspace. This staging leads to the 'collective' aspect of

the Thirdspace – which is, I recall, a "locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency" (Soja 2000, 11). Clearly, *Primavere* has a sociocultural (if not a straight political) aim: it is framed as a reality-based work despite the weight of symbolism. Rocchi/Demonte choose to rebuild the hybrid space of the diasporic subject while making a step towards an inter-generational resolution of identitarian conflicts. The Thirdspace of this comic book is a locus of knowledge exchange and communication, within the Sino-Italian community and between this community and the others. In Yang's work, the collective is subordinated to the subjective intention of finding her own path as a transcultural author (Dagnino 2013). Being the most prolific and successful Chinese comic artist working in Italy, her graphic novels factually represent a place where other Sinophone post-loyalist subjectivities may feel represented and not exhibited. In *Easy Breezy*, the contradictions of a Sinophone post-loyalist identity and their possible solutions can be experienced *in action*, as issues well integrated in an entertaining fictional narrative and not as problems artificially stressed.

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NGOI Hui Chien

Chapter 8
The Obscured Chinese Suffering during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya: An Analysis of Eddie See Yew Lee's *Three Years and Eight Months*

Abstract: This chapter examines the political significance of the obscured Chinese suffering in Eddie See Yew Lee's *Three Years and Eight Months* (2016), a Chinese-language comic about the history of the Japanese occupation of Malaya (1941–1945). The Japanese army targeted the Malayan Chinese due to their past support for China's anti-Japanese movement. I draw upon Shih Shu-mei's theory of the Sinophone, which situates the analysis of the Sinitic-language community within the local context rather than mainland China. Hence, my textual analysis contextualizes *Three*'s obscuration of Chinese suffering in Malaysian politics. I show how the Malayan Chinese suffering during the occupation is occluded in today's Malaysia, where Malay nationalism prevails. With that, I argue that *Three*'s obscuration of Chinese suffering constitutes its critique of Malaysia's mainstream history, which marginalizes the cultural memory of the Malaysian Chinese. By studying *Three*, largely overlooked in existing research, I demonstrate how the preservation of Malaysian Chinese culture can be reconciled with engagement in Malaysia's multiethnic political landscape, which is the paradox of the Malaysian Sinophone. To this end, my scrutiny of *Three*'s language—the interplay of images and words—considers 'language' in the Sinophone not merely a communication tool but a medium of political discourses.

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Overview

The term 'three years and eight months' is no stranger to anyone familiar with Malaysian history. This is because it denotes the Japanese occupation of Malaya[1] from December 1941 to August 1945 during the Second World War. The term is also the title of Eddie See Yew Lee's Chinese-language comic, *Three Years and Eight Months* (2016),[2] hereafter referred to as *Three*, which is a ninety-six-page non-fiction about the history. *Three* has yet to receive critical academic attention. It was produced primarily for Malaysian Chinese readers, most of whom are proficient in Chinese. To engage readers on the topic, See not only uses cartoon imagery to depict the history but also incorporates extensive historical information through text in his comic.

One feature that struck me when reading See's *Three* was the obscured Chinese suffering. According to Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper (2007, 24), the Chinese were not the only victimized ethnic group in Malaya, but they arguably "paid the highest price" among other ethnic groups. One of the cruelest tactics taken by the Japanese army was *sook ching* (肃清, purge), the large-scale massacres of the Chinese across Malaya.[3] Cheah Boon Kheng remarks that 6,000 to 40,000 Chinese were killed in *sook ching* (2012, 24). Besides, another book edited by Siew Nyoke Chow, which collects interviews with 120 Chinese survivors of the occupation, repeatedly mentions sufferings like bashing the victims' stomachs filled with water, random shooting, ruthless bayonetting, rape, killing pregnant women, and so on. The tortures described are so abhorrent that the editor warns readers of possible distress in the Introduction (2015, 2).

In contrast to the atrocious history of the occupation, *Three* mostly depicts the military clashes between the Japanese and the British. Its obscuration of Chinese suffering calls for critical attention. To 'obscure' means to make something difficult to perceive (rather than completely invisible). Besides, with 'Chinese' used as an ethnicity label in Malaya/Malaysia, 'Chinese suffering' means the Japanese army's violence committed against the Malayan Chinese, as exemplified by *sook ching*.

See is a Malaysian Chinese comic artist well known for his children's comic series *Kokko & May* (2003–present). However, rather than grounding my analysis in the discourse of children's literature, I am more interested in exploring the sig-

1 'Malaya' is the former name of West Malaysia before the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 (Cheah 2012, xxi).

2 In this chapter, the quotes from See's comic and other non-English sources are my translations.

3 The term *sook ching* is an established Cantonese romanization.

nificance of the obscured Chinese suffering vis-à-vis the political context in contemporary Malaysia. The eclipsed Chinese suffering is present in two notable Malaysian English novels about the Japanese Occupation of Malaya: Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012). While the former describes how the Japanese military tortured and killed the Chinese, the latter escalates the tension by explicitly describing how a Japanese soldier chopped off the Chinese protagonist's fingers.

My chapter first seeks to examine how See's *Three* textually represents the obscured Chinese suffering during the Japanese occupation of Malaya. Second, it shows that the obscured Chinese suffering expresses the comic's critique of the conflicting political discourses commemorating the occupation, with particular emphasis on the ideological tension between the Chinese and Malay communities. Rather than the accuracy of See's portrayal of history, I will scrutinize the political significance of See's marginalization of Chinese suffering by drawing upon the theory of the Sinophone, which will ground *Three* in Malaysian politics.

On this basis, I argue that *Three*'s obscuration of Chinese suffering encodes an attempt to intervene in Malaysia's mainstream history, which marginalizes the torture endured by the Malayan Chinese. The premise of this argument is how Malay nationalism obscures the cultural memory of the Chinese minority, thereby obfuscating the Japanese army's violence against the Malayan Chinese in the country's mainstream history. Such a situation gives rise to the research problem of this chapter, namely the paradox in the Malaysian Sinophone—the preservation of the ethnic memory of the Malaysian Chinese and political commitment to the multiethnic country.[4] To overcome this conflict, I will explore how See obscures the violence inflicted on the Chinese, which constitutes a critique of the overarching Malay nationalism in defense of Malaysian Chinese cultural memory. With that, I will reconceptualize the 'language' in the Sinophone not merely as a communication tool but also as a carrier of political discourses.

The Malaysian Sinophone

This chapter mobilizes Shih Shu-mei's theorization of the Sinophone (2013). Her framework counters the tendency to regard overseas Chinese as the 'Chinese diaspora,' which, in my understanding, ethnically binds them to mainland China (hereafter 'China'), from where their ancestors emigrated. Her theory aligns with

4 The three main ethnic groups in Malaysia are the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians. The Chinese are the largest minority after the Malay majority.

my notion of 'Chinese suffering' (experienced by the Malayan Chinese) because it stresses the importance of grounding experiences in the local context rather than the ancestral location of origin (China). Furthermore, the Chinese language is widely used among Malaysian Chinese, so the Malayan Chinese community can generally be seen as a Sinitic-language community.

Having established the importance of localization, Shih advances her landmark argument that "[*d*]*iaspora has an end date*." The nostalgia and longing for China will taper off as the migrants and their descendants assimilate into the new country: "Everyone should be given a chance to become a local" (2013, 37). That is why she devises the Sinophone for "multidirectional critiques" via "a critical position toward both the country of origin and the country of settlement," whose politics may marginalize the Sinitic-language community (38–39). This paradigm will demonstrate how *Three* does not just undermine the diasporic nostalgia for China but also challenges Japanese imperialism and Malay nationalism in perceiving the occupation.

Nevertheless, Shih's Sinophone theory has also incurred criticism. Ng Kim Chew is probably its most vehement critic. Ng is a scholar of Malaysian Chinese literature born in Malaysia and currently based in Taiwan, whose literary works have been widely cited as examples in Sinophone studies. While admitting that Sinophone literature tends to pursue "a retrospective path toward ancient China" (2010, 16), he also notes that it would be ideal if the migrants and their descendants could eventually become locals. This is because identification with Chineseness is commonly framed as the 'original sin' (*yuanzui*, 原罪) in certain Southeast Asian countries, whose governments tried to diminish the cultural attachment to China through different means. Furthermore, Ng contends that, against the backdrop of Malay-centrism in Malaysia, Shih's insistence on the importance of localization appears antithetical to the efforts of the Malaysian Chinese in preserving Chinese education over a long time. With that, Ng claims that Shih's theory, which is against diaspora, is ultimately a "thoroughly nationalist logic" (2018). A similar concern is voiced by Zhu Chongke, who believes it is more important to "preserve the cultural bond with a longer life span than politics." Hence, he worries that Shih's Sinophone discourse would subordinate the Malaysian Chinese to Malay nationalist politics (2019, 90).

Such is the paradox of the Malaysian Sinophone that underlies Malaysian Chinese identity. While it is imperative to preserve the ethnic memory of the Malaysian Chinese, the cultural configuration of this group should also be grounded in the political context of this multiethnic country. Notably, this paradox echoes what Teoh Kong Tat observes in the Malaysian Sinophone: the conflict between national and cultural identifications (2018, 123). To promote a rapprochement between the two phenomena, which will contribute to the Sinophone's development, we need to regard the anti-diaspora stance as an initiative to sever the nostalgia for China to engage with local politics. Hence, in analyzing *Three*, I will explore how a Sinitic-

language comic artist like See critiques local political inequality to preserve Chinese culture, including the war experiences of the Malayan Chinese.

The aspiration to transcend this paradox requires a reconceptualization of the word 'language,' which, in Shih's theorization, usually denotes a communication system embodying the ancestral culture. What if we regard 'language' as a carrier of local political discourses rather than just grammar and vocabulary? Made up of malleable materials for cross-cultural production, such political discourses, in *Three*'s context, grow from negotiating Chinese victimhood during the Japanese occupation with Malay nationalist politics.[5] This refashioned notion of 'language' as carrying 'political discourses' would expand on Shih's idea that the Sinophone "is multilingual in and of itself" (2013, 34). On this note, I propose that, in *Three*, the synergy of the Chinese language and the images evinces a multilingual tenor. The reason is that, in comics, language can be construed as the interplay of images and words. That means I see *Three* as transculturally encoding the conflicting political discourses of the Chinese and Malay communities concerning the war. This recalibration of 'language' is a nod to Cheow Thia Chan's suggestion that, in studying Malaysian Chinese literature via the Sinophone, we need to pay attention to "the mutual becoming of place and language" (2022, 27). While language use is contingent upon the place it portrays, the place's sociopolitical dynamism will equally influence the use of language.

A Sinophone Understanding of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya

See's *Three*, which depicts the Japanese occupation of Malaya, will be analyzed through the Sinophone. This is because the Sinophone underscores "a historical formation" of an overseas Sinitic-language community with a "multilingual" outlook (Shih 2013, 33–34). *Three* is written in Chinese, yet it still manifests a multilingual aura by dealing with the transcultural political discourses in Malaysian society. As noted earlier, *Three* engages with multiple political discourses: the preservation of Chinese cultural memory, Japanese imperialism, and Malay-centered politics. Against these discourses, I will examine the interactions between images and Chinese words in *Three*'s images (which form the comic's language) via textual analy-

5 My interpretation of language as a carrier of political discourses is inspired by Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, which treats language as a system influenced by society, as indicated by his notion of the Symbolic (2010).

sis. This approach will scrutinize *Three*'s formal techniques in turning the paradox between Malaysian Chinese culture and local politics into a synergy, through which Chinese victimhood can be introduced into the nation's public consciousness.

Shih avers that the Sinophone "transcends postcolonialism" (2017, 54). However, in my view, rather than disavowing postcolonialism, her conception of the Sinophone situates the enduring legacy of colonialism in the local political discourses. According to Jurgen Zimmerer, 'occupation' denotes "military necessity and outcomes," whereas 'colonialism' denotes a "civilizing mission" in longer terms (2005, 199–200). Still, the Japanese occupation of Malaya was part of Japanese imperial expansionism, the legacy of which falls within the purview of postcolonialism. When the Sinophone is informed by postcolonialism, it can, Brian Bernards writes, "rethink colonial and national paradigms that contrive [the] cultural genealogies" inherited from imperialism (2015, 13). Therefore, my Sinophone framework will ground the obscured Chinese suffering in the divergent memory politics of the Chinese and Malay communities due to the Japanese army's uneven treatment.

The Japanese invasion was traumatic for China, so anti-Japanism has been a recurring theme in Chinese cultural productions about the war. As Leo Ching argues, the term *guizi* (鬼子, [Japanese] devils) no longer "distinguish[es] Japanese militarism from Japanese people" in contemporary Japan. Instead, the two categories have been interchanged to elevate the nationalist spirit in China (2019, 50).[6] However, such intense anti-Japanism is absent in contemporary Malaysian Chinese literature, which generally lacks a detailed description of Chinese suffering. I mention this distinction because, as Paul H. Kratoska notes, the Japanese army targeted the Malayan Chinese because they had previously supported the anti-Japanese movement in China, both politically and financially (2018, 14). It could thus be tempting for one to be influenced by China's anti-Japanism in understanding the occupation of Malaya. The emotion would cause one to miss the Malay nationalism that obscures Chinese suffering from mainstream history.

"Japan's military occupation of Southeast Asia," Nakano Satoshi notes, "was nothing but oppression" (2019, 19). From a postcolonial perspective, such oppression persists for the Malaysian Chinese, whose cultural memory of ancestral victimhood in Japanese-occupied Malaya is generally silenced in mainstream history. "I wanted to tell my story for so long, but no one wants to talk about it," laments Loh Siew Ying, a Malaysian Chinese who survived the occupation, during an interview with Frances Tay (2015, 15). According to Tay, three political phenomena after the occupation over-

6 The derogatory term *guizi* is applicable to foreigners in general. Yet, in the context of Japanese imperialism, it typically refers to the Japanese. Anti-Japanese films in China, Ching notes, tend to use the terms *guizi* and *Riben guizi* (日本鬼子, Japanese devils) "to portray the Japanese devils as stereotypical, farcical figures" (2019, 43).

shadow Chinese victimhood. First, during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), the British colonizers fought against the anti-British communists, who were mostly Chinese. Consequently, the communists' efforts in resisting the Japanese were eclipsed, which also caused the history of Chinese suffering to be obscured from public consciousness. Second, due to the racial riot on 13 May 1969, the Malaysian government cemented Malay nationalism, which further marginalized Chinese victimhood in the Japanese Empire. Third, in 1982, Malaysia's then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad launched the Look East Policy (LEP), which frames Japan as the nation from which Malaysians can gain knowledge of the economy and education (101–116). The LEP is still relevant nowadays, as testified by the brochure celebrating the LEP's 40th anniversary in 2022, published by the Embassy of Japan in Malaysia (2023). Amidst this prosperous relationship between Malaysia and Japan, Japan's imperial violence seems to have vanished in thin air.

Although there have been discussions about the Malayan Chinese suffering, the heart-wrenching details of the atrocities are too feeble to penetrate the official discourse, which is forged by the three fateful historical incidents delineated by Tay. Hence, to understand the occupation in *Three* via the Malaysian Sinophone, we need to regard the comic's language (images and words) as political discourses that intertwine the Chinese suffering with the Malay-dominated policies. As indicated by Vandana Saxena in her study of Malaysian literature in English (including literature translated into English) on the experiences of various ethnic groups during the occupation, while "the Chinese bore the full brunt of the aggression," "the Japanese and the Malays were seen as natural collaborators against the British colonizers" (2021, 95–96). She also uses the LEP (95–97) to substantiate her claim about the rupture in the memories of the occupation in the multiethnic nation. The ethnic rift ironizes the ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which the Japanese Empire used to disguise its military atrocities. However, Mohamed Ali bin Haniffa's research has a different say on such Malay privileges, for one of his interviewees mentions that "the Malays were also forced by Japan to collude with it" (2017, 21). Despite that, this insight only suggests that, if Malay victimhood can hardly be recuperated in Malay nationalist politics, then the Chinese minority's victimhood is even less likely to be.

Furthermore, Tay points out that "active collective remembrance" is lacking in contemporary Malaysia: war commemoration is usually not organized by the Malaysian government, and there are no repositories for wartime testimonies as well as associations for war survivors (2015, 23–24). The inadequacy of public awareness to commemorate wartime suffering can be traced back to history education. As Helen Ting demonstrates, compared to the Chinese-language history textbook of the Chinese independent school, the Malay-language history textbook of the national school (the main education system) seems to manifest Malay nationalism, which downplays Chinese resistance and suffering during the Japanese occupation (2013, 207). Given

that the history of Chinese suffering is largely eclipsed by the official history centered on the Malays (generally spared from Japan's extreme imperial violence), discussions of the Sinophone need to view 'language' not just as a communication tool but also as a medium for political discourses that shape the Malaysian Chinese identity.

The historical details of Chinese suffering during the occupation, whose intensity eludes *Three*'s representation, can be understood through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of the Real. To Lacan, the Real is "strictly unthinkable" (2010, 7). Unlike reality, the Lacanian Real "resists symboli[z]ation absolutely" (1991, 66). In resisting to be inscribed in the Symbolic, Lacan's term for sociopolitical discourses, the Real sustains its illusiveness. Notably, in comics, Tammy Birk states, "the Real retains the 'character of impossibility' and denies the subject access to narrative coherence" (2020, 510). Therefore, in mobilizing the Sinophone to analyze *Three*, I will pay attention to how the comic's formal impossibility and incoherence, namely the obscured Chinese suffering (the Real), gestures toward Malaysia's divergent political discourses about the occupation. That means my chapter regards *Three* as a system of thought in which the Malayan Chinese suffering in the past is obscured in relation to the present discourses of Malaysian society. In this manner, my textual analysis will explore how details of Chinese suffering are marginalized in *Three* and how the obscuration critiques the nationalist politics besetting the Malaysian Chinese.

The Obscured Chinese Suffering in See's *Three*

Anyone who holds See's *Three* will notice that the front and back covers (Figure 1) are colored red, which implies the book's inextricable relationship with Chineseness. This is because, in Chinese culture, red is an auspicious color. Nevertheless, the red on *Three*'s covers is laden with irony. The front cover displays a partial portrayal of the rising sun flag, often associated with Japanese imperialism, and a map of Malaya labeled with Japanese names imposed on the rising sun flag, which evokes the blood of Malayans killed by the Japanese. This front cover is then shrunk and placed on the back cover. The background of the back cover is a red-filtered, blurry photo of billboards, on which the characters 中原 (*Zhongyuan*, the middle and lower regions of the Yellow River) appear three times. Their pronunciation evokes the homophone 中元 (*Zhongyuan*, Chinese Ghost Festival). From the ghostly connotation, we will recall not merely the derogatory term *guizi* but also the departed souls of the Chinese during the occupation. Notably, the implication of ethnic memory through red also evokes "China-centrism," which the Sinophone seeks to counter (Shih 2013, 33). After all, in an ahistorical manner, the color associates ethnic Chinese across the world with China, which also suffered from Japanese imperialism.



Figure 1: Front and back covers (See 2016). © Pinko Creative Sdn. Bhd., reprinted with permission.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Revisiting the history of the Japanese invasion of Malaya during World War II. *Three Years and Eight Months* (Comics Edition), by Eddie See Yew Lee. Depicting the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Singapore through simple comics

The representation of diasporic nostalgia points to the discontent of the Malaysian Chinese with the Malay-dominated politics. As mentioned, the politics obscures Chinese suffering in a social climate that shows affection for Japan. This phenomenon is testified by pages 4 and 5, which portray how Malaysians with happy faces are drawn to Japanese products and the virtues of the Japanese people. To alert readers to the elision of Chinese suffering, See adds "*kawaii*" (cute) and "*arigato gozaimasu*" (thank you) amidst the Chinese characters. These are the transliterated Japanese catchphrases relatively well known in Malaysia. Including a non-Sinitic language creates a multilingual tenor, which also signals the conflicting political discourses between the Chinese community and Malay nationalism as expressed via the word-image synergy. In this way, the heteroglossia raises a red flag about something lying behind Japan's positive image.

That something is the Lacanian Real, the unknown, which, as Gautam Basu Thakur notes in a postcolonial study, brings about "the impossibility of the subject be-

coming whole" in a society enmeshed in the legacy of imperialism (2020, 154). In *Three*, the Real is the details of Chinese suffering during the Japanese occupation of Malaya, whose impossibility to be depicted undercuts the coherence of the text. Such textual incompleteness illustrates the elusiveness of the ethnic memory in national history. The haunting effect of the extreme horror on the Malaysian Chinese identity is exemplified by pages 28 and 29 (Figure 2). On the bottom right of page 28, a panel shows a sword attached to the muzzle of a gun, which is held by a Japanese soldier advancing to Penang Island. The caption reads, "military success without battles," whose literal meaning is ironic: no blood on the soldier's blade. Such a sentiment is heightened when the sword illustrated is indeed not stained by blood. The irony is substantiated on page 29, specifically in the text box, which See calls 'historical kit.' It is positioned on the right side of the panel on page 28, which shows a gun equipped with a sword (though not sequentially consecutive). In the 'historical kit,' the second paragraph comprises only one sentence: "On 6 April 1942, the Japanese army launched a cruel massacre of the Chinese on the island." The massacre here refers to the *sook ching* mentioned earlier. For example, in a study of *sook ching* undergone by Chung Ling High School teachers and students on Penang Island, Tan Chee Seng describes *sook ching* as an unprecedented and thus unexpected "catastrophe" for the school community (2019, 73). Hence, in *Three*, although the images spare readers from the blood-curdling scenes of *sook ching*, the words make them aware of the traumatic violence that defies conspicuous representation.

Arguably, by referencing "military success without battles," a Chinese idiom that appears ironic in a postcolonial vein, *Three* intervenes in the overarching Malay nationalism, which has little space to incorporate the gory memory of the Chinese minority. The way the idiom is used thus echoes Shih's idea that the Sinophone community in Malaysia treats Chinese characters with "a form of 'fetishism for words' or 'faith in worshipping words'." This is because, beyond the communication function, the Chinese characters embody the community's melancholy about the possibility of losing their culture (2017, 171). Such language fetishism in Malaysia's challenging circumstances subsequently gives rise to a kind of Chineseness molded by different elements "on the ground" rather than those of China (Shih 2019, 54). Here, the meaning of the Chinese language used in *Three* is shaped by local political conditions. The Chinese language in Malaysia is hybridized in that it encodes the influences of both ancestral Chinese heritage and contemporary political concerns. This mode of perception tallies with my proposition to think of the notion of 'language' in the Malaysian Sinophone as bearing the conflicting political discourses between the Chinese and Malay communities about the occupation. Such a politicized language, which takes the form of both words and images in See's comic, serves as a cultural medium shaped by Chinese migration and Japanese imperialism.



Figure 2: Japan's invasion of Malaya (See 2016, 28–29). © Pinko Creative Sdn. Bhd., reprinted with permission.



Figure 2 (continued)

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

[Page 28] Panel 1: On 12 December, the British authorities instructed the British on Penang Island to prepare for retreat. Speech bubble: "Pack your things quickly. We must retreat now!"
Panel 2: On the 15th, when war broke out in Gurun, the authorities again instructed the British on the island to retreat in 36 hours without delay. Speech bubble: "Things are getting bad! Tell the British on the island to retreat in 36 hours!"
Panel 3: As the British army retreated from Penang Island, they also destroyed the only power plant, which was essential to the residents. Boom! Power Plant
Panel 4: However, the radio station, which was not so essential to residents, was not destroyed by the British army. Hence, when the Japanese army arrived, they immediately used it for their own good. Speech bubble: "Ha ha, the infrastructure of the radio station still functions well!"
Panel 5: On the night of 15 December, the residents of Penang Island could hear bombings from Kedah. Speech bubble: "It's very close to Penang Island!" Bang … Boom!
Panel 6: On the 16th, the British army had fully retreated. On the 17th and the 18th, although Penang Island had been abandoned by the British, Japanese military aircraft persisted in their airstrikes. Speech bubble: "Show the island residents how great the Japanese army is!"
Panel 7: On 19 December, the Japanese army from Butterworth landed on Penang Island and achieved military success without battles. Speech bubble: "Finally on Penang Island!"

[Page 29] Panel 8: 11 days after the war broke out, the British army was stationed along the Kerian River. Selama was established as a defense headquarters.
Panel 9: On 20 December, as the Japanese army invaded the stronghold along the Kerian River, they advanced southward through Jalan Gerik. On 20 and 21 December, in Lenggong and some other places, military clashes happened between the British army defending Gerik and the Japanese army.
Panel 10: In Kota Tampan, a city to the south of Lenggong, the Japanese army piled up obstacles to block the British army's retreat. Simultaneously, some Japanese soldiers rode a bamboo raft down the Perak River. Speech bubble: "Block the British army's retreat!"
Panel 11: Historical kit: On 19 December 1941, the Japanese army occupied Penang Island without sacrificing even one soldier. Besides, the Japanese navy also established the 11th submarine base. Immediately afterward, the Japanese army ordered the Australian prisoners of war to clean up the reeking corpses on the street. At the same time, residents were ordered to return to their homes, or else their properties would be confiscated, and they would be arrested as punishment. On 6 April 1942, the Japanese army launched a cruel massacre of the Chinese on the island.

Despite mentioning the massacre on Penang Island, *Three* cannot recuperate details like the specific sites and how the massacres took place. The obliteration of excessive ethnic trauma during the occupation keeps readers from being deterred from learning the history. To substantiate this claim, we shall probe the relation between Figure 2 and Figure 3 **(**pages 8 and 9), which depicts the Malayan Chinese anti-Japanese activities. Because the Malayan Chinese politically and financially supported China's anti-Japanese movement, the Japanese army retaliated harshly against them during the occupation of Malaya (Kratoska 2018, 14).

Notwithstanding, *Three* is reticent on the connection between Figure 3 and Figure 2. This strategy creates a more reassuring situation that encourages readers to understand the cause of Japan's atrocities against the Malayan Chinese. In fact, only pages 8 and 9 portray the Malayan Chinese in detail. This formal circumscription signifies how, in contemporary Malaysia, the Japanese army's brutalities inflicted on the Chinese are largely insulated from public consciousness. As Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack lament, while the Chinese suffered gravely from *sook ching*, the Malays' collusion with the Japanese army has been hailed as Malay nationalism. Hence, the scholars see "little prospect of the Malaysian state using the theme of common suffering" in comprehending the occupation (2012, 341).

Significantly, politically charged phrases such as "Defeat Japan!" and "Anti-Japan!" in Figure 3 are not replications of the fiery anti-Japanese ideology one could associate with China (as indicated by Ching above). Instead, the phrases mourn the past diasporic devotion to ancestral China, as demonstrated by the Malayan Chinese's support for China's resistance against Japan, who eventually incurred gruesome suffering during the Japanese occupation of Malaya. The tragedy's details are the Real, which, as mentioned, "resists symboli[z]ation absolutely" and thus remains outside the Symbolic, namely the sociopolitical discourse (Lacan 1991, 66). That means, in *Three*, the tragedy's details can hardly be embedded in the Symbolic of Malay-centrism. Such unknowability thus exposes the void in the Malaysian Chinese identity, which *Three* seeks to address via the propaganda's jagged speech balloons. Harriet Earle remarks that this shape "can denote screaming" (2021, 31). Yet, other than that, the context of *Three* also prompts us to regard this speech balloon shape more as the bombardment of the local ideological strife, which illustrates the comic's commitment to memory politics in Malaysia.

Read through the Malaysian Sinophone, the semiotic dynamics in Figure 3's images and words, which undermine the diasporic nostalgia for China, exude a multilingual tenor in engaging with the discordance in transcultural perceptions of the war. According to Ng, the localization of the Chinese language to Malaysian Chinese literature engenders a contradiction: the language will no longer replicate the aesthetics and sensibility specific to China (2004, 60). In this regard, the propagandistic phrases in jagged speech balloons quoted above demonstrate how elements associated with China can be refashioned to engage with local politics. This artistic strategy resonates with Shih's idea of "Sinophone visual culture," which is "open to the world and inflected by cultural cross-fertilizations as well as cultural politics" (2007, 191). As such, *Three*'s Chinese language, which is interwoven with ethnic memory and Malaysia's political discourses, constitutes a more nuanced tool for expression. In tandem with the images, the hybrid Chinese language serves as a marker of the Malaysian Chinese identity.



Figure 3: Anti-Japanese movements (See 2016, 8–9). © Pinko Creative Sdn. Bhd., reprinted with permission.



Figure 3 (continued)

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

[Page 8] Panel 1: Ever since Japan started invading China, anti-Japanism spread from China to *Nanyang* (南洋, Southeast Asia). Overseas Chinese in different countries called on the people to resist Japan and boycott Japanese goods. Speech bubble: "Japan has invaded China. Boycott Japanese goods!"
Panel 2: Most overseas Chinese schools encouraged the students to boycott Japanese goods in assemblies. Speech bubble: "We do not buy Japanese goods! Do not buy Japanese toys!"
Panel 3: Many teachers also distributed a black armband to each student. Speech bubbles: "Put it on." "What is it?"
Panel 4: The black armbands were printed with different white slogans: Anti-Japan, Save the Country; Never Forget the National Humiliation; Reclaim Lost Territory; Defeat Japan
Panel 5: The teachers then asked the students to yell the slogans while explaining the causes and effects of the incident. Speech bubbles: "Defeat Japan!" "Louder!"
Panel 6: In response to these 'mourning' activities, which seemed to be mourning the dead, the parents not only did not oppose them or find them inauspicious, but they also believed that those were the right actions to take. Speech bubble: "Be a good kid and love your motherland!"

[Page 9] Panel 7: In that period, almost all students put on black armbands. Only the elderly seldom put them on. Speech bubbles: "Anti-Japan!" "These black armbands are not suitable for us, the elderly!"
Panel 8: The black armbands were mostly sponsored by the cloth shops on the streets. If the primary school students lost theirs, they could get a new one from any of those shops. Speech bubbles: "Take it. It's free!"
Panel 9: The *Nanyang* Chinese were indignant about the Japanese invasion of China. They worked hard to raise funds, collect old clothes, and purchase merchandise to aid the victims in China. Speech bubble: "I hope everyone can contribute money and effort to support our Chinese compatriots in winning the war!"
Panel 10: The movement to help China resist the Japanese invasion provoked Japan's intense dissatisfaction with the overseas Chinese. Speech bubbles: "Anti-Japanese!" "Save China!" "Boycott Japanese goods!"
Panel 11: As a small country with a dense population, Japan had scarce natural resources. The abundant natural resources in Southeast Asia unknowingly triggered the greed of the Japanese, which thus strengthened Japan's motivation to expand its territory. Petroleum, coal, agriculture, tin, rubber, wood. Southeast Asia. Speech bubble: "Southeast Asia has rich natural resources … Should we consider it?"

To further caution readers against the downplay of the Chinese suffering in mainstream discourse, See includes a scene that blurs the differences between Japanese soldiers and the Chinese victims on pages 50 and 51 (Figure 4). The scene depicts some Japanese plainclothes military officers caught by Australian soldiers. They put their hands behind their heads and struggled with their tied hands. Without the military uniform and ammunition, the Japanese bear a striking resemblance to the Chinese civilians illustrated in Figure 3, specifically in terms of the black hair and small eyes (no difference is made in the beige skin color among the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Caucasians). This visual ambiguity

shows how the torture inflicted on the Chinese has been diminished in reality, especially when Malaysian policies seem to have consigned the Chinese suffering to the past.

Figure 4 intervenes in the obscuration of violence suffered by Malayan Chinese in mainstream history in two ways. First, by portraying the prosecution of the Japanese military officers, *Three* equates the Japanese with the Chinese—they were equally vulnerable in the war. That implication negates Japan's military violence and Chinese victimhood during the war. Nonetheless, this implication is clearly a satirical strategy employed by See, given how almost the whole book focuses on Japan's military invasion, which was so intense that there is very little space in the text to accommodate the Chinese struggling in the war. In reality, in 1994, Mahathir (who introduced the LEP in 1982) told Japan's then Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi that Japan did not need to apologize for the violence committed in WWII. Mahathir said, "If you start seeking compensation for things that happened 50 years ago, then what about 100 years ago or 200 years ago?" (Associated Press 1994). Uncannily, this sentence echoes what Shih avers, "We cannot claim to be diaspora even after three hundred years" (2017, 16). Nevertheless, rather than siding with the Malay nationalist discourse, the Sinophone articulates the urgency of engaging with local politics. And such localization is demonstrated by *Three*'s multilingual aura—the interplay of images and words that presses readers to reckon with the clashing political discourses that attenuate the historical inheritance of the Malaysian Chinese identity.

The second manner in which *Three* censures memory politics is the emphasis on the foreign status of both the Japanese and the Chinese. This technique ironically articulates how the torture inflicted on the Malayan Chinese is generally towered over by the mainstream cultural memory. As Sharmani Patricia Gabriel argues, the reality that the Chinese "are still refused ownership of the cultural space of the nation" only points to "the hegemonic politics of multiculturalism in Malaysia" (2014, 1221). In this case, the eerie similarity between the Chinese victim and the Japanese perpetrator implicitly engenders the disappointment experienced by the Malaysian Chinese community, which is repeatedly sidelined in Malay-dominated politics.

In the face of 'the hegemonic politics of multiculturalism,' the Malaysian Chinese community's hope for their ancestors' suffering to be heard remains ever elusive. As a matter of fact, *Three* is created primarily for Malaysian Chinese and marginally mentions the Chinese, but it obfuscates the details of the torture undergone by the Malayan Chinese. To some degree, See's choice not to delve into Chinese victimhood risks further obscuring the painful history. This concern is crucial, especially in a society undergirded by the mainstream discourse that eclipses Chinese suffering during the occupation. However, this crisis in cultural

inheritance is exactly the message conveyed by *Three*'s aesthetics, which, as argued, is critical of the nationalist curation of the history of the Japanese occupation. The precarious Chinese war memory is the Real which can only be "locali[z]ed somewhere" via "elimination" (Lacan 2010, 94). The dissipating Chinese suffering, which can only impress upon readers via the textual Real, gestures toward the domineering power of the Symbolic in Malaysian politics. In this situation, See's withholding of the distressing details of Chinese suffering from his readers, despite giving rise to textual incoherence, protects the ethnic memory from being vitiated by nationalist politics.



Figure 4: Military operations and clashes during the occupation (See 2016, 50–51). © Pinko Creative Sdn. Bhd., reprinted with permission.



Figure 4 (continued)

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

[Page 50] Panel 1: Johor would be the last line of defense for the Malay Peninsula. Hence, the British redeployed their army to the area by transferring the Indian troops, who were withdrawing along the roads of the West Coast, to the East Coast to defend the area around Endau and Mersing.
Panel 2: At the same time, an Australian troop was stationed in this area.
Panel 3: Another Australian troop was stationed on the front line of Gemas.
Panel 4: The 18th Division, 1st Brigade of the British army, which had just arrived from Britain, worked with the 45th Brigade of the Indian army to defend Muar and Batu Pahat. Speech bubble: "You defend Batu Pahat. I defend Muar."
Panel 5: Having just retreated from Kota Bharu and Kuantan, the 19th Division of the Indian army was stationed on the West Coast. Speech bubble: "Um, this is the best defense we have recently!"
Panel 6: On 4 January, in the south of Mersing, the Australian army arrested two undercover Japanese military officers, who carried pistols and small flags. Later, in an uninhabited attap house with smoke rising from it, a few more Japanese were arrested.

[Page 51] Panel 7: Initially, the captured Japanese did not admit that they were Japanese. They only admitted their identity when it was found out that they could only speak a few Chinese sentences.
Panel 8: These two cases prove that, before war broke out in Johor, the 5th Japanese Division had already penetrated Johor and begun its intelligence operation.
Panel 9: On 14 January, the Australian army placed landmines under a bridge of the Gemencheh River. At 4:10pm, they detonated the landmines and sent 30 Japanese soldiers on the bridge flying into the air. At the same time, the Australian army also attacked them from the forest. Allegedly, this ambush killed hundreds of Japanese soldiers. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!
Panel 10: Historical kit: At 3pm on 14 January, the Mukoda Detachment of the Japanese army had advanced 15km to the west of Gemas. Because soldiers in the tanks were impeded by the bridge destroyed by the bomb, soldiers riding bicycles took the initiative to invade. Despite that, the 8th Australian Division cleverly used the geographical terrain to set up ambushes. Coupled with 9 bombers and 12 fighters that rushed there to attack, the Australian army managed to kill and injure 130 Japanese soldiers. Unfortunately, this advantage only persisted until 10pm that day, when the Mukoda Detachment broke through the defense and stormed into Gemas. The 3rd and 4th Mukoda Squadrons attacked the British from the rubber estates on both sides.

In this regard, if we take the reading of *Three* to a pessimistic end, we would reach the interpretation that the comic obscures Chinese suffering not to decry the political system but to suggest leaving behind the tumultuous past while moving forward to the future. This notion brings us back to page 3, where a photo shows the titular phrase "三年零八个月" [three years and eight months] written on a beach. At first glance, the photo evokes a mental image wherein one stands leisurely on a breezy seaside, expressing the possibility of not clinging to the woeful past eclipsed in national history. Notwithstanding, a careful reading of the text would suggest otherwise.

Below the photo is a caption indicating that the beach is located in Sabak, where the Japanese army landed before launching its invasion of Malaya. That the comic title was written on the beach, which would soon be erased by waves or footsteps,

expresses See's censure of Malaysia's nationalist politics that risks eroding the war memory integral to the Malayan Chinese identity. Significantly, See's choice of the beach also expresses his hope to enact an "affective re-visioning"[7] of the place from where the nightmarish history was unveiled—to turn it into a site that reminds the younger generation to be grateful for living in this peaceful era. Since the phrase "three years and eight months," which carries the painful memory, cannot stay forever on the beach, the photo also suggests the need to let go of any potential resentment. What matters is an acknowledgment of the harrowing past. Thus, the titular phrase in the photo emanates a multilingual Sinophone spirit by embodying not just a critique of Malay-centrism but also a reconciliation with the hardship suffered by the Malayan Chinese during the Japanese occupation.

Evidently, *Three* obscures the Chinese suffering via a synergy of images and words that compel readers to think about the local sociopolitical pressure that obfuscates the anguished past. To restate Kratoska's view (2018, 14), Japan's animosity toward the Malayan Chinese arose from the latter's previous support for China's anti-Japanese movement. However, without explicitly expressing the anti-Japanism that is widespread in China today, *Three* turns away from diasporic nostalgia and critiques the local nationalist politics in a bid to preserve the war memory in Malaysian Chinese culture. The political calling explains why *Three* is imbued with historical information written in a detached tone, which makes it look like a mini encyclopedia.

In *Three*, the Japanese army's atrocities are outlined only toward the end on page 82 (Figure 5), except for a single-sentence mention of the Chinese massacre in Figure 2. Nevertheless, the notion of Chinese ethnicity remains elusive on the page. In the first panel, See blackens the three individuals to be massacred, which ambiguates their ethnicity. Then, in the second panel, a man is crucified and whipped. As for the third panel, a Japanese soldier carries a woman away from her home, while the two other soldiers pillage the properties. The skin color of the man and woman in these two panels might tempt readers to assume that they are Chinese, but *Three* withholds such connections because, as mentioned, it illustrates the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Caucasians as having beige skin color. The fourth panel features a Japanese soldier ordering the Malayan Chinese to offer fifty million dollars to save their lives. While the images vaguely indicate the Chinese ethnicity, the words signify how the looming Chinese victimhood has been dispersed across other ethnic groups in Malaysia. The words in question are "across Malaya," "across Singapore and Malaya," "civilians," "victims," and "219 million dollars (undoubtedly the hard-

7 This phrase is borrowed from Monica Chiu's chapter (2022, 47) about a comic that describes the United States internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II.

earned money of the people)." By obscuring the ethnicity while indicating suffering, these phrases subordinate the Chinese suffering to the collective history in which Malaya was victimized by Japan—no one ethnic group suffers more than the others. And this insight prompts readers to reflect on the obscured history that the Chinese, to reiterate Bayly and Harper's remark (2007, 24), "paid the highest price" compared to other ethnic groups. This indication of the veiled Chinese suffering is accomplished by, as explained, anchoring the signifiers' meanings in the context of the occupation. In this understanding, *Three* exemplifies Chan's view that geographical and cultural "marginality" allows Malaysian Chinese literature to "shap[e] distinctive local and regional cultural ecologies" (2022, 20).

To probe how the obscured Chinese suffering in Figure 5 signifies *Three*'s intervention in the nation's memory politics, we need to pay attention to the gutters in the text. In Scott McCloud's view, gutters allow for readerly "*participation* [original emphasis]" by prompting them "to use their *imaginations* [original emphasis]" to fill in the gaps among the panels (1994, 69). But this conception of gutters does not work well for Figure 5—to what extent can one imagine the Chinese suffering, whose extremely distressing nature defies recuperation in See's comic? In this case, Dominic Davies' postcolonial conception of 'gutters of history' would be more suitable. In Davies' retooled notion, "gutters materialize contrapuntal geographies and histories spatially on the page, thereby accounting for the historical omissions" (2022, 57). Noteworthily, 'accounting for' does not mean explaining away. What it means instead is a gesture of signaling that something has been omitted. And that is similar to how I have been interpreting *Three*. In Figure 5, for instance, the infrastructure of gutters indicates that something has been missing. With a postcolonial ethos, it prompts readers to take cognizance of the irretrievable Chinese suffering vis-à-vis the conflicting political discourses without reducing the agony experienced by the victims.

This obscuration of Chinese suffering is an effect of trauma, an indication of the Real. In Zizek's words, the Real is "a traumatic encounter which ruins the balance of the symbolic universe of the subject" (1988, 108). In Figure 5, we see how the trauma of the Japanese atrocities seeps through the Symbolic, namely the conflicting political discourses in Malaysian society, and bleeds into the comic panels. However, instead of "ruin[ing]" the Symbolic (Zizek 1988, 108), which will be a radical act, this phenomenon happens gradually and elusively. The point that such traumatic bleeding—a symptom of the Lacanian Real—can only take place toward the end also alludes to the difficulty in conceiving of the trauma in the Malayan Chinese identity. By signaling the obscured Chinese suffering, *Three* seeks to raise readers' awareness of the crisis in preserving cultural memory. More importantly, it cautions against a seemingly coherent history, particularly one conditioned by nationalism, which is hardly interrupted by unthinkable atrocities committed by the Japanese army.



Figure 5: Japanese army's atrocities against the Malayan Chinese (See 2016, 82). © Pinko Creative Sdn. Bhd., reprinted with permission.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 1: Three days after occupying Singapore, from 18 February to 2 March 1942, the Japanese army carried out verifications and massacres in Singapore and later across Malaya.
Panel 2: At that time, the number of civilians killed by the Japanese military across Singapore and Malaya, including those who died due to brutal torture, exceeded 150,000.
Panel 3: Mass arrests by the Japanese army would always be followed by brutal killings. There were also rapes, burnings of houses, and thefts (scoundrels of other ethnic groups also took advantage of the situation to plunder the properties). Roar! Roar! Roar!
Panel 4: Besides, on 2 March, in a meeting with the representatives of overseas Chinese, the Japanese ordered the Malayan Chinese to offer 50 million dollars as tribute to save their lives. Speech bubble: "50 million dollars as redemption money for atonement!"
Panel 5: Meanwhile, the Japanese government also issued military currency ('banana currency') without any reserves to replace the Straits dollar.
Panel 6: The Straits dollar that the Japanese army replaced with its currency amounted to 219 million dollars (undoubtedly the hard-earned money of the people). The entire amount was looted by the Japanese military government.

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter argues that the obscuration of Chinese suffering during the Japanese occupation of Malaya embodies the endeavor of See's *Three* to critique the Malay-dominated politics. Because of the political ideology, Malaysia's national history seems to deemphasize the Japanese army's cruelties. I substantiate this contention through a textual analysis that examines how *Three* mobilizes a range of formal strategies to draw attention to the eclipsed Chinese suffering. In this respect, the formal strategies used by See guide readers to realize how ethnic war history has been sidelined in mainstream history. To explore *Three*'s role in mediating See's political concerns, my textual analysis is conducted through the theoretical framework of the Sinophone, which grounds *Three* in local memory politics between the Chinese and Malay communities. It demonstrates how, by obscuring Chinese victimhood, *Three* transculturally critiques Malay nationalism in a bid to preserve the history of Chinese suffering during the Japanese occupation, a cultural memory integral to the Malaysian Chinese identity. This move thus reconciles the need to preserve Malaysian Chinese culture and engage with the local politics of this multiethnic country, which have been the paradox in the Malaysian Sinophone.

Through the scrutiny of *Three*, this chapter suggests that only by studying the history narrative can we understand the aspects of that history that are in crisis, which will in turn offer insights into the present political situation. That means we

cannot ever fully return to the past, and every return to it is an ongoing journey. Hence, in examining the significance of the obscured suffering of Malayan Chinese during the Japanese occupation of Malaya, we need to continuously interpret the comic alongside the sociopolitical context of Malaysia. In this way, the 'language' in *Three* refers not just to a Sinitic language like Chinese. Instead, the comic's language—a composite of its images and words—becomes the conduit for various political discourses, whose tension with one another shapes the Malaysian Chinese identity. As much as the comic obscures, it also articulates something about the condition of its obscuration. The historical narrative operates similarly. As much as an obscuration of history speaks to the past, it also speaks to the present.

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Corrado NERI

Chapter 9
Sonny Liew and His Double: Exploring Pan-Asian Metacomics

Abstract: This chapter investigates the innovative contributions of Sonny Liew, a transnational comic artist, to the evolution of Sinophone and Pan-Asian graphic novels. It focuses on two pivotal works: *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* and *The Shadow Hero* (co-created with Gene Luen Yang). While *Charlie Chan* employs a postmodern 'mockumentary' style to reimagine the history of Singaporean comics through a fictionalized artist's life, *The Shadow Hero* revives the forgotten Asian American superhero *The Green Turtle*. Both works engage with Harold Bloom's concept of 'anxiety of influence,' using strategies of retro-continuity and reboot to address the historical marginalization of Asian creators and characters in global comic culture. Through comparative analysis, the chapter highlights how *Charlie Chan* critiques the erasure of Sinophone creativity by blending fictional and historiographic elements, whereas *The Shadow Hero* integrates an Asian superhero into mainstream American narratives, challenging past biases. By exploring these complementary approaches, the chapter underscores Liew's dual strategy of engaging with the comic medium's global canon while proposing a renewed Sinophone artistic identity. Ultimately, it advocates for the recognition of contemporary Asian voices in the traditionally Western-dominated graphic novel landscape.

Sinophone Comics Didn't Really Exist …

The output of relevant Sinophone comics has been largely inferior, in quantity and soft power, to American comics, Japanese manga, and European graphic novels. This chapter does not have the ambition of offering a general theory about this relative scarcity, but will concentrate on one artist, Sonny Liew, who – via a multilayered and transcultural practice – unravels pivotal problematics around cultural specificity, anxiety of influence, and struggles between the quest for originality and paying homage to past non-Sinophone masters. Born in Malaysia in 1974, Singapore-based Sonny Liew is a chameleonic, versatile, and resolutely transnational comic artist. He has drawn many covers and interiors for Marvel and DC comics, as well as other major American publishers. I will concentrate

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here on a parallel reading of what might be considered his most relevant and important work, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (hereafter: *Charlie*) and his work with scriptwriter Gene Luen Yang, *The Shadow Hero* (*Shadow* later). The latter hybridizes the American superhero genre with a more realist approach, namely the description of the experience of Asian immigration in the United States; the former upgrades his Sinophone connection by conceiving a vertiginous 'mockumentary' that imagines a fictional author's autobiography, creating a kaleidoscopic meta-narration of comic book history and aesthetics (working with national imaginary, Western influences, and rivalry and admiration for Japanese manga).

… So We Had to Invent Them

Both *Charlie* and *Shadow* are highly allusive and layered – a reader not familiar with comic book and graphic novel history will miss many intertextual references and arguably also a great part of the meaning and poetics of these books. Moreover, they show both respect and anxiety vis-à-vis Western (and, in a minor frequency, Japanese) comic art. I argue that Yang and Liew treat their anxiety with the strategy that Harold Bloom, in his seminal *Anxiety of Influence*, defines as 'revisionary ratio' or 'Tessera:' "completion and antithesis; I take the word not from mosaic-making, where it is still used, but from the ancient mystery cults, where it meant a token of recognition, the fragment say of a small pot which with other fragments would re-constitute the vessel. A poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (Bloom 1973, 14). Yet there is a major difference between the two books: Charlie pushes the 'precursors' poetics in a 'what if' ucronia (alternate history) where the *creators* of Singapore's comic book history are invented *ex novo* with a retro-continuity strategy applied on the real word; *Shadow* pushes forward the history of its *character*, with a retro-continuity strategy applied on the fictional world – and a reboot of a forgotten, Asian superhero. Hence the comparison between these two different works might be framed with the concepts of reboot and retro-continuity; both specifically related to the comic book industry, they apply literally for *Shadow*, metaphorically for *Charlie*. William Proctor offers this succinct summary: "Both reboots and retcons function as 'makeover modalities,' of repair, reprogramming, and regeneration; the former uses a method of beginning again with the establishment of new horizontal memory while the latter endorses the revision of an already existing narrative sequence without deleting the entire story-program."

(Proctor 2017, 133). Using Willits's definition, Proctor further explains: "Rebooting, then, 'means to restart an entertainment universe that has already been previously established, and begin with a new storyline and/or timeline that disregards the original writer's previously established history, thus making it obsolete and void' (Willits 2009, quoted in Proctor 2017, 133). [. . .] On the other hand, retroactive continuity refers to: [t]he process of revising a fictional serial narrative, altering details that have previously been established in the narrative so that it can be continued in a new direction or so that potential contradictions in previous versions can be reconciled." (Booker 2010, 510, quoted in Proctor 2017, 133).

As we see here, these 'makeover modalities' are both creative and industrial in scope and ambition: they do take into consideration the narrative past and the universe-building of the original work, yet they are useful for rewriting and – supposedly – renewing a narrative universe that feels obsolete. Obsolete but not ready to be thrown into the dustbin and forgotten: even if the remake (reboot or retcon) changes the basis of the narrative universe to make it almost unrecognizable, the creators still indulge in it, revamp it, rekindle it – or correct it; because the narrative universe has a surplus of nostalgia and heritage that is still considered valuable. In more prosaic terms, the makeover can simply be a stylistic revamping for old franchises: the dialogues are too long and the descriptive texts seem odd to contemporary taste, the rhythm too slow etc. But some rewritings are more urgent in a political sense because bestseller evergreen fictional universes have included racist or gender bias, tolerable at the time of their making but not today. Hence the producers of franchises such as James Bond or Dungeons and Dragons need to take into consideration the progress of society in terms of anti-racism, gender equality, post-colonial decentering and deconstruction and so forth. As comic readers know very well, a reboot or retcon operation can be an industrial and/or a poetic pursuit: to propose a reboot of a classic superhero franchise can 'modernize' the pace and the dialogue of a venerable institution like the Fantastic Four and try to make them 'cool' again to expand the number and variety of derived products and their income stream; to transform an old and goofy superhero like the Sandman into Dream, can (as Neil Gaiman did) create one of the most influential and poetic universes in the comic book industry – and when the Netflix adaptation changes the gender and ethnicity of some characters, it connects with 2000s sensibilities and demands for inclusion and diversity.

The case of Liew and Yang's *Shadow* is exemplary in this sense: they could have just invented a new character, but instead they made a point of finding a public domain and Asian (both creator and character) superhero to integrate him into the canon of the US mainstream comic industry. Their aim, I conjecture, was precisely to 'correct' and redress the unequal treatment that both character and

creator received during the Golden Age of comic books. As Jordan Peele has done with the Western genre (mixed with horror and SF) in *Nope* (2022), the political agenda aims to make visible and celebrate the contribution of minorities to the great national imaginary construction. *Shadow* manages its anxiety of influence with a compelling retro-continuity operation that inscribes an Asian presence into the sparkling American superhero genre which once excluded them. The case of *Charlie* is different and puzzling because it is a retro-continuity operation on 'real life.' The book describes a fictional artist – an exercise in ucronia (alternate history) – or an exercise in 'queering history' – in the sense used by Palmer: "The 'making-strange' that constitutes defamiliarization is queered (…). In the process of queering, as in the process of defamiliarizing, subjects, objects, things and structures are liberated from the strictures of their preconceived referents and permitted multiple potential reorientations. Queering is defamiliarizing" (Palmer 2020, 3). We can read *Charlie* as both a celebration of the heritage of Sinophone comics and an act of mourning for the missed opportunities and censored masterpieces; it is an imaginary history that is collective (national), individual (the imagined artist), and also – or maybe, above all – the history of the becoming of an artist. All these elements are incomplete. If readers seek a comprehensive history of Singapore, they might be disappointed. The life story of the imagined artist is compelling yet *fake* (and comics-literate readers will immediately spot the real models such as Spiegelman or Stan Lee); Sonny Liew himself remains in the background. Yet these elements merged to create the new (and thus, defamiliarized) configuration that shines as a portrait of the interior life of an artist, including all the books he would have liked to write but didn't, the fake memories of a fictional character, the invented heritage of Sinophone comics. It is important to underscore the multilayered art of Liew, but also question the possibility of a renewed Sinophone graphic novel outside the savant mimicry of past (and alien) masterpieces: in *Charlie* the anxiety of influence might overwhelm the actual history of the Singapore comic industry that is here utterly erased.

The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to unbundle two different strategies used by Sonny Liew and his scriptwriter Gene Luen Yang to ennoble and raise awareness of the diversity and richness of the newly born Sinophone graphic novels that both create new perspectives but also build on the classic canon of internationally celebrated comic books. They are successful because, in different ways that (thankfully) manifest the irreducibility of art to overarching theories, while talking to the contemporary public, they do not ignore or disdain the history of the medium – regardless of its geographic origins. In so doing, they remind readers of the necessity of an openness to both highbrow and genre-oriented works, as well as the necessity for specialists to fluidify their theoretical approach according to the texts they are reading. I use the term 'highbrow' be-

cause I contend that comics, while continuing to support alternative or fringe discourses and mainstream consumerism, have definitively entered the realm of institutionalized art. The exhibition *Bande dessinée, 1964–2024*, which occupied all floors of the iconic Centre Pompidou in Paris (29 May–4 November 2024; see Groensteen et al. 2024), can serve as evidence thereof. In such spaces, comics – including so-called 'postmodern' ones – have acquired the status of highbrow art, appealing to an audience seeking intellectual engagement and cultural sophistication. Much like Umberto Eco's novels, graphic novels such as *Charlie* invite readers to navigate multilayered narratives and self-reflective themes, offering an elite level of reflexivity and a uniquely complex experience.

The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye

Charlie is a multilayered book that presents itself as a graphic novel biography of the father of Singapore comics. Its specificity lies in the fact that, regardless of the mention on the cover "presented by Sonny Liew," it is entirely penned and drawn by Sonny Liew and the comic artist Charlie Chan is a completely fictional character. Borrowing from cinematic terminology, the book is a 'mockumentary,' a fake or parodic documentary that uses all the stylistic features of the genre and that can be mistaken for a 'real' 'classic' documentary. By pointing to the conventions of a genre deemed to be 'realistic,' and using them for a constructed fictional narrative, *Charlie* exposes the rules of the game and enhances the vigilance vis-à-vis the cinematic medium itself, which can be even more treacherous when using the documentary – or *cinéma vérité* – style or composed of real objects. Sonny Liew retraces Charlie Chan's life: from his youth to mature age, his surroundings, family environment, peers, and friends, broadening the context to society and history of Singapore and Malaysia as well as a history of Singaporean comic art itself. From this complex entanglement of stories emerges what might be the real subject of the book, namely the personal history of Sonny Liew as an artist who has been raised in Southeast Asia and has been fed with American, Japanese and European comics. This background might have also created an 'anxiety of influence' (where are the comics made by Sinophone artists? Can we find traces of them in collective history or imaginary? Why has our/my imaginary been shaped by foreign masterpieces?), an anxiety he tries to dispel by implicitly acknowledging the relevance of foreign inputs while imagining a non-existent canonicity.[1]

1 It is interesting to note that the book was "given a publication grant of S$8,000 by the Singapore National Arts Council (NAC). After the book was on sale for about a month in Singapore,

The first page shows an elder Charlie Chan talking directly to the reader uttering "Did you know that the 'si' in Malaysia comes from 'Singapore'?", and the caption reads: "Charlie Chan Hock Chye, aged 72, 2010." The next case explains the geopolitical context: "From the merger in 1963 … so 'Malaya' became 'Malaysia'." The next page enters the world of comics (or manga), since the elderly artist, after a pause, says: "In the beginning there was Tezuka. They called him the king of manga." Charlie Chan is shown looking for a book by Tezuka, and a voice from out of the case (a balloon filled with signs "" that recall the 'language' of Woodstock from the *Peanuts* series) calls him back, revealing that Charlie is being interviewed; the artist utters "Oh? Ok", comes back in the picture, and declares, "As for me, I was born in the year of nothing: 1938. Well, as far as Singapore's history is concerned, anyway. 1938 … but it was the year that *The Beano* first appeared in the UK, and Superman made his debut in the United States." The prologue ends with a full-page portrait of Charlie Chan saying: "Maybe I was destined to become Singapore's greatest comics artist" (Liew 2015, 3). Personal biography, history and comic art history are merged into a unity that sets the tone of the book.

This figure is reminiscent of the character/actor Li Tianlu (李天祿) in the Taiwanese classic biopic *The Puppetmaster* (Hou Hsiao-hsien 1993). The director Hou recreates the life trajectory of the puppeteer Li Tianlu, born under Qing rule and living through Japanese occupation, Nationalist martial law, and democratic Taiwan. The young Li is interpreted by actors (Li as a child and Li as a young man). At an advanced stage of the movie (40 minutes) Hou lets his character speak directly to the viewer. An aged Li Tianlu appears telling his own story, including his hesitations and doubts ("did it really happen that way? Memories get confused"). One fictional, one not, yet both Li Tianlu and Charlie Chan are national living (at the time) treasures, they are artists/artisans that crossed and witnessed the century while contributing to changing it via their life and work. And they are both representative of the artistic intelligentsia that lived and compromised under multiple colonial rulers and dealt with their legacy. And their art is heavily influenced by the dominant Chinese Confucian heritage and the post-colonial international drives. Readers/spectators are invited to both appreciate the recollection of personal histories and to grasp the social, political, economic context, and to appreciate the evolutions, compromises, struggles and achievements of their respective art. Yet, contrary to the well-documented immaterial

NAC 'degranted' it, citing the politically sensitive content of the book and reclaimed the amount given out" (Lim 2015). This incident has arguably been a major factor contributing to the book's success, but it also underscores the subtle critique embedded in Liew's approach – the government eventually understood that it was financing a potentially subversive (or deeply critical) work.

heritage of Li Tianlu, the art of Charlie Chan is entirely made up, and this fact opens an aporia, a void that is both frustrating and programmatically engaging readers into critical thought.



Figure 1: Homage to *Pogo* and *Maus* (Liew 2015, 82–83). © Pantheon Books, reprinted with permission from the author.

Liew's graphic novel is, in my reader opinion – and I'll try to redeem it at the end of the chapter – a slightly frustrating experience: we get lots of samples, yet only samples of Chan's production. We never get the complete story – the complete story has never existed. Among the material that Liew recreated, parodied and invented, we can find multiple inspirations and references to masterpieces of the Ninth Art: the comic book inside the comic book *Giant Robot* is a manga-style homage to Tezuka Osamu (the robot has the very local specificity to only obey orders given in Chinese); *Force 136* is a war drama were the Japanese are pictured as anthropomorphic dogs, the 'locals' as cats, and British as monkeys, which might evoke Walt Kelly's *Pogo Adventures* (1948), or even *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (Figure 1); *Invasion* is inspired by Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* (1934) – and probably also the baroque and kitsch movie adaptation produced by Dino De Laurentis and directed by Mike Hodges (1980). Charlie Chan has also created a

pulp superhero, a Singaporean version of *Spiderman* (1962), aka Roachman, a guy bit by a (radioactive?) cockroach that becomes a lumpenproletariat action hero; his red scarf that covers his mouth might be an homage to *The Shadow* (1930), another iconic, yet more 'retro' superhero (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Homage to *Spiderman* (Liew 2015, 149–150). © Pantheon Books, reprinted with permission from the author.

The samples of Chan's works have resonances with the social, geopolitical, or cultural events of Singapore and the region. For example, to stick to Roachman, pages 161–162 present the covers of Roachman's classic stories as well as newspaper cuts with chronicles that inspired the author in the creation of his superhero adventures. Yet, it is exasperating: we readers see all these materials, this incredibly exciting art, we see trailers of nonexistent stories that we will never read. It is a poetic choice of indetermination and liberty given to the reader to fantasize, maybe a way toward recreating the enchantment of a younger age – before the internet – when the eyes kept licking posters, advertisements, lists of out-of-print previous issues and 'next issue announcements' well before their publication, and much of the pleasure of the comic book enthusiasts was the expectation.

Toward the end (p. 275 onwards), we find an almost literal quotation of the iconic *Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller (1986) – the hero's silhouette backlit by a thunderstrike, the squares inserted in the page which reproduce TV screens, the voice-over of interviews and commentators, and the color palette. In Miller's graphic novel, the apparition of the elder yet monumental Bruce Wayne was charged with pathos. In *Charlie*, the reader collects the pieces of an imaginary artistic career, hence the pleasure resides in the intellectual play between Liew and his reader – who is invited to imagine the adventures of these East Asian avatars of international comic book icons and their inscription in local history. Yet, readers will remain in ignorance regarding what was really being published in Singapore at that time: the pages dedicated to the life of Charlie Chan are indeed rich in detailing the role of politics, censorship, the changing market priorities, the fluctuating publishing strategies, which all stress the denunciation of a very limited creative freedom. They also seem to suggest the overarching influence of foreign – mainly Western – comic art masters. Not a single actual Singaporean artist or character is ever celebrated in *Charlie*; the canon proposed is the pantheon of acclaimed artists that shaped the masterpieces of what is considered the 'Ninth Art' today. On canon formation, Christophe Dony observes:

> The idea of canonicity is based on key notions such as selection and hierarchy [...], but these notions need not only be articulated by communities of readers and/or viewers. Publishers, producers, and artists certainly participate in the creation of a canon as well, especially when they recurrently refer to and/or draw connections with specific movements, traditions and/or artists whose themes, works and/or aesthetics they either glorify and celebrate or, on the contrary, subvert and challenge. Following this line of reasoning, one might argue that the sector actors of any cultural domain can propose new historical and canonical matrixes of an art form as they engage with the philosophy of intertextuality and its many implications. More specifically perhaps, publishers and artists alike can attempt to redefine and hence rewrite a canon in terms of socio-cultural and patrimonial issue. (Dony 2014, 2).

According to Liew's vertiginous book, then, we won't find any canonical reference in Singapore's actual comic art history; the artistic paragon of comic art resides elsewhere. Does this imply a post-colonial Stockholm Syndrome? Maybe, I'll suggest, more of a Stendhal Syndrome: stuck by the beauty of the elsewhere canonic library, he seems regretful of the scarcity of Sinophone influential output. Liew denounces Singapore's lack of comic art development; he does so by detailing the difficulties that politics and ethics have put into the road of the development of the Ninth Art in the region. It is not talent, I hear Charlie saying, that is lacking in Southeast Asia and in the Sinophone world, but these talents have been suppressed, tamed, silenced. With his own book, his own melancholic alternate history, Liew also celebrates the creativity of his people and predecessors and, by

creating a watershed work of art, demonstrates that although history is not built on 'what if' (no, there has been no Tezuka Osamu or Frank Miller in Singapore), today artists can nevertheless impose their creations, their views, their stylistic, thematic, narrative experimentations.

Even if the legitimacy of the Ninth art to be called, well, art, comes from Western or Tezuka's works, contemporary Singapore is nonetheless a legitimate highbrow graphic novel producer – *Charlie* itself was the recipient of a prestigious Eisner Award. Liew showcases his ability to craft different stories in different genres, hence demonstrating his skills and creative genius, even if (arguably) proposing a frustrating reading experience that recalls the metafictional novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, where Italo Calvino writes ten incipits of novels with different styles and genres, without developing them (Calvino 1979). As with the postmodern, metafictional novel by Calvino, *Charlie* is demonstrating a remarkable ability to mimic different styles and narrative devices, expressing an uneasy anxiety of influence, but also indulging and letting the reader indulge in the pleasure of disbelief, the pure bliss of narrating and reading, and becoming mesmerized in a fictional word and attached to fictional characters, advocating an elsewhere canonical practice that might be indulged also here and now, adapted to the Sinophone comic world.

Charlie (Finally) Read

It is noteworthy that this multidimensional book has been the object of close scrutiny by scholars of different disciplines, in large majority addressing Liew's construction (or deconstruction) of history and memory, while avoiding addressing the elephant in the room, as in 'if Charlie Chan never existed, what was then happening in Singapore's creative world at that time?.' The end of the book is extremely challenging in regard to national history: Liew inserts numerous footnotes that elucidate historic events or cultural trends of the decades he's narrating. The graphic novel fuses with a history essay that demands to be read as serious historiography. These final informative footnotes invite one to read further about the history of the Nation, of its cultural industries, and the history of the comic book format itself, to better understand the complexity of postcolonial Singapore and East Asia. Joanne Leow considers Liew's strategy as 'circumventing the archives.' Liew is creating this historiographic metafiction by the tactic of circumvention: "the act of *circumvention* might provide a new theoretical lens through which to consider how art functions in the face of repressive historical and political practices of the state [...] Liew implicates the artist and writer in the process of historiography and storytelling, deconstructing the visual impact

of the political elite and imagining various alternate histories" (2020, 59). *Charlie* is, accordingly to this persuasive reading, an alternative historiography of Singapore, a challenging site where readers must enact a circumnavigation themselves, to separate reality from fiction. The archives are there, in the form of footnotes and data and collective memories disseminated all along the pages. Yet the reader must actively engage in a deciphering mission. Consequently, it is not only 'the artist and writer' that are implicated, but specifically the reader is challenged to actively engage in a mission of demystification and fact checking. Leow introduces another thought-provoking idea by defining *Charlie* as a "a *Kunstlerroman* – one that sees its artist protagonist move through the history of comics from the 1950s to the present day" (2020, 65). *Charlie* is therefore not only an engaging deconstruction and reconstruction of Singapore history, but also an exploration of the culture industry from which it emerged.

Teri Silvio has brilliantly explored this idea by asserting that the main character of Charlie Chan is, other than the fictional artists, the 'creative labor' itself. Sonny Liew provides "visions of the function of art and the nature of the creative process that challenge those of the Singapore government's discourse and the international creative industry theorists on whom it draws." He constructs "modes of address that encompass both Singaporean and non-Singaporean readers, and make all readers complicit in the project of constructing Singaporean identity." And thirdly, Liew reimagines "the relationship between Singaporean and creative worker identities through simultaneously using and subverting the idea of national allegory" (2018, 143). By summoning the idea of 'national allegory,' Silvio's words recall the famous C. T. Hsia's intuition that modern Chinese writers are 'obsessed with China' in the wake of overlapping historical crises (Hsia 1971). Mutatis mutandis, we can imagine a similar anxiety of influence in early republican Chinese writers and contemporary Singaporean comics artists living under the young republic.

Philip Holden also engages the historical approach of Charlie Chan identifying the graphic novel as a "metafictional form that also relishes the emancipatory possibilities that narrative provides" (2016, 2). The artist doesn't stand outside history, neither does the reader, and our engaged act of creation and reception stresses the necessity of telling alternative histories and mobilizing collectivities, bearing in mind that "the pleasures of historical telling and retelling, of identification with and of separation from larger found narratives, thus offers genuine possibilities of agency for social change" (2016, 13). This agency might stem from the 'queering' of history (mentioned in the introduction), where the defamiliarization of the narration of the past should induce some active, critical, individual research into the national narrative, collective memories and grassroots expressions, and eventually spur active engagement in contemporary (cultural) politics.

'Agency' is again identified as the final intention of the book, or at least a particularly welcomed side effect. Playing in tunes with these suggestions, Philip Smith (2019) underscores the *créolité* of the book. Smith notices the 'oral nature' of the storytelling, which is pluri-vocal. As we have seen, not only Charlie Chan but also Liew, not to mention the numerous fictional and non-fictional characters, express themselves in a cacophony of voices and languages – Cantonese, Mandarin, English, Chinglish, etc. These voices, languages and registers are specific to each locutor and positioned in a sociocultural network. This act of showcasing polyvocality cannot but put into question the historical reasons for the supremacy of Chinese and English, hence adding a further complexity to the official historiography and the power relations at play in the writing of national history and legitimizing existing (but not immutable) inequalities. As well, it might be argued, and active engagement in showcasing, celebrating, and valorizing comic art that has been neglected by Singaporean institutions.

In Sonny Liew's *Charlie*, one can see the creation of an invented tradition in the field of the graphic novel, where prosthetic memories of comic book masterpieces that never existed (yet are plausible) strive to become part of a collective national memory. The most evident tactic to integrate fictional works into real memories is the recreation of different forms of materiality. Sonny Liew shows a bibliophilic attitude in replicating, for each of the comics showcased, the grain of the color, the paper (white, or used by time, or scratched), the materiality of the supports including their poor quality or the wear that time left on the book – and indirectly tells that these books were popular, loved, read, passed from reader to reader. Liew inserts the parodies of foreign classics into the visual habitus of Sinophone (specifically Singaporean, but also pan-Asian) experience. If, in fact, Singaporean readers never enjoyed the adventures of the characters imagined by Charlie Chan, a fictional author, their memory – according to generation or acculturation – might rekindle past reading habits, the smell of the ink, the sensation of manipulating different formats of comic books, the gesture of browsing the newspaper looking for the daily cartoon … the refracted, intertwined and interrupted stories that Liew invents here might be seen as a prosthetic memory grafted on historical supports, creating a new standard – and arguably, proposing a new direction for contemporary creators. If the characters and narratives of Charlie's creations are all made up and references to an acclaimed, canonical elsewhere, the materiality evoked in the graphic novel speaks to its reader, because readers never read (or heard of) Roachman, but they have read other comics in the same format, have used the same drawing paper that Charlie used, had been familiarized with the font, the ink, the graphic features of the (imagined) comic books and magazines (and the drawing materials, scrap books, school diaries, black and white photos etc.). Moreover, Liew also indirectly writes and

draws a history of reading habits that becomes integrated into the big historical narrative, interwoven with factual events and people.

Liew invents a repertoire that is described both within (the creative labor Teri Silvio is evoking) and without (anecdotes of reception, promotion, and censorship) the cultural history of Singapore. I called it a 'frustrating' reading because the author solicits our curiosity that will inevitably be left unsatisfied. At the same time, he constructs a ucronia that powerfully evokes what could have been and opens a door to a conceivable future for creative industries that might be nourished by the prosthetic creative past to become, possibly, real. In terms of creative industry, I stretch the concept of 'retro-continuity' to real life (alternate history) to underscore how Liew does not get rid of the past by erasing it, but rewrites the story by adding elements that might have put Singapore at the center of the Ninth Art scene. With this alternate history, Liew retrospectively integrates the anxiety of influence in the history of a national creative industry via the fictional character of Charlie Chan, who illustrates the road not taken (but might inspire future paths and agencies), and provides in the same movement a breath of nostalgia and celebration of common everyday life experiences. A glorious, graphic illustration of this path is offered by another pastiche/postmodern work, *The Shadow Hero*.

The Shadow Hero

Can we infer an 'anxiety of influence' in the works of Sonny Liew? I would argue so, and that's the reason I am proposing a Janus-faced understanding of his oeuvre. On the one hand, we can read the intellectual and complex highbrow *Charlie*, where we can also surmise the struggle to renew and go past the savant mimicry of past (and alien) masterpieces. Its structure, fabric and philosophy situate *Charlie* in the cerebral exercise of postmodern pastiche. One possible strategy to propose a narrative, affective book that plays with the rules of mainstream comics while celebrating unsung voices of Asian creators is, I argue, *Shadow*. This work with scriptwriter Gene Luen Yang hybridizes the American superhero genre with a more realist approach, namely the description of the experience of Asian immigration to the US. Sonny Liew is familiar with the superhero industry; he draws stories, covers, and pin-ups of characters and franchises, such as Doctor Fate, Spiderman, Star Trek, and Hawkman, among others. Gene Luen Yang has created graphic novels and mainstream superhero stories. Among his best-known works are *Boxers and Saints* (on the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1901 in China, 2013) and the autobiographical *American Born Chinese* (2006). He is one of the most prominent voices of the Asian superhero scene inside the industry: he penned stories for *Superman* (includ-



Figure 3: pages from the comic book that inspired *The Shadow Hero* (reproduced in Liew and Yang 2014, 161–162). Public domain.

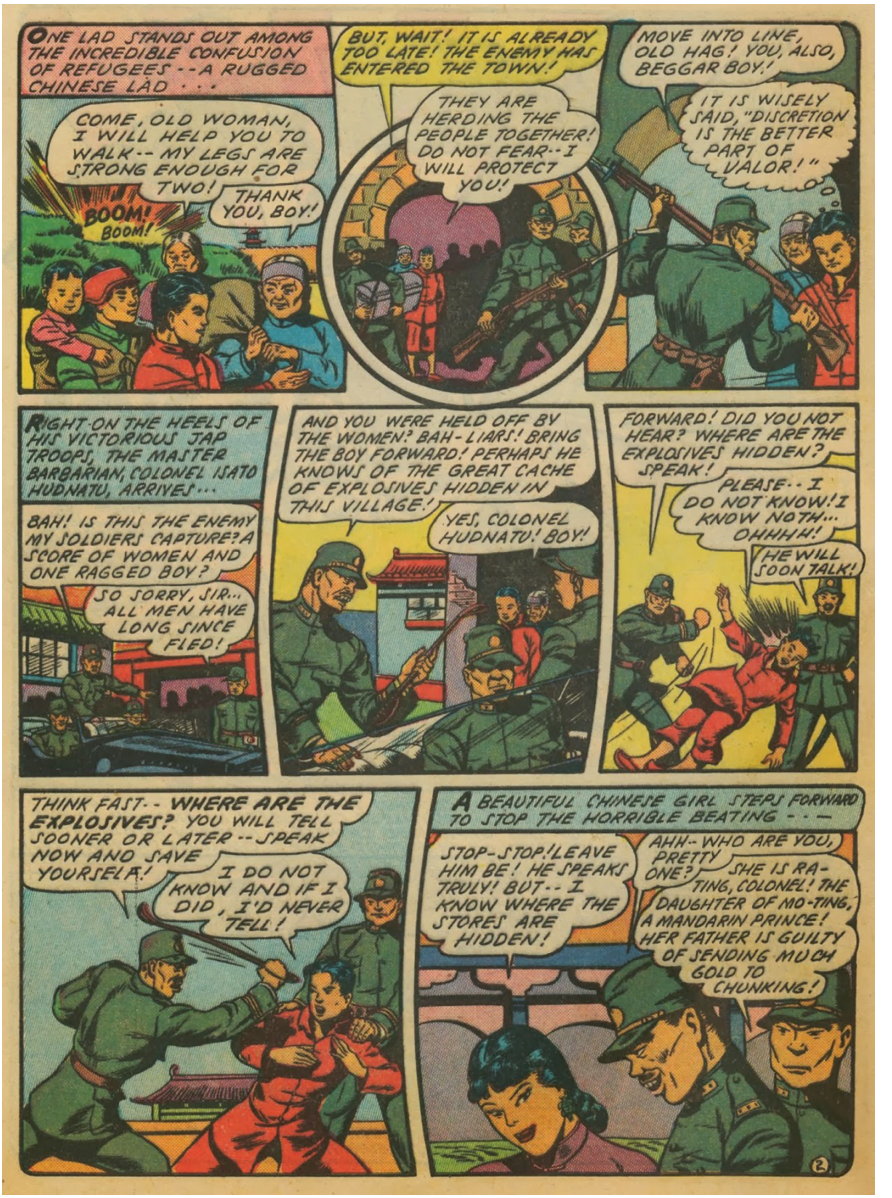

Figure 3 (continued)

ing the Chinese version, Shanghai-based) and *Monkey Prince* (with Sun Wukong Junior, placed in the DC universe, meeting Batman and friends, 2021–2023).

Shadow is a remake, or more precisely a reboot, of a forgotten character from the Golden Age of American comics (Figure 3): The Green Turtle, created by the also forgotten Chu Hing. Using the words of Yang himself, the six-part miniseries "revives the Green Turtle, an obscure comic book character from the 1940s who is arguably the first Asian American superhero" (Yang 2014). The authors themselves in the preface of their graphic novel introduce contemporary readers to the short publishing history of *The Green Turtle*. This slightly unusual historical introduction has a strong nostalgic feeling, as well as a powerful political stance. Green Turtle, the short-lived character of the 1940s, is a Batman rip-off, visually resembling the caped crusader, and he is also accompanied by a teenage Robin-like sidekick. Liew and Yang found it difficult to retrace the author biography of Chu Hing. In the postface, they write "Hing was among the first Asian Americans working in the American comic book industry. This was decades before the Asian American movement, though, so he wouldn't have self-identified as such. Most likely, he would have just called himself Chinese" (Yang and Liew 2014, 154).

We can infer that Liew and Yang, who successfully claimed a voice in contemporary comics (they are both published), find particularly interesting a less fortunate predecessor who lived in an epoch when 'minority' voices were silenced on rendered invisible. To the point that in the preface Yang uses Hing as the family name, and in a later intervention (in the form of a comic strip) he rectifies his mistake: "So, I screwed up. In the essay that accompanies the first printing of *The Shadow Hero*, I repeatedly refer to Chu F. Hing, the creator of the Green Turtle, as if Hing were his familial name. This is incorrect. Hing is his individual name. His familial name is Chu" (Yang 2015). Helped by Alex Jay, a "legendary comic book logo designer," Yang managed to rectify his information and find additional information about the mysterious cartoonist (Jay 2014). To be noted that the responses to Alex Jay's research come from enthusiastic descendants of the cartoonist delighted to have been able to finally retrace lost family information; some of them contributed to summarize old documents and pictures. A particularly poignant witness reads: "Thank you for posting this blog about Chinese American artists. Chu F. Hing is my Uncle (my Grandpa Bill's brother). My Uncle Fook was discussing email [sic] about some older photos of the Chu Kin Yuen family. Some family history and stories arose and none of us knew the full story of Uncle Hing after he had married Aunty Helga. I actually have a painting of my great grandparents, Chu Kin and Chong See, by Uncle Hing that I need to send in for art restoration. That is the only original art that I know of which we have kept in the family. Seeing his other pieces on your blog and his life story as an artist and husband are eye-opening. I have shared your blog with my family members

and they love it" (Jay, 2014). Oral history and art history, comic art archeology and family origins research, national imaginary and community building are mixed in a touching combination of art and genealogy.

In the original comic book itself, the two authors find echoes of a conscious Asian voice, as well as signs of the awareness of its forced invisibility: the stories are set in China during the Second World War, and the English title is accompanied by Chinese characters – correctly written. Needless to say, the Japanese are portrayed as cruel enemies oppressing Chinese people. Besides, the reader never gets a glimpse of the secret identity of the Green Turtle – as if in a Batman book we never got to see Bruce Wayne. According to Yang and Liew, this might be a silent protestation from the author, who rebels against the discrimination and the imposed invisibility on Asian people. To borrow their words: "Supposedly, Hing wanted his character to be Chinese. Supposedly, his publisher didn't think a Chinese superhero would sell and told Hing to make his character white. Supposedly, Hing rebelled right there on the page. Throughout the Green Turtle's adventures, we almost never get to see his face. Most of the time, the hero has his back to us" (Yang and Liew 2014, 155).

This strategy seems somehow complementary to Liew's *Charlie* that created an alternate history, hinting at the complicated political background that might have aborted many creative enterprises, imagining a parallel universe where masterpieces such as *Maus* or *The Dark Knight Returns* were produced in Singapore by local talents. In *Shadow* the possibility of an American superhero of Asian origins is realized since he is proudly showing his face, his background, his name and his origin, which is possible (legitimate, necessary) today but not during the 1940s. *Shadow* and *Charlie* both develop creative ways to subtly denounce the past invisibility/oppression/injustice and celebrate the pride of contemporary visibility and regained agency.

The name 'Shadow Hero' is also an interesting choice: the superpower comes from an ectoplasm similar to shadows, but it can also hint at the invisibility of diversity in the US – until recently, that is. But that is exactly where our authors step in with *Shadow*. We can call it a mixed operation of retro-continuity and reboot. The first visual impact is an homage to the original *Green Turtle* Golden Age books: a colophon in red at the left side of the page has the title in Chinese characters (vertical) and the English translation at the bottom (Yang and Liew 2014, 1). Then the narrative proceeds in a rather 'classic' way. We are not in a citational, postmodern, breaking-fourth-wall perspective (as in *Charlie*), quite the contrary. An external voice-over sets the temporal frame of the story: "In 1911, the Ching dynasty collapsed, ending two millennia of imperial rule over China. The country plunged into chaos. Soon after, in a place between our world and the next, the dragon, the phoenix, the tiger and the tortoise came to a council. These four spirits were born with China, and through the centuries they had watched over her. Each was well aware



Figure 4: Secret origin of Shadow Hero (Liew and Yang 2014, 69–70). © First Second, reprinted with permission from the authors.

that they would die if China were defeated" (Yang and Liew 2014, 1). And so the story starts, with important differences from source material: the graphic design of the characters is up to date; the historic settings are not the Second World War but early republican China; and soon the action will transfer to the USA.[2]

The aura, echo, or relevance of China is still very much present: Liew and Yang set their story among Chinese Americans who are struggling to integrate into the harsh new American reality but also keep memories and values from their home country. The first chapters tell the origin story of the new superhero. It is actually his mother, working at a laundry shop – a profession historically dominated by Chinese immigrants, see for example, the role of Michelle Yeoh in *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (Kwan and Sheinert, 2022) – who is passionate about superheroes and desperately wants her son to become one. Yang chose a parodic approach: the mother not only imagines slapstick ways to let her son acquire superpowers (like ingesting a concoction of exotic herbs and minerals, or

2 Green Turtle Golden Age comics can be read here: http://chimericaneyes.blogspot.com/2014/01/the-art-of-chu-f-hing-part-4.html.

receiving a "small bite" by an animal that had been used for scientific research), but also sews a costume with the *jin* (金, gold) character which is also the name of the family laundry shop, by combining fighting crime with advertisements for her business. The tone changes abruptly on page 65. Something happens, an event in the classic tradition of superheroes such as Spiderman, who loses the sadly iconic Uncle Ben. The father is brutally killed in front of his son and wife. After this shocking tragedy, the protagonist becomes aware of his father's secrets, and notably the legacy he brought from China: the tortoise spirit we met on the first pages, who gives him real superpowers in exchange for the possibility to inhabit the young man's body (Figure 4). He can then fight evil, revenge his father, and be integrated into the American superhero family. He even meets a Superman-like character, Anchor of Justice, who (like Kal El in the *Superman* series), is an alien or, as he puts it to Green Turtle, "my parents aren't from around here, either" (Yang and Liew 2014, 152). Not unlike Green Turtle himself: coming from another country, struggling to integrate, but also the carrier of a supernatural spirit protecting "China" (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Homage to *Superman* (Liew and Yang 2014, 151–152). © First Second, reprinted with permission from the authors.

The Shadow Hero as a Post-Vertigo Book

Shadow reveals itself as an origin story. Anchor of Justice tells Green Turtle, "Have you been following the news out of Europe and Asia? Sooner rather than later, America will be called upon to defend our allies. The president's already spoken with me about it. They'll need people like you and me to bolster our troops" (Yang and Liew 2014, 151). And here the link with the setting of Golden Age Green Turtle is created, in the classic tradition of superhero origin story (often a trauma). But this time, Turtle has been given a face, a name, a story. Liew and Yang provided an engaged, political backup story to the otherwise anonymous, allegedly first Asian American superhero. Yang is an engaged artist, creator, and educator who strongly promotes diversity. What I find particularly interesting here – other than the rightful political engagement – is the way he and Liew propose to rectify continuity of the popular superhero genre from within. He does so by modifying the canon, not by dismantling it, by enriching it with a denunciation of the inequalities while adopting the industry's rules – in terms of the already quoted Harold Bloom: in order to manage and dispel the anxiety of influence, they complete their precursor "as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (Bloom 1973, 14). Yang and Liew do not deny their work's precursor (here, the vintage tradition of caped superheroes). However, they feel the need to go further, to include and celebrate diversity by rewriting the canon, because diversity (in Asian communities, here) has always been there, but was not acknowledged. It is now, and it's a diversity that can appropriate the rules of the genre (superheroes, here) and enrich it with its own experiences, feelings, histories.

Shadow doesn't come from the iconic, late DC Vertigo Comics imprint – the line that, under the direction of the legendary Karen Berger, largely contributed to the coming of age of US comics and is still – in the Internet age – a source of inspiration for TV shows like *The Sandman*, *Preacher* or *Small Tooth*. Yet, *Shadow* performs the DC Vertigo guidelines: it appropriates old, rusty characters, elevating their stories to a more high-brow profile by proposing a mature readers' perspective (explicit sexuality, adult themes such as drug abuse, rape, politics, war, Anthropocene, politics, and so forth. Among the best known are *The Sandman*, *Shade the Changing Man*, *Swamp Thing*, *Animal Man*).

To come back to the quotation from Dony (2014) provided in the introduction, I believe that Yang and Liew are acknowledging and celebrating a canonical pantheon (the great American superhero) as a matrix, but they also spot an aporia (where are Asian artists and characters?), and consequently decide not to trash/deny/disown the canon but to redefine it. This redefinition proceeds in accordance with major trends in contemporary culture: first, the valorization and legitimation of 'geek' and 'nerd' popular culture; and second, a claim for visibility on behalf of

Asian communities. I argue that *Shadow* can be read as a post-Vertigo mature reader comic book. It does not deny its popular, commercial, formulaic origins. On the contrary, it ennobles and inserts them as a canonical voice that has every right to be part of the symbolic capital of American – and global – popular culture.

Charlie and *Shadow*: Two Complementary Strategies of Legitimization

Even more engaging in our exploration of the visibility of Asian voices in the global comic book scene is that *Shadow* deploys a strategy that is complementary to Sonny Liew's *Charlie*, further complexifying and enriching contemporary Sinophone comic books. The latter engages in a highly conceptual and postmodern creation that refrains from emotional engagement – or, as we have seen, deliberately refuses it. *Charlie*'s samples of popular culture and quotations impede emotional pleasure, and even the parts related to Charlie Chan's (fictional) biography are episodic and leave many loose ends. The book can be called an 'alternative strategy' to borrow from Paul Lopes, who notes that "alternative rebels also faced the contradiction of reproducing the type of status hierarchy that had stigmatized comic books for so long. Those committed particularly to the alt-strategy of framing comic books as legitimate as any other high art simply reproduced the popular art versus high art dichotomy that in many ways comic book culture worked hard to escape" (quoted in Dony 2014). *Charlie* adopts this 'alt-strategy' since it focuses on a narrative voice that bridges the gap between biopic and national allegory in a postmodern, reflexive, 'high art' tone. On the contrary, and in a complementary fashion, *Shadow* borrows the graphic and narrative conventions of superhero comics, but refuses to dichotomize between high and low brow, and aims "at highlighting the (dis)continuities that one creator wishes to establish with his/her predecessors in relation to his/her own aesthetic practice. This should not be solely understood as a sign of nostalgia but as a poetic concern for lineage, originality, and perhaps self-canonization" (Dony 2014). Or, to borrow again from Harold Bloom, this 'anxiety of influence' forms and malforms new creations that aspire, as arguably Liew and Yang's oeuvres do, to permanence. A permanence that is an aesthetic and political statement where Asian creators and characters play in a self-conscious metafictional way and can produce works like the ones I am analyzing: *Charlie* by constructing a complex elitist graphic novel (metahistorical postmodern fiction), *Shadow* by explicitly and proudly respecting the rule of the genre (here: superhero), engaging in 'straight,' affective, emotional storytelling.

The Art of Charlie Chan and *The Shadow Hero* claim, from a Sinophone perspective, the symbolic capital that Asian comic art outside Japan is still lacking. *Charlie* offers a beautiful, inexistent graphic novel repertoire, *Shadow* gives one the presence, the relevance, and the dramatically silenced voices of Asian people via the American-born superhero genre. These two inclusive and generous texts chart an alternative history where a 'new' art can be foreseen. The graphic novel is not a novelty, but the Sinophone graphic novel may be – or at least, it possesses thus far – a short history. Relatively new Sinophone voices are engaging in a genre that is not manga-style, political cartoon, *wuxia* (武俠, martial arts) or *lianhuanhua* (連環畫, 'linked drawings'), but rather a twist on the Western graphic novel (or *gekiga* 劇畫 from Japan) and post-Vertigo superhero. Untold Asian stories embark on a less traveled road (for Sinophone comics), and their importance resides in the path they open for future creation, but also in the lack they are pointing out. The rarity of Sinophone graphic novels and the invisibility of Asian characters and creators in mainstream American culture are examined in these two books, and are somehow compensated. Liew and Yang, with their act of creation, are consciously engaging with global comic book storytelling, proposing something new in a classic Western format. What I find compelling is that this format is not challenged per se. Instead, its potentialities are finally explored by courageous artists who do not propose an elusive 'Chinese characteristic' to their style or narration but integrate established and contemporary transcultural genres with their personal and collective Asian stories. While rewriting the past of Sinophone graphic novels and the Asian superhero, they contribute to tracing a path for future creations; not by subverting the established narratives and styles, but by amending their roots and proudly adopting their rules.

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Section 4: **Reaching Outwards – Taiwan and Global Connections**

Teri SILVIO

Chapter 10
Autobiographical Cartoon Characters and Artist Personae: Modeling the Labor of Self-Branding in Taiwan

Abstract: In the past quarter century, a new type of cartoon character has emerged in the Sinophone world which blends aspects of autobiographical comics and mascot/logo characters from North America and Japan. In this chapter, I analyze the work and careers of three Taiwanese artists whom I see as key figures in the development of this genre: Chen Wen-xiu (陳文琇), Hu Jia-wei (胡家瑋), and Li Han-ren (Lee Han-jen, 李含仁), better known by the names of the popular characters they have created, Kaixi (Cathie), Wan Wan, and Mark. These characters appear in autobiographical or semi-autobiographical comics, where they are shown, at least sometimes, as creative workers, and are also licensed and serve as the artists' personal brand mascots as much, if not more than, as narrative characters. Both the characters and their creators have become role models for white-collar workers both in and outside of the creative industries. The relationships established between character and artist model how to create a self-brand and how to inject creativity into white-collar labor. The three character/artist dyads provide different models for how to negotiate tensions between legibility and flexibility, and thus how to become a successful worker in the neoliberal economy.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, governments and corporations around the world have adopted policies to promote 'creativity' as a solution to the post-industrial problems of unemployment and urban stagnation. The ideas of the 'creative industries,' 'creative cities,' and the 'creative economy' were first developed in the UK and the US in the 1990s, and

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spread quickly to the rest of the post-industrial world and then to developing countries. According to Kong et al. (2006), Taiwan (along with Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea) was deeply engaged with the creative industries discourse and began promoting its own adaptation of these concepts and policies in the early 2000s.

One aspect of the rise of creative industry policy and discourse has been that artists have come to be seen as model workers under the global neoliberal regime. Artists have served as models in two ways. First, they are seen as the most paradigmatic example of creative people. Thus, government bureaus and corporations have hired painters, musicians, and performance artists to teach their staff how to inject creativity into their institutional culture and encourage their employees to think outside the box (Ross 2003, Wilf 2015). Second, because of traditional images of the Romantic artist's mode of production (working 'for love,' working alone, working long and irregular hours, seeking patronage, tolerating wildly fluctuating incomes with long periods of poverty, etc.), "the artist was reconceived as the model citizen-worker – a self-motivated entrepreneur able to work in a highly flexible manner with a wide range of clients, partners, and sponsors" (Ross 2009, 36–37).

One area where contemporary artists serve quite directly as models for how to be a successful neoliberal worker is in their attention to the development of a personal brand. As many have noted, branding has become a requirement for participation in the neoliberal economy, not only for corporations, but also for entities at all different scales – nations, cities, ethnicities, and individuals (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, Manning 2010, Gershon 2016). In her study of job seekers in the United States in the mid-2010s, Ilana Gershon (2016) found that self-branding workshops were popular, despite the fact that there was no evidence that they actually helped people find jobs, and in fact, employers she interviewed paid more attention to traditional qualifications. Gershon attributes the popularity of branding workshops to the fact that the concept of the individual brand provides a solution, in theory if not in practice, to a key paradox faced by workers in the neoliberal economy, that workers must be always flexible, continuously learning new skills and constructing new networks, but at the same time, in order to stand out in an increasingly competitive job market, they must also maintain a legible, coherent identity. Gershon argues that what the self-branding process involves is the isolation and decontextualization of personality traits which can be made to seem continuous over time. As Gershon notes, this can be a difficult and self-alienating process for many. Successful role models can provide guidance and reassurance as workers face this process.

In this chapter, I want to outline what I see as a new genre of cartoon character that has emerged to meet this need. I analyze the work and careers of three Taiwanese artists whom I see as key figures in the development of this genre: Chen Wen-xiu (陳文琇), Hu Jia-wei (胡家瑋), and Li Han-ren (Lee Han-jen, 李含

(二), better known by the names of the popular characters they have created, Kaixi (Cathie),[1] Wan Wan, and Mark. These characters appear in autobiographical or semi-autobiographical comics, where they are shown, at least sometimes, as creative workers. They are also licensed and serve as the artists' personal brand mascots as much, if not more than, as comics characters. They have become role models for how to negotiate the tension between legibility and flexibility, and how to inject creativity into white-collar labor.

Taiwan has often been a hub where global trends in business practice and popular culture, usually originating in Japan or North America, are localized and then spread to other Chinese-speaking communities (Rigger 2021). A prime example is Japanese manga, which have been exported to Chinese-speaking communities throughout Southeast Asia via Taiwanese translations. The three artists I discuss here blend genres that have histories in places other than Taiwan – the autobiographical comic, the mascot or logo character, and the character represented as an office worker and/or a 'creative' – into something new: what I will call the self-brand cartoon character. While the earliest and longest lasting examples of this type of character I found are Taiwanese, they can now be found throughout the Sinophone world.

Autobiographical comics have been central to the indie comix scene in North America since the 1960s, and have existed in Japan for almost as long (Hashimoto 2013). In the Sinophone world, autobiographical comics were quite rare until the twenty-first century. But they have begun to appear in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, as well as Taiwan. Cute cartoon characters have functioned as brand representatives for corporations and places in Japan for decades. Mascot cartoon characters are also common in Taiwan, representing institutions ranging from banks to subway systems to bubble tea chains. Real people, including politicians, have been appearing as cartoon characters in Taiwan since the turn of the century (Chuang 2011). Comics in which the main identity of the characters is as a white-collar worker have a long history in both North America and Japan, from Scott Adams' Dilbert to the whole genre of salaryman comics in Japan. In Singapore, Johnny Lau's beloved *Mr. Kiasu* series frequently shows the protagonist as an office drone. Self-reflexive comics about artist protagonists are also a staple of the North American indie scene (often combined with autobiography, as in the work of Harvey Pekar and Art Spiegelman), and many such comics have been published in Japan (e.g., Ohba Tsugumi and Obata Takeshi's *Bakuman* or Higashi-

1 Chen uses the Chinese name Kaixi and the English name Cathie (sometimes Cathy) equally often, and sometimes together on the same book cover or post. Hereafter I will refer to the character as Cathie.

mura Akiko's *Blank Canvas: My So-Called Artist's Journey*). The Taiwanese comics artists Sean Chuang (莊永新) and Mickeyman (米奇鰻), as well as Hong Kong artist Stella So (蘇敏怡) and Singaporean artist Troy Chin, have all drawn autobiographical or semi-autobiographical comics depicting their work lives in the creative industries.

Some comics and characters blend two of these three categories. Mr. Kiasu appears as a toy and on many products, and thus might be considered a sort of brand mascot as well as a worker character (but the comic is not autobiographical). And, as I just mentioned, many comics that portray creative workers are also autobiographical (but the characters are not brand logos). Thus, we could see the comics I analyze here as continuations of the impulse to blend genres and marketing techniques. Yet I think there is something distinctive and reflective of the times about the way that Chen, Hu, and Li's works combine autobiography, the representation of creative labor, and brand mascot functions.[2]

Neither the appeal of these self-brand cartoon characters nor their potential role model function lie solely in the contents of the comics or the appearances of the characters themselves. They are based in the relationship established between the character and the artist, or rather, the artist's public persona. Each of the artists discussed here has created a public persona for themselves, not only through their comics, but also through public lectures and autograph signings, online and in-person interactions with fans, and published interviews. Each establishes a different kind of relationship between the public persona and the autobiographical character. Each artist persona/autobiographical character dyad presents a different model for how to construct a creative, entrepreneurial, branded self. Fans (as far as I can tell from online comments and artists' descriptions of their interactions with fans) identify with both the characters and the artists.

As John Crespi (2020) points out, the meaning and effects of comics only make sense within the media ecology in which they are produced and consumed. I should note that the self-brand cartoon characters I analyze here operate in a media ecology much different from the print and online contexts of most of the comics discussed in other chapters of this volume. The Japanese 'media mix' strategy for marketing manga characters (Steinberg 2012) has been adopted to varying degrees by different enterprises in Taiwan, and has expanded in tandem with the discourses of the creative industries/cities/economy and of branding. While I

2 Cathy Guisewite's semi-autobiographical character, Cathy, has all of the characteristics of a self-brand character, and may be considered a unique early example of the type. Guisewite's comic strip, *Cathy*, was serialized in American newspapers from 1976 to 2010, and the licensed Cathy character appeared on a wide range of stationery and household products.

have chosen characters that do appear within comics (very broadly defined), most also appear detached from the print products that 'comics,' 'manga,' or '*manhua*' usually reference. They swim in a much larger media mix sea, buoyed by licensing agents as well as publishers, and dependent on digital technology. They appear not only in books, but also in animations, as toys, as emojis used in social media messages, and decorating a wide variety of products.

In this chapter, I will first introduce Chen, Hu, and Li and their self-brand characters, focusing on the artists' career trajectories and the relationship between their artist personae and their characters, before moving on to analyze how these artist/character dyads model different strategies for self-branding. I will end with a discussion of why this genre of cartoon character first emerged in Taiwan rather than elsewhere.

Chen Wen-xiu/Cathie

Chen Wen-xiu, better known by her pen name, Cathie or Kaixi, has been called the "originator of the creative industry world" in Taiwan (A Bian 2023). Chen graduated from the Fu-Hsin Trade and Arts School (復興高級商工職業學校), a private technical high school considered to have one of the best programs in design in Taiwan. She then went to work for a stationery company run by fellow alumni, where she edited licensed images of Western cartoon characters, such as Garfield and Fido Dido. After a trip to Canada, where she kept an illustrated diary, her boss encouraged her to develop new products based on her drawings. They introduced the Cathie character in an illustrated notebook called *White T-Shirt and Blue Jeans* in 1996.

The format for *White T-Shirt* was a new one in Taiwan. A new term was invented for this new type of book, which had less text than most commercial comics or illustrated books: note/book (*bijishu*, 筆記書). I have been unable to find any extant copy of a *White T-Shirt* note/book, but they are described like this in a 1997 article:

> In April last year the first pamphlet (*shouceshu* 手冊書), *White T-Shirt and Blue Jeans*, was published. The content was a member of the new generation's (*xinxinrenlei* 新新人類) short sayings and points of view, very clearly written, taken from Chen Wen-xiu's illustrated diary, which easily moved the hearts of today's youth. Within a week of publication, more than 200,000 copies were sold. (Yan 1997, cited in Cai 2023)

Chen went on to produce several more of these note/books, as well as other stationery products featuring the Cathie character. She then began publishing illustrated books with more text between the illustrated pages, over twenty between

1997 and 2014, with different publishers (Figure 1). The books are all based on Chen's diaries, and she claims that the Cathie character is '100%' herself (Renjian Weishi 2016). The persona she presents, through her texts and in public appearances, is a young woman in search of self-realization, constantly examining her own emotions, an adventurous world traveler who is a bit rebellious.

Chen's texts often directly address the reader, and the content tends to be abstract and philosophical, focusing on how to face negative emotions and experiences, maintain courage, and remain true to one's self (eg, "Don't try to change others. Remember that it's already hard to change yourself;" 2005, 74). English sentences are interspersed with Chinese. The style of Chen's pencil and watercolor drawings, as well as her handwriting, is deliberately childish. This style aims to create a sense of intimacy. Chen says, "My drawing is ugly and my handwriting isn't pretty either, so when people see it, they feel like it's their own work, they really connect with it" (Renjian Weishi 2016).



Figure 1: Some of Cathie's illustrated books and stationery products. Photograph by the author.

The Cathie books and goods were extremely popular in Taiwan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, primarily with girls in middle and high school. Fans took Chen/

Cathie as a role model, and they often wrote to Chen for advice. 'Kaixi' even became a descriptor for a certain type of girl for a time (Renjian Weishi 2016).

Chen's illustrated books almost never deal directly with work. However, in 2011, she published *Cathie Accompanies You to Play with Design*, which explicitly sought to teach readers how to be creative. Each section of the book elaborates a principle for how to be creative (e.g., be flexible, don't be afraid to use formulas), which is illustrated with some examples from Chen's own career and ends with an exercise the reader can do. Each page contains drawings of objects that inspired Chen, or of the Cathie character working or simply expressing relevant emotions. The principles are meant to apply beyond the narrow field of design. As Chen says in the introduction, "Design is not just a job, a professional title. Design is a medicine that can energize us to defeat our enemies and make our minds calm and optimistic" (2011, 7). The last section is on character design, and this section describes Chen imagining a high school girl character very similar to the younger Cathie.

The changes in Chen's career parallel the changes in Taiwan's media ecology and public discourse. Her early note/books, which focused on self-discovery, friendship, and travel, were published before the discourse of the cultural creative industries was popularized in Taiwan, back when 'branding' was a term used almost exclusively by advertising agencies and business executives. In the early 2000s, as the government started promoting the creative industries, she increased the range of her products and became an independent entrepreneur. By the time she published *Cathie Accompanies You to Play with Design*, her fan base had matured with her and were now in their 30s, and creativity was seen as a necessity for the Taiwanese economy and for individual workers. The role model offered by the combination of the Cathie character and Chen's public image segued smoothly from appealing to adolescent girls to addressing middle-class workers.

Hu Jia-wei/Wan Wan

Like Chen Wen-xiu, Hu Jia-wei graduated from the Fu-Hsin Trade and Arts School, after which she worked a series of low-paying office jobs. At the same time, she was posting sketches of her daily life on her sister's blog, featuring a cute cartoon character she called Wan Wan. The blog diaries proved to be extremely popular, especially with students and office workers. Hu started her own blog in 2004 under the pen name Wan Wan, and designed a series of emoticons for the MSN Live Messenger service. Her blog became the first in Taiwan to receive one billion views. In 2005 an editor suggested that she do a book, and she cooperated with him to pub-

lish *I Hate My Work, But Enjoy My Life.*[3] She has published over 20 illustrated books so far, as well as maintaining her blog, and has licensed the Wan Wan character image, which has appeared on numerous products including stationery, clothing, purses, housewares, and magnets (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Some of Wan Wan's books and magnets featuring the Wan Wan character. Photograph by the author.

I Hate My Work, But Enjoy My Life presents a series of short vignettes (one or two pages) and illustrations of observations. There are no panels and gutters, and no frames other than those around each page, which are hand-drawn. All the text is handwritten, occasionally in dialogue bubbles but usually in captions.

Like Chen's Cathie character, Hu's Wan Wan is presented as completely autobiographical, based on the creator's personal diaries. For both women, the complete identification of the cartoon character with the creator's public persona is obvious not only from the use of the character's name as pen name and the use of the character to illustrate first-person narratives online and in books, but also from

3 A more accurate translation of the Chinese title would be, *Can I not Go to Work? Wan Wan's Doodle Diary 1*. Here I use the English title given in the book itself.

their statements in public appearances. Hu even played herself as a doodling high school student who grows up to become a famous blogger in the 2011 film *You Are the Apple of My Eye*. As with Chen, Hu presents the strictly autobiographical nature of the character as the source of her appeal. As she put it, "[If] it doesn't come from my true feelings, isn't what I really want to draw, it won't be funny, and it won't resonate with other people who see it" (Dearjohn 2005).

There are some significant differences in the two women's style, however. While the Cathie note/books are reminiscent of the sketchbook, a genre associated with a more bohemian lifestyle, Wan Wan's work is closer to the commercial manga format. Also, the Wan Wan persona is more traditionally feminine than Cathie's, and more child-like – fun-loving, naive, vulnerable, not very competent, and often confused. For instance, she sings to herself on the way home from work, panics whenever her boss calls her, and answers her boss' question, "Ten years from now, what do you want to be?" with, "Married!" (Wan Wan 2010, 44).

While both women's visual styles are 'cute,' appearing to be hand-drawn and unsophisticated, Wan Wan's is more minimalist. Color is used sparingly, only one color per section, and the palette is mostly pastel. The Wan Wan character has no facial features other than eyes, a mouth, and a single, curled line behind her head to represent a ponytail; other characters are given hair, clothing, glasses, and so on. It is a tenet among visual artists that the more blank a cartoon character's face is, the more open it is to psychic projection by readers (see McCloud 1993, Yamaguchi 2011). Thus, not only is Wan Wan presented narratively as a more ordinary character than Cathie, she is also visually designed to appeal to a wider audience.

Also, while both Cathie and Wan Wan are clearly presented as figures of identification for young women, Wan Wan also resonates with an older readership that includes men, based on shared experiences of office work. Although in one scene in *I Hate My Work*, the boss refers to the workers as 'animators,' the workplace scenes in Wan Wan's comics are generic. Wan Wan is simultaneously a specific individual (with training in animation) and an Every Office Worker. Hu expanded the reading of Wan Wan as worker in her 2009 book, *Can I not Have an Iron Rice Bowl?*, in which Hu spends a couple of weeks working each of a series of very different jobs, including teacher, baker, and flower shop assistant, illustrated with both photographs of Hu Jia-wei and drawings featuring Wan Wan.

In her representations of her own career path, Wan Wan attributes her success not only to staying true to her own experience of the world, but also to her childishness. Indeed, one of her books is titled, *Can I Stay Childish?* (2012). In Wan Wan's oeuvre, childishness is the source of creativity, which is as necessary to the path to success as persistence in pursuing one's dreams. Thus, more than with

Cathie, the cuteness of Wan Wan's persona is critical to how she constructs herself as a role model.

As Sianne Ngai (2005, 2015) has argued, cuteness is an ambivalent aesthetic. On the one hand, the cute object, especially when it is a character with infantile proportions and features, elicits an instinctual protective response. But it may also elicit a sadistic response, an urge to destroy. The cute object also produces a cute subject – the viewer of the cute object often responds with baby talk, becoming cute (vulnerable, innocent) herself. These potential reversions – between affection and disgust, powerlessness and power, object and subject – imminent in the aesthetics of cuteness make the cute identity one which is especially vulnerable to spoiling.

The dangers of adopting a cute identity that is presented as nearly identical to one's professional persona can therefore be dangerous, especially for female media personalities. This danger was manifested when, in 2014, shortly after her much-publicized wedding, Hu was photographed by paparazzi kissing an old boyfriend. While some fans stayed loyal, blaming the old boyfriend or claiming that she had the right to privacy, many felt betrayed by the contradiction between the innocence of the Wan Wan persona and Hu's unexpected revelation of an adult and 'immoral' sexuality, and claimed that they could no longer read her comics in the same way, that the character they had seen as cute now appeared ugly to them. Hu was forced to apologize to her fans on her blog and in a press conference, and her career took a nosedive. As the scandal died down, she began blogging and publishing again, but this time focusing on her life as a wife and mother. She never regained the popularity and contract opportunities she had had before.

Li Han-ren/Mark

Mark is a character licensed under the brand name 'I'm Mark' by artist Li Han-ren, who also goes by the name Mark Lee. Like Chen Wen-xiu and Hu Jia-wei, Li attended the Fu-Hsin Trade and Arts School and then earned an MFA from the National Chinese Culture University. He worked for several years as a graphic designer at an advertising firm, and then established his own design company in 2005. In 2008, he began posting comics on his personal blog which were based on his experience working for the advertising firm. When the blog comics proved popular, he found a partner to take over the business aspects of the company, and they launched the 'I'm Mark' brand. They began licensing the character images, carefully managing the brand through selecting appropriate partners. Aside from the character images appearing on numerous products such as soft drink

bottles, calendars, mugs, t-shirts, and red envelopes for New Year gifts, they also appear in published comic books (twelve between 2009 and 2020), as well as comics on the Korean online comics platform Webtoon since 2013, in digital animations, and even in a stage play (Mark 2018a).

The comic books are published under the series name *Whining about Making a Living* (*Wu Dou Mi Kao Yao*, 五斗米靠腰). *Wu dou mi* is a phrase taken from classical Chinese, which literally refers to a measure of rice, and is figuratively used to mean 'a living.' It is similar to 'one's daily bread,' but with the negative implication that one sacrifices one's principles to survive. *Kao yao* is a Taiwanese (Hoklo) phrase meaning 'to whinge' or 'complain.' The main character in the *Whining* series is Mark, the designer, who is described as "a low-level employee who laughs through his bitterness. Although he gets no respect, he still is happy to serve others" (Mark 2015, 5). He and most of his male co-workers are drawn with dark bags under their eyes, and the boss has blood-tipped fangs.

In terms of visual style, the drawings are highly stylized and obviously edited on a computer. The characters are composed of geometric shapes, slightly rounded, with shading designed to give the impression of glossy smoothness. This style works very well for figurines and other merchandise. The comics are composed of short segments, some with several frames, although others do not use frames at all. Some segments are narrative, but the majority have a theme, with each frame as an example of the theme. The frames look much like PowerPoint slides, usually with the same written text at the top and/or bottom of the page (Figure 3).

In terms of setting and characterization, the *Whining* comics are very similar to Scott Adams' Dilbert comics, and indeed, Li has said, "[If] I hadn't been influenced by Dilbert at the start, Mark would not exist" (Mark 2018b). But there are significant differences. For one, Adams' *The Dilbert Principle* (1996), called "the management book of the century" by the *Washington Times* on its cover, teaches exclusively through sarcastic negative examples. The *Whining* comics take a gentler tone, and also contain lessons on good leadership from Taiwanese and global CEOs, such as Alibaba's founder, Jack Ma, inserted between the vignettes. In his autobiography, lectures, and Facebook posts, Li stresses the importance of hard work and persistence, and especially learning from failure (his first company, after initial success, went bankrupt due to poor fiscal management, and he started again from scratch; he keeps a regular schedule and only sleeps six hours a night, etc.). For Li, creativity is defined primarily in terms of problem-solving, and its suppression is a problem primarily because of its impact on efficiency.

Scott Adams has been criticized for hypocrisy. As Norman Solomon (1997) argues, the Dilbert comics merely provide an escape valve for corporate workers' dissatisfactions, while the cartoons are not only highly commercialized, but actually used to illustrate corporate guidebooks. Li Han-ren, however, has not been

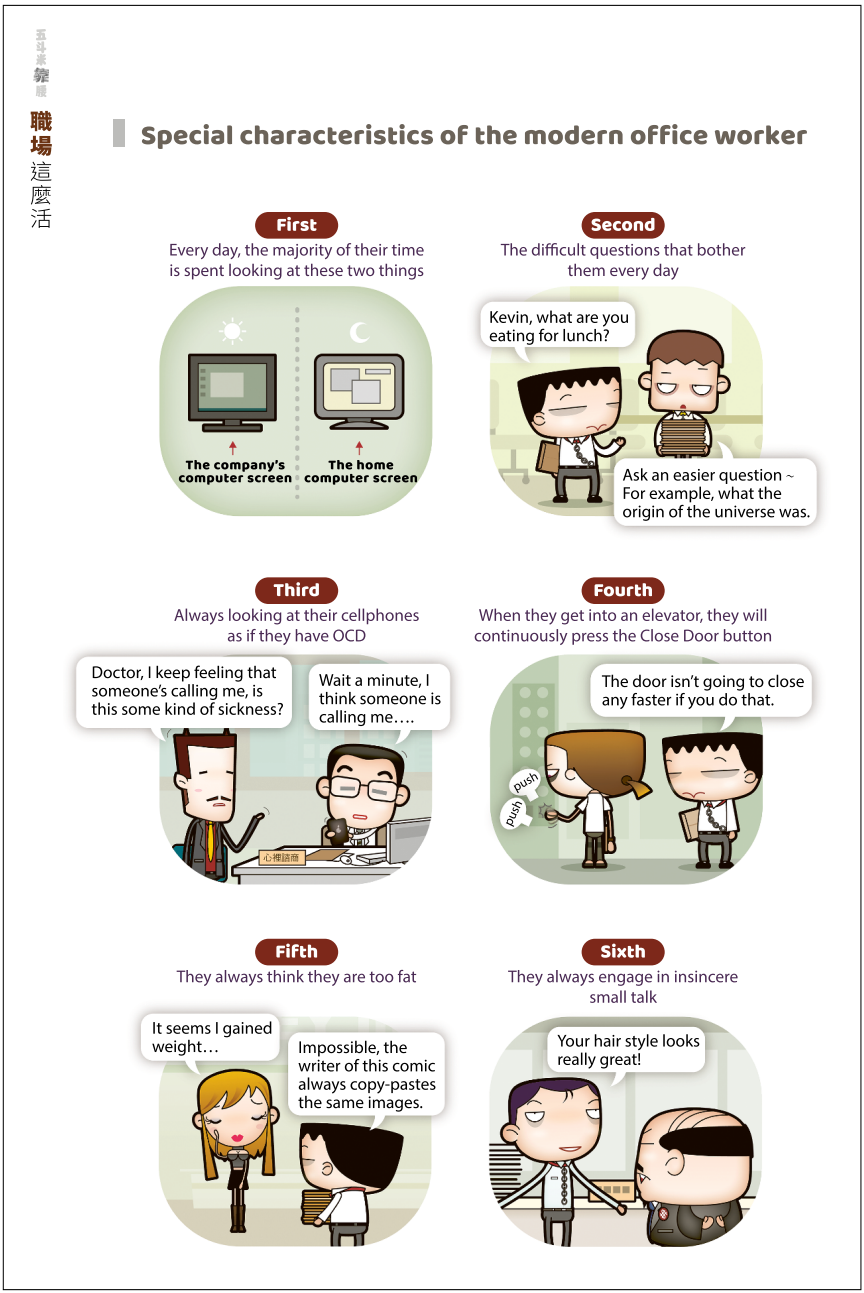

Figure 3: A page from Mark's *Whining About Making a Living: The Workplace Is So Lively* (2015, 12). Reproduced with permission of Li Han-ren. English translation by the author, added by Li Han-ren.

subject to similar criticism, despite the fact that he represents the exploitation of white-collar workers as an inevitability. I think this is because Mark is presented within the context of Li's model persona as a representation of Li's past, embodying a stage in his ultimately successful entrepreneurial career. In his autobiography, his term working for the advertising firm on which the cartoon is based is framed as necessary experience. Most Taiwanese office workers expect to go through a apprenticeship period in which they are overworked and underpaid, as a first step toward the 'Taiwan dream' of the worker becoming the boss (Holo: *ou-chhiu bien thau-ke*, 黑手變頭家). As outlined in his autobiography and lectures, Li's career is an exemplar of this idealized path, going from exploited employee to independent freelancer to the owner of a brand and an employer himself.

Although there is clear identification between Li Han-ren and the character Mark, Li's relationship to Mark is more distanced than Chen Wen-xiu's to Cathie or Hu Jia-wei's to Wan Wan. On the one hand, his brand name and English name indicate an identification between artist and character (he even published his autobiography under the name Mark), as does the fact that he often repeats that the comics, at least at the start, were based on his personal experience. On the other hand, Li says in his autobiography that Mark's personality is based on one of his female coworkers at the advertising firm, and that he could not keep the comics going for very long based only on his personal experience at a company he left years ago. Li says that for many years, he has gotten most of his ideas for the comics from his fans. He maintains a close relationship with fans, claiming to answer every single message from them, and has gathered a core group who are not only willing to tell him their workplace stories, but also give suggestions on previews of new comics and products. Li also hired a team of young designers after establishing the I'm Mark brand, and spent three years training them to understand the characters and the brand. His main purpose in doing so was so that the characters and the brand could survive without him, so that Mark would have a life of his own (Mark 2018a).

Thus, many people contribute to Mark, allowing the character to evolve and to reflect a broad spectrum of office worker experiences. At the same time, Li's entrepreneurial values of persistence and learning from failure make his personal and corporate brands consistent, both with each other and across contexts.

Some Qualities of the Successful Self-Brand Cartoon Character

Now that we have a sense of these three artists, whom I see as key figures in the development of the genre of self-brand cartoon character, we can see some of the things they have in common. What allowed Cathie, Wan Wan, and Mark to become figures of identification for significant groups of middle-class workers, while other similar comics appealed only to more limited audiences? What makes a cartoon character work as a self-brand, and a comics artist become a role model for people who are not themselves aspiring creative workers?

There are, of course, some practical factors that aided in the market success of Cathie, Wan Wan, and Mark. Being alumni of the Fu Hsin school, for instance, seems to have provided them with opportunities that may not have been available to other artists, and they were all able to take advantage of the belief among Taiwanese corporations in the early twenty-first century that there was a market for home-grown brands. I will leave these more sociological considerations aside for now, and focus on the conscious aesthetic choices made by the artists.

First, to succeed as a personal brand mascot, a character must be open to the audience's identifications, projections, and even participation in keeping it animated. At the same time, it must also be always recognizable, consistent across media and time periods. This tension is characteristic of brands in general, and of successful Japanese mascot characters in particular (Yano 2013). For all of these artists, cute visual style is critical in maintaining this tension, since cute style (particularly of Japanese *yuru kyara*, ゆるキャラ) is designed to elicit the projection of almost any emotion. The focus on moments or vignettes, rather than sustained narratives, also maintains openness and highlights the character's ability to move among different contexts. Yet, visual and narrative style do not provide much help to ordinary readers in terms of negotiating the tension between demands for flexibility and legibility. Gershon (2016) argues that for American jobseekers, the most difficult and alienating aspect of creating a self-brand is the decontextualization of personality. That is, distinctive traits must be made to seem consistent throughout the process of developing one's 'human capital.'

In their later works, Cathie and Wan Wan (both the characters and the artists) tell stories of personal development. For instance, in Wan Wan's *Happiness, Here I Come: Wan Wan's 20 Joyful Ideas* (2011), she imparts lessons she has learned (e.g., when you can't change your situation, change your attitude) from crises in her career. But the personal developments that Hu/Wan Wan and Chen/Cathie undergo are consistent with, and sometimes explicitly motivated by, the characters' core traits, such as Cathie's drive for self-understanding and adven-

turousness, and Wan Wan's childlike innocence and optimism – the same characteristics which the artists see as the source of creativity. With Mark, the character remains stuck in the artist's wage-slave past in an eternal Everycompany; his transformation is always potential. But personal development is critical to Li's artist persona; his brand of creativity — his problem-solving approach — consistently leads to learning and maturation as an entrepreneur.

Also, each artist chooses a different range of media based on the readers they want to reach. The wider the market they aim for, the more media they use. Chen Wen-xiu created her autobiographical character when she was working for a stationery company, and her Cathie products, aside from her note/books, were those aimed at students – writing pads, pencil cases, etc. After she left the company, and as her fan base aged, she marketed more products aimed at young and middle-aged women, such as clothing and tea sets. Wan Wan and Mark aimed for a broader market and used far more media to present their personal brand characters, treating them more like franchised *yuru kyara* in Japan. At the height of their popularity, the Wan Wan and Mark characters were ubiquitous. Aside from the books, they appeared on clothing, stationery, refrigerator magnets, coffee mugs, software advertisements, soft drink and snack packaging, and so on. They thus became a part of the everyday environment in urban Taiwan.

Perhaps more importantly, Cathie, Wan Wan, and Mark all appeared not only in the artists' blogs and Facebook and Instagram pages, but also as Line stickers and emoticons that could be used in consumers' own social media posts to animate their own speech, in both a literal sense (some Line stickers move) and Goffman's (1981) sense of voicing an author's words. Here these characters are not only figures of identification, but, since many Taiwanese office workers use Line throughout the day, including for professional communications, they can also be integrated into their own self-branding practice

The Relationship between Artist Persona and Self-Brand Character

There is a range of relationships between an artist's public persona and their self-brand cartoon character that can work to elicit audience identification with both, from fully autobiographical in real time (Cathie and Wan Wan) to loosely based on past life experience and then expanded via the experiences of others (Mark). But this range does have limits. We have seen in the case of Wan Wan the dangers in constructing too close a relationship between cartoon character and pub-

lic persona. There is also danger in constructing too distant a relationship between character and persona. Another example of an artist/self-brand character from Taiwan makes this clear.

Meerkat Ojisan (Uncle Meerkat) is the protagonist of *Low-key Naked! Meerkat Ojisan's Chaotic Workplace Struggle*, a comic book published in 2016 by an artist who goes by the name Tom.[4] Tom, along with three friends, started Newfolder Man Creative (NFM) Productions, a studio primarily making animation for television commercials, in 2009. In 2014, Tom decided to produce an original character to represent and promote the company. Tom designed the character and created the Meerkat Ojisan comic on his website, using a digital paint program he developed himself. These online comics were seen by a publisher who offered to publish them in book form. The humor is more adult and edgy than the three comics discussed in the first section, and the visual style is also more 'arty.' The format is fairly standard for comics, with clear frames and gutters and dialogue in bubbles, and this is the only comic discussed here with an overarching narrative for the entire book, about Meerkat Ojisan's competition with his new coworker to get demoted. Meerkat Ojisan is introduced on the book cover and on websites this way: "a regular office worker in real life, smiling on the outside, but depressed and conflicted on the inside" – a somewhat cynical counterpoint to Mark. NFM licensed the characters, created a series of Line stickers, and began producing some tie-in products. They made prototypes for toys, but most of these were never mass produced.

The relationship between Tom and Meerkat Ojisan is ambiguous. In the blurb about Tom on the inside cover of the comic book (Tom 2016), we read that,

> As the founder of an animation studio, regarding work in the lower levels of the advertisement industry, he has seen many coworkers encounter mental and physical abuse. He always wanted to make an animation about the collapsing workplace.

The characters work for an animation studio with the same name as Tom's studio, so we can assume that even if Meerkat Ojisan is not specifically a representation of Tom himself, the relationship is similar to that of Li Han-ren and Mark – based on personal experience and the experiences of his coworkers.

However, unlike Li and the other artists discussed, Tom has no public presence outside of being Meerkat Ojisan's creator. The blurb cited above also describes Tom in terms of personal quirks – e.g., he is sensitive to bright colors and shiny surfaces,

4 As the Meerkat Ojisan character is not associated with the designer's Chinese name on any public forum, I do not give it here but use the name given as the creator of the comic. The information about Tom's career in this section comes partly from online sources and partly from an interview I conducted with the artist in January 2021. The character's name (Meerkat Ojisan, in English and Japanese) is used in the comic itself (2016, 4).

and doesn't think the breakfast stalls in Taipei use enough soy sauce. Other than that, there is no more information available on the internet about Tom. Meerkat Ojisan has his own Facebook page, but neither Tom nor NFM do. The artist's identity is not a secret – others in the animation and design industries know him, and I was easily able to locate him for an interview through the company's website – but it is kept separate from the identity and work of 'Tom.' Thus, Meerkat Ojisan is not really a personal brand character, and doesn't really work like an ordinary corporate brand mascot either. He is closer to the classical Japanese 'media mix' character, where the material manifestations of the character in toys and other merchandise invite the consumer to participate in and extend the fictional world of the manga/anime (Steinberg 2012).

When I interviewed him, Tom told me that NFM stopped working on the Meerkat Ojisan characters in 2018, and that he considers it a failed experiment. Meerkat Ojisan's Facebook page only had around 70,000 followers, less than a quarter of the 300,000 that he would consider to be an index of the character 'making it big' (*bao hong*, 爆紅), and sales of Meerkat Ojisan products at a weekend market stall were disappointing. Tom told me that it is very expensive to keep original characters going – you need to keep releasing new products, which requires not only a reservoir of capital, but also contacts with reliable manufacturers, and he did not have these, although many fans have remained loyal and still correspond via Facebook even after 2018.

While Tom's explanation of the failure of Meerkat Ojisan to take off makes sense, I also think that Tom's lack of a public persona made it impossible for an artist/character dyad to take shape and to serve as a model for readers as white-collar workers.

The Regional Spread of Self-Brand Cartoon Characters

The conditions which make models for self-branding attractive are not limited to Taiwan. Policies aiming to develop the creative economy have been enacted in Singapore, the PRC, and in Southeast Asian countries with ethnic Chinese populations. So have neoliberal policies such as deregulation and privatization which encourage the growth of the gig economy, and thus make 'creatives' into models for many other kinds of workers. Thus, it is not surprising that the models established by Cathie, Wan Wan, and Mark have been adopted and adapted in other parts of the Sinophone world.

I have only anecdotal evidence here, but I just want to mention some examples of comics which present autobiographical or semi-autobiographical characters as potential self-brands that I have found outside of Taiwan. One 2012 comic, *I Am in This World (1): Ongu Manhua Series*, features a round alien whose only feature is a single huge eye. Ongu is the creation of an artist who goes by the pen name Kiyo. The blurb on the inside cover says Kiyo is an artist "produced in Taiwan, polished in the West," and the book was published in Hubei (Hua Man Gongzuoshi 2012). The book has a foreword by a researcher at Beijing's Central Institute of Technology who recalls Kiyo telling him that the name Ongu comes from a sound that Taiwanese mothers coo to their babies. Kiyo says that Ongu is "the child in us," and is clearly the child within Kiyo (Hua Man Gongzuoshi 2012, 1). The autobiographical feel of the Ongu character is reinforced by the content, in which Ongu dreams of being a painter while working an office job. The format of *I Am in This World* is similar to that of the Taiwanese comics I've discussed, with short vignettes, some with frames and some without, with lots of blank space and a cute style. I purchased the book along with a vinyl toy of the Ongu character.

The same year, a comic book titled *Do You Think He's Adorable? Idiot Panda* was published by a Chinese artist whose pen name is Idiot Lin (Lin 2012). According to the introductory section, this is an explicitly autobiographical comic based on the creator's daily life. According to the inside cover blurb, Lin created the cute panda self-character, Nono Panda, in 2007, publishing comics on an online forum and creating emojis for QQ. The format and color scheme are similar to Wan Wan's early books. Finally, Michael Chuah, one of Malaysia's best-known Chinese language comics creators, published the first in a series called *Office Survival* (Cai 2013). In the introduction, Chuah says that the comics are inspired by his experiences of office work, although interestingly, he says he decided to create the series only after he himself became a boss. The format is four-frame, one-page vignettes, and thematically the comic resembles Scott Adams' and Li Hanren's comics. Chuah frequently visits and exhibits in Taiwan. These are only a few examples, but their existence suggests that the phenomenon of the self-brand cartoon character has spread from Taiwan, and is being localized in other parts of the Sinophone world (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Comics featuring self-brand cartoon characters from around the Sinophone world. Photograph by the author.

Conclusion: Modeling Self-Branding at the Individual, National, and Sinophone Levels

Why this genre of cartoon character emerged at the time that it did seems clear. What may not be so clear is why it emerged in the place that it did. In other regions, it seems that autobiographical comics and cartoon mascot characters may be present, but they mostly stay in their separate lanes. Why did the combination of the two appear in Taiwan?

One reason might be that in Taiwan, branding is tied to the project of increasing national visibility and power on the world stage, and individual success is tied to this national project discursively. In 2008, I interviewed Aaron Yin, then the head of the Designers Association of Taiwan, who gave me an overview of Taiwan's economic history. In the 1960s and 70s, he told me, the basis of Taiwan's 'economic miracle' was OEM – original equipment manufacture, where factories produce products to the specifications of a client company that markets them in their name. In the 1980s, when mainland China and Southeast Asia captured the

OEM market with cheaper labor, Taiwanese companies tried to transition to ODM – original design manufacture, where a company manufactures products they design in house, but which may be sold under a client company's name. The next step, the sought-for future, was OBM, original brand manufacture, where Taiwanese companies would market products that they designed and that they, or manufacturers they hired, produced, under their own brand names.

I have heard individual workers in the creative industries refer to themselves using these terms. For instance, in 2008, one freelance designer told me,

> Designers like [another freelance designer] are ODM – they make things themselves and sell them themselves. Designers like me, we're OEM, we just make things for the client. Among ourselves we use these categories. The soul of ODM is the designer himself. For us, our soul is the client.

Artists like Cathie, Wan Wan, and Mark model a path from OEM to ODM, a path towards to visibility, power, freedom, and control over one's own soul, as they have moved from office drones to entrepreneurs. In creating autobiographical comics, they have made variations on this model of development through design and self-branding available to their white-collar audience.

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Norbert DANYSZ

Chapter 11
Contemporary Comic Reviews in Taiwan: Towards a New Editorial and Aesthetic Paradigm?

Abstract: The 2010s in Taiwan saw the emergence and thriving of five comic periodicals, which can be considered different from regular magazines or comic books and are thus analyzed in this chapter as 'reviews.' *Taiwan Comix*, *Monsoon*, *Bo_ing Comix*, *Creative Comic Collection* and *Zigma* appear to be halfway between magazines and books – while an ephemeral format, they are endowed with more prestige than throwaway publications. This chapter posits that such a particular format may have served as the structure of an alternative ecosystem for Taiwanese comics during the period discussed. Through the study of several parameters (production and distribution strategy, form and materiality, aesthetics), these five titles are shown to be both heterogeneous and interconnected. Official support for the comics sector created a favorable environment for Taiwanese artists to use the editorial format of the 'review' to experiment with new styles, to gain attention and to foster ties between authors, publishing houses and official institutions. Lastly, this chapter argues that comic 'reviews' may have contributed to changing the concept of comics in Taiwan, but also calls into question the lasting effects of this new paradigm.

At the end of the 2000s, Taiwanese comic authors living in Taiwan and abroad decided to come together and publish in March 2010 an anthology of comics, in short stories or fragments, collecting the works of artists from different generations. This enterprise was first intended as an extensive presentation of comic productions in Taiwan, addressed to the leadership of the Angoulême International Comics Festival in the hope that they would invite Taiwan as the guest of honor in a future edition–Taiwan was indeed officially invited in 2012. That first miscellaneous collection of comics, adequately called *Taiwan Comix* (Figure 1), was soon followed by a second anthology, effectively inaugurating a new comic periodical. Over the last decade, no less than four other initiatives similar to *Taiwan Comix* have been introduced on the island and have greatly contributed to the revitalization of comic art in Taiwan. In 2017, Slowork Publishing brought out the first issue of *Monsoon*, a publication dedicated to documentary comics and

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focusing on social, environmental, or cultural perspectives in the broader Southeast Asian region (Figure 2). The following year saw the creation of *Bo_ing Comix*, which collected works from a handful of young authors exploring very diverse drawing styles (Figure 3). The *Creative Comic Collection*, originally published between 2009 and 2015, was recreated in 2018 in a new format (Figure 4). Finally, in 2020, the sci-fi specimen *Zigma* was released in a few independent bookshops in Taipei (Figure 5), making it the last project to date (in 2025) to shine a light on Taiwanese comic anthologies that are published on a periodical basis.

This chapter takes a first step in the apprehension and understanding of the field established in the 2010s by the five titles stated above. Through studying these periodicals launched between 2010 and 2020, I wish to show the contemporary restructuring of the comics field in Taiwan, which is mainly apparent through the two scopes of the aesthetics and the production or distribution networks represented by the five titles. I focus first on theoretical assumptions that comics studies have been developing over the past two decades, namely the publishing modalities and the material characteristics of comics. It is in this part that I argue why I choose to use the label 'comic reviews' for *Taiwan Comix*, *Monsoon*, *Bo_ing Comix*, *Creative Comic Collection,* and *Zigma*, publications that are halfway between magazines and books and that could serve as the structure of an alternative ecosystem for Taiwanese comics. I then put to the test the idea of an alternative ecosystem in the 'reviews,' firstly in regard to their production and distribution strategies at local and global levels and, secondly, considering the new forms, materiality, and aesthetics of the 'reviews.' Throughout this study, I rely on personal observations of physical periodicals as well as email or oral interviews conducted in January and February 2023 with comic artists who contributed to the analyzed 'reviews.'

Why the 'Reviews' , and How to Study Them?

Based on the French term *revue*, the 'review' represents a specific editorial format, situated at the crossroads of the periodical press and the book. Compared to the mere magazine, it is endowed with a certain prestige. Belonging to the physical world of paper, the 'review' differs from the newspaper or the magazine because of its long-term periodicity and the fact that it always revolves around a precise theme (in this case, comics). For the artists, it is a place where they can develop a style or a story which will sometimes be amplified later in other projects and may lead to more traditional publications in book form. The five 'reviews' cited in the introduction are primarily devoted to creation, although they

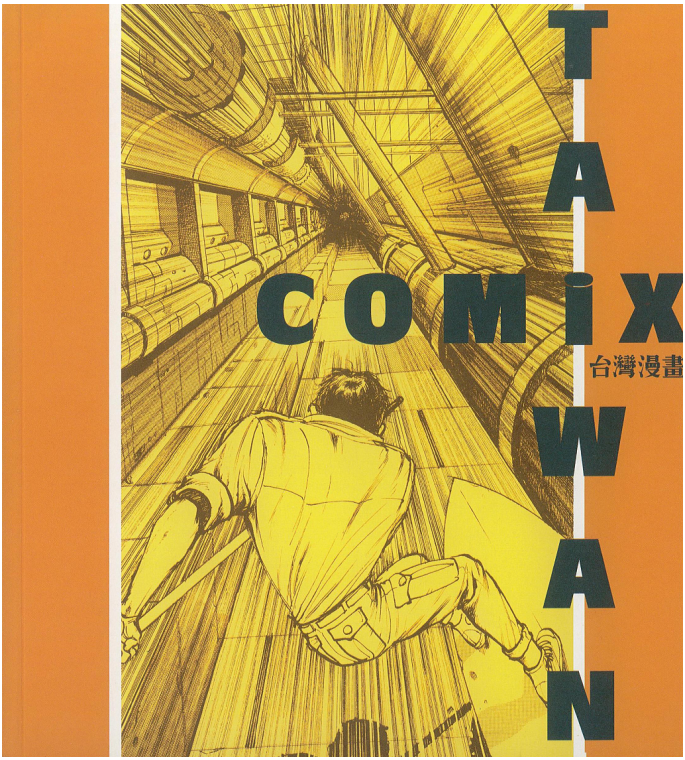

Figure 1: Cover of *Taiwan Comix* 1, 2010.

occasionally also provide criticism or analysis of other comics. They may see themselves as '*heji*' (合輯, meaning 'compilation,' referring to *Taiwan Comix*), as 'anthologies' (in English, referring to *Monsoon* and *Bo_ing Comix*), or as '*zazhi*' (雜誌, meaning either 'review' or 'magazine,' referring to *Zigma*).[1] Yet I choose to label the five titles 'reviews,' a unifying terminology that acknowledges their prestigious quality (in materialities and ways of producing comics) and serves as an apt substitute for 'comic magazines,' a term that seems improper for the purpose of this study, since it is generally a synonym for standard 'comic books' (Pedri 2022, 20).

The 'review' can sometimes lead towards different models, either the artist 'review' or the fanzine: the former provides an opportunity for graphic gestures

1 It could be argued that the name *Zigma* is a derivative from 'magazine.'

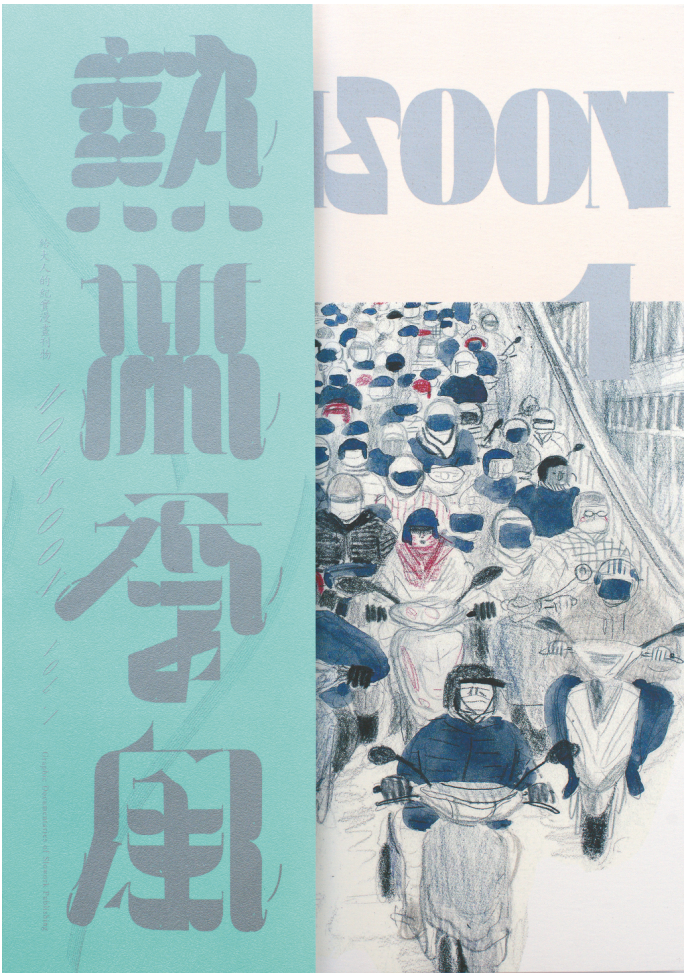

Figure 2: Cover of *Monsoon* 1, 2017.

that are often avant-garde or even a form of protest (Chevrefils-Desbiolles 2016, 93); the latter adds a do-it-yourself ideology to the production and can be the expression of a certain marginality in the creation (Gai 2018, 94). The 'review' is therefore halfway between other types of publication and is integrated into a media universe with fairly vague borders. It can also evolve towards the 'mook,' contraction of magazine and book, referring to thick volumes sold mainly in bookshops and that "bring out true review-objects, using a wide range of typogra-

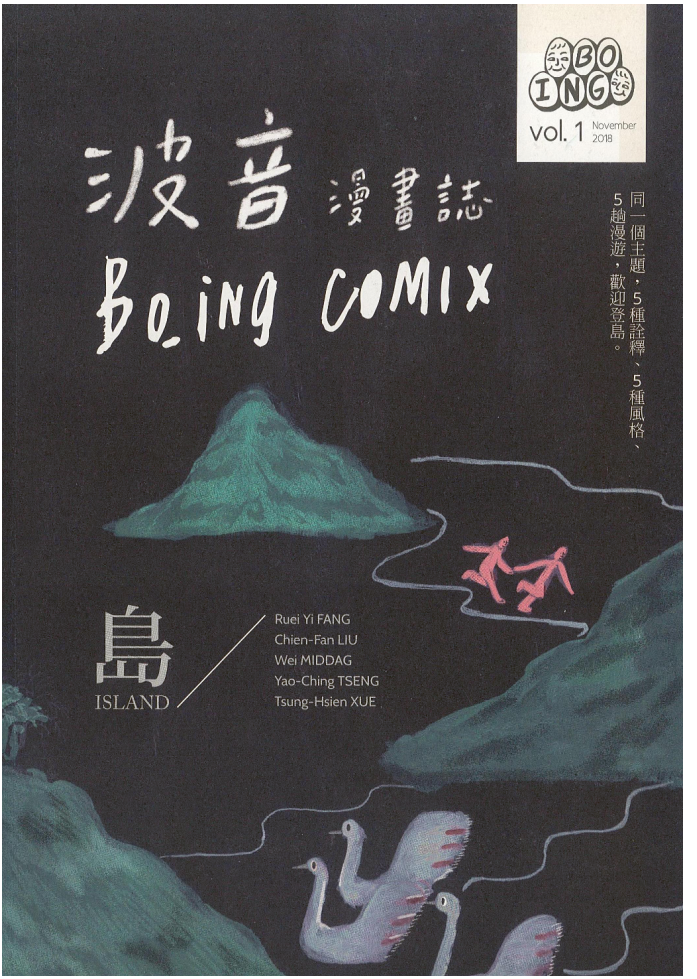

Figure 3: Cover of *Bo_ing Comix* 1, 2018.

phies, compositional models, formats, illustrations and graphic approaches"[2] (Gai 2019, 89). The mook thus acknowledges the material physicality of the publication.

2 All translations from languages other than English are mine.



Figure 4: Cover of *Creative Comic Collection* 1, 2018.

Indeed, any published volume is definitely an object, a concrete thing to analyze, and the comic 'review' itself is as important as the comics it contains; in fact, it modifies the perception of the comics, and it guides the reading, like any other type of physical medium. As Lesage and Suvilay put it, "the reading experience begins even before opening an album: the binding technique (hardback or paperback), the weight of the paper, the shine of the lamination, all build a certain atmosphere and contribute to the reading pact in process" (2019). Some publications don't go any further than the use of a rather classic format (which is by no means



Figure 5: Cover of *Zigma* 1, 2020.

less significant), while others prove to be acutely aware of their materiality and exploit numerous parameters (types of paper, size of pages, ink, colors, etc.). In such cases, "the different types of printed matter become true 'mediums-media'" (Chevrefils-Desbiolles 2016, 95), meaning that the object is not only the place for a reproduction of the work–the object *is* the work.

Being attentive to the form of publication represents the first and elementary level of a material study of comic art. The material approach to comics was foregrounded by seminal articles over twenty years ago (such as Lefèvre 2000). It has been gradually developed since, and only recently addressed in monographs specifically dedicated to the formats of comics, by scholars from different countries (Bachmann 2016, Kashtan 2018, Lesage 2019, Yamamori 2019). Nonetheless, research on this particular aspect of comics is still relatively sparse in comparison to semiotic, narratological, political or other approaches, and "it is time for materiality to finally enter the field of vision" (Kálovics 2024, 224). Beyond a mere description of their physical characteristics, we ought to analyze what those charac-

teristics imply for the comics themselves. For example, Lesage (2015) has noted that changes in the format lead to changes in the readership, in the readings, or in the discourses that are held on comics and that aim to legitimize or delegitimize the medium. Indeed, the same comic would not be read the same way if it was published (for instance) in a Taiwanese newspaper, in a sort of pulp format obtained by merging Chinese *lianhuanhua* (連環畫, palm-sized picture books) and Japanese manga and strongly associated with mass culture (Mélikian 2020, 112), or in a prestigious review. According to Pascal Lefèvre (2000, 98), "Different formats even stimulate different manners of consuming: a manga magazine is quickly read and thrown away after reading, while a European album will be kept and read several times."[3]

The physical characteristics of a piece of comic art thus prove to be an essential element in its comprehension, as they lead or relate to other interrogations, extending beyond purely material data. In the case of comic 'reviews' for instance, the use of the hybridized and original 'review' format seems to coincide in Taiwan with the creation of alternative comics, generally labeled 'independent comics' (*duli manhua*, 獨立漫畫). Incidentally, alternative comics appeared in the US parallel to the development of the small press in the 1980s (Tinker 2007, 1170). The peculiar nature of the comic 'review' material somehow corresponds to the peculiar nature of the content, often experimenting with other styles and other narrations than those of the mainstream production. Alternative comics are not necessarily independent nor underground, since they can be included in the catalogues of publishing houses that are well-established on the market (Menu 2005, 11). They can be better defined by the following characteristics: "the rejection of mainstream formulas; the exploration of (to comics) new genres, as well as the revival, at times ironic recasting, of genres long neglected; a diversification of graphic style; a budding internationalism, as cartoonists learned from other cultures and other traditions; and, especially, the exploration of searchingly personal and at times boldly political themes" (Hatfield 2005, x). This definition by a Western scholar describes yet an object built by global artistic influences and happens to suit the Taiwanese productions, which also claim themselves to be part of this category, as we can see for instance in the first editorial of *Bo_ing Comix* (2018, 2): "We aim to explore different kinds of comics."

In light of the definition above, this chapter's aim is to question whether the five anthologies, linked by the common trait of alternative comics (always present, even if partially), can serve as the foundation of a new ecosystem in the

3 Of course, those consumption patterns allow for other practices, as fans can also collect and archive manga magazines and pulps.

Taiwanese comics production. Keeping in mind that the identity of a 'review' represents more than the simple sum of its authors (Lesage 2018, 15), I also draw from the notion of ecosystem the features of interdependencies and symbiotic relations in a shared environment. Thus, this paper considers the interactions within each anthology and between them, as well as the potentially coherent structure that they form as complementary objects. Providing media ecology tries to find out "how media structure what we are seeing or thinking" (Scolari 2012, 205), it is by showing the novelty of the five comic 'reviews' that I wish to reveal a new conception of comics developed in Taiwan today.

In addition, if several 'reviews' affect each other, shaping a new type of comics while being shaped by it as they become more and more visible in the field, the ecosystem that they are composing could also be understood as a renewed 'art world.' When practitioners of an existing art world take up new conventions and those innovations are shared by a significant number of participants, we are faced with a revolution in the said art world, or even with the creation of a new art world (Becker 1982, 308), as this paper argues for Taiwanese alternative comics. In that sense, any art world is always the result of a collective enterprise; it "exists in the cooperative activity" of the people engaged in it, without the rigidity of a formal structure or organization but with the flexibility of a *network* (Becker 1982, 35). The core members of the Taiwanese comic anthologies' network include authors, editors and publishing houses, bookshop owners, state institutions and readers.

To acknowledge the collective dimension of art worlds, I first expand my observations of the five titles' content by considering all the data that belongs to the 'paratext' of each issue. Taking over the neologism forged in 1981 by Genette in literature, Mitaine (2013) applies the concept to comics studies and specifies its multifaceted meanings:

> Its function is as much one of physical protection (cover, endpapers) or symbolic protection (prologue, preface, afterword, epigraph, etc.) as of identification (author's name, title of the work, publisher's name, place and date of publication, place of printing, name of the collection, bar code, etc.), organization (table of contents, bibliography, index, appendices), distinction (soft or hard cover, format of the book, choice of paper) or seduction (sleeve cover, surface illustrations, graphic design, etc.).

All this information, which was usually considered until Genette as "separated from the author's control" (Mitaine 2013) and thus as non-essential, is in fact meaningful in regard to, for instance, the way an object was published, the people it was designed with and for, or the motivations that underlay its creation in the first place. Considering first the data that could be inferred from the paratext, I have then developed my understanding of these anthologies' editorial situations

and cooperative activities with answers that their members provided during interviews conducted in person or online in January and February 2023: authors Lin Li-jing (Lin Li-chin, 林莉菁), Liben (力本) and editor Amigo Cheng (鄭詠中) for *Taiwan Comix*, editor Huang Pei-shan for *Monsoon*, authors Elainee Fang Rui-yi (Fang Ruei Yi, 房瑞儀) and Liu Qian-fan (Liu Chien-fan, 劉倩帆) for *Bo_ing Comix*, the editorial board of *Creative Comic Collection*, and author Oscar Tsai (奧斯卡) for *Zigma*. I combine those pieces of information with my observations of the 'reviews' materiality, content, and paratext, to explore whether they can structure an alternative comics ecosystem, leading to a new paradigm for Taiwanese comics.

The Reviews' 'Glocalized' Networks

The five comic collections seem to be embedded in networks typical of 'glocalization,' understood as an example of the local operating symbiotically with globalization (Roudometof 2021, 61). In Taiwan, the comics sector currently benefits from a favorable environment, which is apparent in the organization of festivals like the Golden Comics Awards in Taipei or the Comic Art Festival in Taichung, attended by prominent members of the government, Minister of Culture Zheng Li-jun (Cheng Li-chun, 鄭麗君) in 2018 or President Cai Ying-wen (Tsai Ing-wen, 蔡英文) in 2017. The government promotes the creation of institutional venues dedicated to comics, among which the Taiwan Comic Base opened in 2019 in Taipei, a place to sell books, display exhibitions and host artists' studios, or the National Taiwan Museum of Comics opened in Taichung in 2023. Taiwan's government also showed its support to the comic book sector when it released in 2018 an aid fund of 80 million NTD for artists and publishing houses (Mélikian 2018), directly benefitting some of the 'reviews' mentioned above, and confirming that the state is an essential actor in the network of comics development in Taiwan today.[4]

The financial situation of the five publications allows us to distinguish between different business models. While *Creative Comic Collection* is directly backed by the large commercial publishing house Gaea Books and by other institutional actors such as the Academia Sinica Center for Digital Cultures or the recent Taiwan Creative Content Agency, *Monsoon* is published by a young independent structure, Slowork Publishing. Like *Bo_ing Comix*, *Monsoon* still had the

4 According to Menu (2005, 11), it is not necessarily because comics are independent (from the state or from mainstream publishers) that they are alternative, and alternative Taiwanese comics can ultimately become part of the establishment.

opportunity to make good use of public subsidies and one-off grants delivered by the Ministry of Culture in 2018, whilst relying on crowdfunding programs or even personal funds. *Zigma* also depended on online donations by private individuals, since it enlisted on the crowdfunding platform FLiPER Publish. As for *Taiwan Comix*, it is the only 'review' to be solely funded by its creators–all the contributors of an issue provide personal funds for the printing process and are offered a certain number of copies that they can sell afterwards to their own networks and communities to cover the costs. The whole set of various actors who make possible the publishing of the 'reviews' already projects an image of a new comics ecosystem in Taiwan.

Outside of the local perspective, the support for comic art provided by various levels of Taiwanese governance is also part of a cultural policy targeted at foreign countries, promoting abroad a specifically Taiwanese identity. This emphasis on Taiwaneseness is expressed, on an individual level, by artists who cultivate a personal style and at the same time seek to define Taiwan (Zemanek 2016). It is also visible in several recent works that put forward the motif of the island or the oceanic world, stressing the hybrid culture of the Taiwanese archipelago and sometimes combining the quest for a character's identity with the search for a common history and destiny (Danysz 2025). While *Taiwan Comix*, initially under the guidance of author Lin Li-jing, was connecting artistic and political motivations already in 2010 with the aim of promoting and advertising Taiwanese creations, the production of comics in Taiwan seems to be now fully integrated into a "nationalist agenda" led by official actors (Zemanek 2022). Indeed, the stated aim of this enterprise is to make comics an instrument of the island's soft power. Zhong Meng-shun (Chung Meng-shun, 鍾孟舜), who in 2017 was the head of the Taipei Comic Artist Labor Union, insists on the need to make comics nothing less than a national security issue, first of all in order to publicize Taiwan's situation abroad, but also because it is by maintaining a culture of its own that a community can exist in the face of other cultures (Chien 2018).

Bo_ing Comix and *Taiwan Comix* were initiated by such a will to fill in a gap in the international comics landscape, while *Monsoon*'s aim was originally to familiarize Taiwanese readers to documentary comics (thus not far from the general promotion of comics by *Creative Comic Collection*). Therefore, the five anthologies stem from a collective effort to manage a place for Taiwanese comics both in Taiwan and abroad (*Zigma* is contributing to that effort as well, although it was not originally created for that purpose, but as a personal project by Oscar Tsai to boost his vacillating career). This strategy of glocalization also leads the state to share with foreign publishers the original works by the anthologies' authors, such as Fang Rui-yi, Ding Bo-yan (Ding Pao-yen, 丁柏晏), 61Chi, Chen Pei-xiu (Chen Pei-hsiu, 陳沛琇), Wei Middag, etc., subsidizing the translation and the

printing (Paoliello 2023, 202). Alternative comics from Taiwan which are sold that way echo alternative comics in other countries (combining more one-shot stories, dealing with new topics and genres such as autobiography or documentary, displaying unusual drawing techniques or layout styles), and they happen to be efficient selling goods that make Taiwan known abroad.

The five comic collections themselves are both influenced by and directed to foreign comics communities, as can be inferred through their graphic styles and distribution strategies. While *Creative Comic Collection* stands close to the Japanese sphere through styles and the tendency to serialize, the other titles lean more towards Western/European comics. *Monsoon* claims to be the offspring of former French alternative comic review *Lapin* and ongoing *La Revue dessinée*, a pioneer in the field of documentary comics, and extends its distribution network to European countries, if not the world. Its first issues include some introductions to Western or Japanese graphic novels,[5] all the texts are translated into English from the second issue onwards, and the fourth one features contributions from abroad, namely from the People's Republic of China (Yan Cong, 烟囱) or South Korea (Hyeon A-seon). In *Monsoon*'s paratext, the price of each issue is even displayed in Euros alongside Taiwanese and Hong Kong dollars. At the same time, the name of *Monsoon* directly refers to an entire tropical area neighboring Taiwan (Hong Kong, Macao, Southeast Asia, the Pacific) with which the 'review' wishes to "seek new cultural relationships" (Huang Pei-shan 2017, 2) through its documentary comics.

The anthologies can find recognition in other countries, thus intertwining again local and global dynamics by stressing simultaneously the quality of Taiwanese comics and the participation of Taiwan alternative authors on the international stage. *Zigma* (at times only publishing in English) was indeed selected at the Angoulême Festival in 2021 for the Alternative Comics Prize, as was *Monsoon* in 2020, along with *Bo_ing Comix* (systematically offering an English translation) and *Taiwan Comix* (favoring mostly wordless comics that can be understood all around the world). In the latter case, what first looks like an essential aspect in the narration from a creative perspective – wordless comics – has in fact a lot to do with more pragmatic considerations regarding the possibilities of dissemination beyond the Taiwanese scene.

As it happens, contemporary Taiwanese comics that explore new graphic and narrative forms are clearly linked to other art scenes abroad. The strong connec-

5 *Monsoon* brings out works by Hanawa Kazuichi (花輪和一) (Huang Hong-yan 2017), Joe Sacco (Hu 2017), Tatsumi Yoshihiro (辰巳 ヨシヒロ) (Huang 2018), David Schraven & Jan Feindt (Chen 2018), David B. (Chen Wen-yao 2019), Ulli Lust (Chen Yun-rou 2019).

tions with the Japanese tradition, epitomized by the career of Zheng Wen (Chen Uen, 鄭問) at the end of the 1980s[6] (Mélikian 2020, 114) and always bolstered since then, are backed by other international ties, notably in Europe. For instance, ever-changing delegations of artists from Taiwan have been attending the Angoulême International Comics Festival every year since 2012,[7] and they also regularly attend the Frankfurt Book Fair. Those opportunities allow the authors to be confronted with an abundant variety of artistic expressions in comics, and at the same time, to make their own productions known to the public and to European publishers. Such annual events are complementary to residency programs, like the one organized at the Maison des auteurs in Angoulême since 2015, in partnership with the Taiwan Cultural Centre in Paris. Selected artists can pursue their activities alongside other comic authors from different countries, in what can be seen as a true cosmopolitan place, an emulating environment at the center of mixed influences (Parisi 2013, 205). Other residency programs have also been organized, e.g. in Riga with the kuš! association, not to mention the large number of young artists who have spent a few years studying in art schools in Europe, particularly in France and the United Kingdom. Such strong relationships indicate that the new alternative comics ecosystem in Taiwanese 'reviews' is not restricted to Taiwan.

The diffusion of 'reviews' oriented towards foreign audiences (European in particular) does fit well in the official narrative of shaping a distinct Taiwanese identity and publicizing it to the world. However, and in tune with the capacity of alternative comics to foster artistic ties across national boundaries, connections with the international comics scene were first developed by authors themselves, when comics were still "a blind spot for the government" (Zemanek 2022). Furthermore, even if the five reviews' distribution proves to be rather broad geographically, the diffusion in number of copies still resembles the limited print run of alternative comic books (regular print run figures rank from 300 copies for *Bo_ing Comix*, 450 for *Taiwan Comix*, 500 for *Zigma*, up to 2000 copies for *Monsoon*). As the editorial board of *Creative Comic Collection* did not communicate their print run, we can only assume that it is at least equal to that of *Monsoon*, if not higher, considering that *Creative Comic Collection* can be seen on the shelves of all types of bookshops in Taiwan. The latter anthology supported at an institutional level presumably has more budget than the four others, at the same time

6 In 1987, Zheng Wen was the first foreigner to work for the weekly *Morning* edited by Japanese publisher Kodansha; he was awarded the Excellence Prize by the Mangaka Association in 1991. See Chapter 1.

7 Eleven years after Angoulême, Taiwan was the first country to be guest of honor at the Lausanne Comics Festival BDFIL in 2023.

as it is targeting a larger audience and trying to increase popular awareness of local comics in Taiwan. The situation is different for *Bo_ing Comix* and *Taiwan Comix*, both deprived of an ISBN[8] and restricted to independent bookshops where they are sold in consignment in the major cities of Taiwan, or else directly at book fairs and other events or on the Internet. In the two main independent bookshops specializing in comics in Taipei, Mangasick and Wildflower (荒花), these publications are presented alongside local and foreign comic zines, as well as alternative comics mainly from Taiwan or Japan, appealing overall to readers interested in non-mainstream creations, be they from Taiwan or elsewhere. *Monsoon* and *Zigma* are also sold online and in independent bookshops, as well as in bigger bookstores of various chains (e.g., Eslite, Kingstone), thus bridging the gap between the other titles.

New Forms, New Aesthetics

However dynamic the current revival of local comics in Taiwan may be, we cannot but acknowledge that the current state of the market is still dominated by commercial manga (and US comics to a lesser extent). Therefore, in general bookshops and in convenience stores alike, "Taiwanese *manhua* take up very little space" (Mélikian 2018). In this context, artists contributing to the 'reviews' seem to be very inclined to break away from the ubiquitous Japanese (or American) comics, thus structuring through their creation an alternative scene. They tend to do so following two general models that can be identified as the graphic novel and the zine.

Bearing in mind that the differences between graphic novels and regular comics are somewhat fuzzy and that "the graphic novel is something that changes all the time" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 21), it is clear however that, closer to a book and to an ambitious narrative, the graphic novel is an ideal tool to "*distinguish* [original emphasis], in a Bourdieusian way as well as a traditional way, certain comic books from traditional albums" (Labarre 2018, 15).[9] In that respect, it is no surprise that institutional support for the sector can be stimulated by the development of such a distinguished and prestigious comic art form. However, the alter-

8 As reviews are not strictly magazines, issues of *Monsoon*, *Zigma* and *Creative Comic Collection* do have an ISBN. Issues of *Bo_ing Comix* have an ISSN, however.

9 The distinction as analyzed by Bourdieu in 1979 goes beyond a mere differentiation between two elements, it also refers to the elitist dissociation from a popular culture that is considered less valuable.

native Taiwanese comics scene also explores the multiple possibilities of the zine, which could be considered as an antithesis of the graphic novel in that its page count is often very low, and its production is sometimes amateurish. The artistic culture of the zine, which (like that of the graphic novel) cannot be easily delineated, usually produces short self-published works, "broadly conceptualised as paper-based" (Kempson 2014, 459), with a small print run and limited distribution. It is identified by accessible means of creation and reproduction (e.g., the basic use of photocopy) as much as by a nostalgic sentiment in the context of a retro revival today (e.g., old-fashioned printing techniques like the risograph) (Thomas 2009, 27).

The practice of the zine is not, however, exclusive, and it is possible, even common, to simultaneously engage in other types of publication (Thomas 2009, 33). Parallel to the flourishing comic 'reviews,' practitioners of the zine form have grown in number over the past decade in Taiwan (Huang 2022, 17). Artists are more involved than before in the shaping and distribution of their comics, and this has had a natural effect on the 'review' scene. They benefit from widely democratized digital tools, advanced training in art schools, simple access to printing services, but also from increased possibilities of being active online, so much so that "anyone can now think of themselves as the editor of a review" (Gai 2018, 104). In this context of differentiation from the Taiwanese mainstream via the forms of the graphic novel and the zine, the construction of an alternative ecosystem through the five comic reviews is apparent both in the reviews' materiality and creation.

At first glance, from the point of view of materiality, the five 'reviews' all appear to be fairly conventional objects, in that they read like traditional books – pages are bound into a spine and enclosed by a cover. However, while *Taiwan Comix* (printed in black and white) and *Bo_ing Comix* (printed in color) are both classic soft-cover booklets, respectively large and medium in size and barely exceeding one hundred pages, *Monsoon* makes more extravagant use of all the possibilities offered by the realm of paper. All the issues are large books, containing peculiar fonts, and the pages use many different types of paper (glossy, sanded, woven, cardboard) which are occasionally even presented as foldouts or small booklets inserted in the middle of the volume's large pages, with inks of all colors sometimes nearing the brilliance of gold or silver. All these characteristics make *Monsoon* a refined object, more technically advanced to produce than *Taiwan Comix* and *Bo_ing Comix*, which are more amateur items produced by collectives of zine artists. In *Monsoon*, the originality of the form immediately suggests a new editorial project; the object itself functions as a manifesto. The recent *Zigma* also adopts unusual materiality, with alternating glossy and matte paper pages, two cardboard plates serving as the front and back covers, and a conspicuous stitched

binding on the spine. Such binding allows the anthology to open completely flat and ideally display full-bleed double spreads, thus highlighting the essential linkage between materiality and content. As for *Creative Comic Collection*, quite voluminous with two hundred pages, it is perhaps the least atypical of the five titles, as its very soft cover and thin paper make it a rather commonplace object; it is also the only one of the five to read from right to left.

Therefore, whereas *Creative Comic Collection* could occupy a prestigious position by being supported by official and recognized institutions, the prestige of *Monsoon* and *Zigma* clearly stems from their unusual and luxurious printed matter. All these different materialities can also be explained by divergent strategies, involving both local and global audiences. For instance, *Monsoon* is targeting a well-off Taiwanese readership, that might be more interested in reading journalistic reports than comic books, all the while appealing to a more global audience in Asia and Europe, but *Creative Comic Collection* is designed for readers used to reading serialized comics in Taiwan and is not looking for a foreign public.

Since the substance of a 'review' cannot be separated from the form, it is not surprising that *Creative Comic Collection*, reading from right to left like Japanese books – and this is not insignificant when it comes to comics – is the 'review' featuring stylistic expressions that are closest to mainstream contemporary manga. When it was re-launched in 2018 as a monthly periodical, *Creative Comic Collection* was indeed meant to serve as a "training ground for *commercial* [emphasis mine] projects" (Digital Cultures 2018). Even so, the 'review' occasionally does welcome less standardized, more singular styles, such as Zeng Yao-qing's (Tseng Yao-ching, 曾耀慶) painted comics in the very first issue, thus supporting the 'creativity' claimed by its name.

The five reviews' titles usually say a lot about their ambition (which is sometimes clearly stated in an editorial or a foreword). Apart from building a common identity with Southeast Asia, the climate term for *Monsoon*, evocative of boisterous conditions, may underline the hectic and eclectic nature of the anthology's ever-changing styles, from childish felt pen drawings to contemplative charcoal plates, from chaotic computer layouts to shaky pencil strokes. Such diversity is also at the heart of *Bo_ing Comix*, whose name is explained as follows in the opening of the first issue:

> Our name 'Bo_ing' comes from a Taiwanese dialect word meaning 'busy'. At the same time, 'bo_ing' looks like the English vocabulary: 'boring', but without the letter 'r'. The double meaning describes our magazine: People are busy reading comics, and it will not be boring! (*Bo_ing Comix* 2018, 2)

These amusing convolutions are a reminder of how casually and instinctively the *Bo_ing Comix* collective uses the 'review' form: the title might just be a mere pretext

for creation, as much as a funny-sounding word. As stated in the first issue, the periodical wants to explore different styles and new narrative perspectives in comics. Aesthetic diversity is visible in *Taiwan Comix* as well, perhaps even more so because of the greater number of various contributions, although the black and white printing contributes to smoothing out the differences and homogenizing all the stories.

Additionally, the titles of those two 'reviews' refer to 'comix,' a term forged in the American underground fanzine world in the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction to the widely censored genre of 'comics' (Hatfield 2005, 16). That borrowing may well be a way of including twenty-first-century Taiwanese publications in the long global history of alternative comics. At the same time as both zines are oriented towards a 'glocalized' audience of alternative comics fans, their contributors can nonetheless feel indifferent to potential readers and take the 'review' simply as a trigger for creativity, "a vehicle for self-expression" (Hatfield 2005, 8), similar to American comix. As for *Zigma*, it does not bother to explain the origin of its name in its first issue but declares in the foreword that it wants to "Tak[e] the un-trudged path" (Zigma 2020) by devoting itself to a relatively new theme in Taiwan: soft science-fiction. The styles are again very diverse and address the common theme of soft SF from different points of view, in one-shot short stories. At the other end of the spectrum, many of the stories published in *Creative Comic Collection* happen to be chapters taken from a longer series. This sequential dimension, supported by a monthly periodicity where the other four titles are published less frequently, definitely refers to a more classic form of entertainment.

Fortune and Misfortune of the 'Reviews'

This paper has revealed that, even though the five titles can be called 'reviews', what the authors make of that specific editorial format is by no means homogeneous, since they are the results of different agendas (aiming at cataloguing, experimenting, holding an avant-garde journalistic discourse, etc.). The 'reviews' can benefit from prestigious conditions according to different scenarios (through institutional recognized support or luxurious materiality) and position themselves differently in relation to a local and/or global audience. In particular, the descriptions of the five titles discussed in this chapter have hinted that *Creative Comic Collection* somehow stands apart, since it is not solely concerned by the development of alternative comics but essentially aims to increase the domestic visibility of Taiwanese comics in general. Even though it does provide a creative space for the authors, it bears specific characteristics when compared to the other four–short-term periodicity, stronger institutional support, more manga-

esque comics, more serialized stories, and it is clearly focusing on a local site compared to the local *and* global orientations of the other four. Based on those elements, *Creative Comic Collection* could be considered at the edges of this new ecosystem of alternative Taiwanese comics, perhaps also as an offspring of "publisher's monthly magazines [...] subsidized by the government" in the 1990s and 2000s (Lent and Shiau 2008, 722).

The five 'reviews' also explore various directions in the field of comics – genre comics are published in *Zigma* or *Creative Comic Collection* (despite the former having auteur ambitions and the latter being made for public consumption), comics approaching the model of the graphic novel are showcased in *Monsoon* and *Zigma* (while *Monsoon* also targets readers who may not be familiar with comics but are more interested in journalism in general), and the zine culture has had a remarkable influence on the whole scene (although *Taiwan Comix* and *Bo_ing Comix* are clearly part of the amateur fanzine world while *Zigma* leans more toward a refined and polished prozine).

However, none of these divisions are completely sealed, as they allow stories and artists to circulate from one publication to another, which shows that the 'reviews' indeed form a coherent ecosystem, precious to the comic artists' milieu in developing ties and boosting their careers. For instance, *Creative Comic Collection* has advertised *Monsoon* in some of its pages and published one of *Monsoon*'s authors, Zeng Yao-qing, who also collaborated with *Bo_ing Comix*, whose co-founder Liu Qian-fan participated in *Taiwan Comix* too. This example does not mean that the 'reviews' are interchangeable but that they are interconnected. It highlights the fact that they participate in the same dynamic and federate common forces. In that, they are outlining the first stage of a whole new comics environment in Taiwan, in which actors can be part of a community of artists, editors, booksellers, readers, united by their taste for alternative comics as defined by Hatfield (2005, x): the five 'reviews' do reject mainstream formulas, like ordinary popular magazines[10] and books or established publishing houses, they do explore new narratives and graphic styles, breaking away from the mangaesque in a more or less obvious manner, and they are definitely included in international alternative comics circulation, since the artists themselves were the first ones to forge links with foreign counterparts, particularly in Europe with the very first issue of *Taiwan Comix*.

This new artistic milieu can be seen as the area of development of an alternative Taiwanese comics ecosystem, which owes a lot to the 'review' material. The

10 Examples of such magazines in Taiwan are *Dragon Youth Monthly* (龍少年月刊, 1992–1998, 2003–) or *Star Girls* (星少女月刊, 1992–2000, 2006–).

format of the 'review' can effectively serve as the foundation of this renewed art world, particularly because of its ephemeral dimension that allows authors to experiment with other ideas or to try new drawing styles, all the while gaining in visibility. Kálovics (2020, 103) has demonstrated that historically, in Japan, "format and related publishing practices determined the visual style of comics, the structure of their narratives and the flow of the storytelling." In other words, the concrete and tangible medium in which comics are embedded is powerful enough to make the comics change.

In the exact same way, because 'reviews' are published intermittently – even unpredictably in some cases – and because they are not as lasting as regular books on the market, they tend to channel comics that are off the beaten track. The ephemeral or transient quality of this kind of publication also results from the fundings that are often hard to secure. All this makes the 'review' a peculiar tool for artists, one they can use, without risking too much, to try and transform their art. In another neighboring artistic field, it has been observed indeed that "the artist's review transforms the very concept of art" (Chevrefils-Desbiolles 2016, 93). Likewise, the comic 'review' can change the concept of comics, by introducing a fresh graphic style and storytelling, or by innovatively rethinking the comics material itself. Eventually, in the same way that 1950s Taiwanese comics were built around picture books and newspapers (Fan 2017, 37–38), 'reviews' in the 2010s have been acting as a crucial new territory for the creation of contemporary comics. The 'reviews' have opened an original space for new expressions of comic art, displayed in new editorial objects which cover a wide range of both diverse and coherent productions.

Yet today, apart from *Zigma* which is still planning a second issue (out of a total of four issues), all the other titles have ceased the publication of physical editions, either temporarily or permanently. *Bo_ing Comix* and *Monsoon* too halted after four issues, the former coming up with a single special issue in 2020, the latter now focusing on other types of anthologies or books released by Slowork Publishing. *Taiwan Comix* is not planning any new edition for now (since the last one in 2019), and *Creative Comic Collection* suspended its physical publication in 2020 to become an online platform for digital comics. Explanations to this standstill can be very specific to each title. *Monsoon* was only planning on four issues from the beginning whereas *Creative Comic Collection* may not have sold enough physical copies, just like *Bo_ing Comix* may have encountered economic

difficulties.[11] As for *Taiwan Comix*, it eventually began to feel less necessary as other projects were emerging and thus chose to slow down production. Conversely, the reason why *Zigma* is still in activity would be that it has only published one issue and is planning to release at least of few more, possibly also profiting from the basic financial model of crowdfunding and/or the trendy SF genre.

Beyond those particularities, the growing importance of state-led measures may also have been the ironic cause of a decline in the 'review' field. The various types of official funding released between 2017 and 2020 have initiated a bigger implication of the state, whose interest is to showcase a Taiwanese identity to the world as well as developing the comics sector in Taiwan and making it more prestigious. Hence, the mission initially fulfilled by *Taiwan Comix* in 2010 is now fulfilled by the state making the 'reviews' less necessary in that regard. From the point of view of creation, however, comic authors from today or tomorrow now lack a space to experiment in a relatively autonomous position, and their art could suffer from being completely integrated into the state's strategy and instructions.

The reviews' decline could finally be interpreted as the classic reaction which occurs when alternative and self-publications are confronted with the market of mainstream publications, and which consists of "the publishing structure once again taking over the artistic and hand-crafted manner" (Martinelli 2016). The alternative experimentations of the reviews' incubating stage can then freeze into automatic graphic and narrative formulas, bound to be outclassed by a new alternative. In other words, and to use Becker's concepts, the innovations produced by the reviews' actors – exquisite print, innovative styles, new types of layouts, new forms of storytelling, etc. – would be elevated as new conventions, considered as a new set of evident norms to be used in other comic forms than the 'reviews' where they emerged, thus leading to a revolution in the art world of comics. It is true that, historically, self-published comics like fanzines have already operated as a strategy to penetrate the field of comics (Lesage 2014, 139; Tinker 2007, 1172). In that case, relying on the transient quality of the 'review' as a heterogeneous material and in the hybridity of the format which does not have the same authority as a regular book, the Taiwanese comic 'reviews' from the 2010s would only prove to be a transitional ecosystem, the very logical first step of a new generation of artists on the market of comics.

11 According to Tinker (2007, 1179), whatever the reviews' artists gain from their creations, "it is certainly not profit. Even in well-established alternative comics it is rare to see anyone making much money."

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Chapter 12
Are Comics a Serious Matter? Materiality, Remediation and Status of Comics in Taiwan

Abstract: This chapter explores recent developments in Taiwanese comics from a perspective that combines global connections with locally relevant concerns. It analyzes *The Reporter File*, touted as Taiwan's first instance of comics journalism, published by a digital-native independent media organization. First, it argues for the relevance of print materiality despite the global advent of digital platforms, through the lens of David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of remediation. It shows that *The Reporter File* capitalizes on a recent emphasis on sensorial qualities of print in Taiwanese comics, while incorporating elements of digital materiality that connect with the independent journalism website which commissioned this series. Thus, it constitutes both a pleasurable object in itself and a cleverly designed advertisement for the website. Second, this chapter inquires whether the unprecedented state-led development of comics in Taiwan is tantamount to the consecration of comics as a high-status medium for exploring 'serious,' complex topics. With its heavy reliance on emotion-eliciting strategies, *The Reporter File* seems to refute this claim: it does not aim to make innovative contributions to socially engaged storytelling, but to capture readers' attention for traditional journalistic reports. Nevertheless, other recent documentary comics present evidence in support of this medium's evolution towards mainstreaming.

Introduction

Until recently, comics in Taiwan had negative connotations as children's entertainment. Homegrown art was largely invisible to the public and did not receive extensive or consistent government support. As mentioned in the previous chapter by Norbert Danysz, Zheng Li-jun's (Cheng Li-chun, 鄭麗君) tenure as Minister of Culture (2016–2020) radically boosted this medium's domestic prominence and contribution to public diplomacy. The Ministry of Culture took giant steps to expand comics production, publishing, international promotion and sales of translation rights. It established new institutions such as the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA, 2019), an arm's-length organization supporting cultural and cre-

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ative industries. It showcased comics within Taiwanese pavilions at leading regional and international events – the Angoulême International Comics Festival (since 2012), the San Diego Comic-Con (since 2019), the Seoul and the Frankfurt Book Fairs.

These transformations can be credited to various factors. Zheng Li-jun belongs to a generation whose cultural habitus was deeply impacted by comics consumption, which rose to prominence during the last decades as 'new cultural intermediaries.' Zheng's appointment as Minister of Culture was made possible by the Democratic Progressive Party's victory in the 2016 legislative and presidential elections – a party invested in strengthening local identity and Taiwan's international visibility. The success of popular media in building Japan and Korea's soft power served as a source of inspiration for state-led projects involving comics. These watershed official initiatives have faced a fair share of contention and hurdles (Wang 2021). They may arouse suspicion of top-down steering according to a nationalist soft power agenda or of producing works tailored for subsidies and awards rather than market success (a broader problem of ROC government funding discussed by Jian 2019 for popular music). Nonetheless, they have undeniably advanced production, international rights sales, and formal innovations.

An interesting trend is that of highlighting the objecthood of comics through book design, printing and paper quality, despite the parallel development of digital formats – e-books and serialized online comics published on a local platform, CCC Webcomics (CCC 追漫台, launched in 2020 by TAICCA), or on Korean Webtoon platforms expanding into the Taiwanese market. *Son of Formosa* (Yu and Zhou 2020[1]), a book supported by the Ministry of Culture and translated into Japanese under the TAICCA-led Taiwan Comic City project, exemplifies this trend. This book is also remarkable for showcasing the history of local comics as a key part of Taiwan's post-war history, thus boosting their status. The life story of its protagonist, Cai Kun-lin (Tsai Kun-lin, 蔡焜霖), born under Japanese colonial rule and a White Terror victim under the authoritarian nationalist (KMT) government, is a nutshell embodiment of Taiwan's recent history. Significantly, Cai founded a publishing house (Wenchang, 文昌) and a magazine (*Prince*, 王子, 1966–1969) issuing comics, and worked as comics editor and scriptwriter.[2]

This apparent consecration of comics is countered by a drawback. Cai was not a creative worker, but a manager with decision-making power over the creation and publishing of comics. One of the book's authors, You Pei-yun (Yu Pei-

1 This book's first two volumes were published in Lin King's translation under the tile *The Boy from Clearwater* (Montclait, Amsterdam & Holboken: Levine Querido 2023 and 2024).

2 For further information regarding Cai Kun-lin's comics-related publishing activity, see Lee 2024.

yun), is included in the story. You, an academic, is visually represented as doing anthropological-type work within a university-led research project: her working tools are an audio recorder for interviews and a notepad for fieldwork notes (You and Zhou 2021, vol. 4, 4). Therefore, despite self-reflexively legitimizing comics as a 'serious' medium fit for (re)writing national history, *Son of Formosa* seems to downplay its self-determination. Comics are represented by elite, authoritative figures – traditional intellectuals (You) and cultural intermediaries (Cai) with power over discourse, which resembles classical accounts of cultural nationalism (Hutchinson 2003). Comics artists feature only as minor characters doing commissioned work (2021, vol. 3, 63–64). Zhou Jian-xin, the book's second author, seems to be assigned a similar role. Although his contribution stands out by impressive graphic craftsmanship, with each volume displaying a different style, the artist is diegetically invisible.

Son of Formosa inspired the framing for this study. It will focus on comics journalism, a genre inaugurated in Taiwan by *The Reporter File* series, published in print and online by an independent media organization. Departing from the mangaesque conventions that dominate Taiwanese homegrown productions, works like *The Reporter File* or *Son of Formosa* do not constitute a critical mass on the domestic market in terms of readership or commercial success. Nevertheless, the ROC government's sustained efforts to strengthen local comics (with both mangaesque and alternative artistic styles) and to promote them abroad for nationalist purposes related to soft power, show that the domestic market and commercial success are not the only fields at stake. *The Reporter File* and *Son of Formosa* embody recent innovations spurred by state support. They are symptomatic of both global trends in comics and locally relevant strategies of building cultural capital through global connections. The analyzed works also constitute an interesting case study of using comics for the 'serious' aim of social engagement.

The Reporter File also constitutes an interesting case for addressing the materiality of comics in view of the rise of digital platforms and the above-mentioned emphasis on design and print quality. In the following sections, I will first explore the links between print and online materialities from the perspective of remediation. I will discuss new roles assigned to comics within a complex media assemblage, thus contributing tentative answers to the question – wither comics in the digital era? Secondly, through an analysis of *The Reporter File* against the background of comics journalism as an established (Western) genre, I will also attempt to answer the question – wither (journalistic) comics in Taiwan as a serious matter? For this purpose, I will assess whether the recent status boost of comics is paralleled by a development of medium-specific contributions to key practices with political and social impact, such as news reporting.

The Reporter and Its Comics

The Reporter is a digital native, independent, non-profit media outlet in Chinese, established in 2015 by two renowned public intellectuals – journalist and writer He Rong-xing (何榮幸) and Zhang Tie-zhi (張鐵志), a writer and cultural-political commentator. It specializes in investigative journalism on public policies and issues of social concern, often involving marginalized communities. This platform targets young intellectuals (Wang and Wang 2023, 66) and was designed as a response to the perceived quality downturn of local fast news services, which often publish contents from other sources (58). In contrast, The Reporter's journalists are provided with sufficient time to investigate and produce complex, in-depth, lengthy reports and multimedia features dedicated to each main topic, whose high quality has won many awards.

Innovativeness in experimenting with new media forms and their combinations for storytelling is a distinctive feature of The Reporter – photojournalism, podcasts, unexpected, interactive web designs or news games. Comics are among the topics of concern and the diverse narrative modes adopted by this news organization. Apart from featuring articles that trace current local, regional and global trends in comics, the platform also produces its own comics – short news features or longer graphic narratives such as *The Reporter File*, which target young and adult audiences.

This chapter takes into account the first two volumes of *The Reporter File*: *Study Abroad Illegal Workers* (Li 2022) and *Crime Under the Sacred Trees* (Li 2023). A graphic narrative opens each volume (totaling 97 pages), followed with traditional (mostly textual) investigative reports. The former graphic narrative (38 pages) was authored by Lau Kwong Shing (柳廣成), an artist of Hong Kong origin settled in Taiwan, the latter (46 pages) – by Sensen (森森), a young artist whose other publications include a co-authored commercial comic book, and an instalment on the CCC platform. Both volumes were issued by Gaea, a leading comics publisher in Taiwan, and the second obtained funding from the Ministry of Culture. The first volume is the outcome of an impactful investigation which drew public and government attention to foreign students from African and Southeast Asian countries, attracted to Taiwan by private universities with promises of work internships, and exploited as cheap labour by employers. The second volume exposes illegal logging of rare tree species, a lucrative activity in high demand among woodcraft collectors, with fugitive labor migrants from Southeast Asia and Taiwanese aboriginal people often involved as poachers. This investigation was conducted in the aftermath of a steep increase in fines for such activities, imposed by Taiwan's Forestry Bureau in 2020.

The Reporter File: Materiality and Remediation

Aaron Kashtan shows that the physical form of comics is not culturally neutral. It is a culturally and historically contingent assemblage of physical parameters and technologies involved in delivering content that works as a signifying resource. Changes in material formats can impact a text's readership, cultural and economic status (2013, 93). David Bolter and Richard Grusin also discuss media as practices of meaning-making in which a key role is played by interactions with the body and senses (1999, 77), striving for the real defined in terms of audience experience that triggers an immediate (authentic) emotional response (53). Remediation is a defining trait of new digital media, engaged in a constant dialectic across media networks, redeploying, responding to, competing with, and depending on earlier and coeval media for cultural significance (50, 56). New media refashion older ones, and the latter develop strategies to counter challenges posed by new media. Thus, in the competition between print and digital media, an emphasis on visual and other sensory qualities, impossible to reproduce on a screen, can serve as a strategy of differentiation for print books. This strategy, however, is a product of the digital era itself, with its emphasis on visuality, expressive graphic design, and interactivity (Kashtan 2015, 420–421).

Kashtan builds his argument about the reinvented materiality of comics in the post-print age upon an analysis of Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012). Designed as a sophisticated reflection on the contemporary condition of the book, *Building Stories* celebrates its physical form while also commenting on the impact of new media culture in social and publishing terms. Kashtan commends the potential of comics to hybridize print and digital modes of materiality, thus producing "prototype books of the future" (2015, 445). But he also signals that *Building Stories* is a cumbersome prototype (bulky, heavy, difficult to acquire and costly despite being printed in the PRC), and calls for more democratic models (446).

The recent evolution of comics in Taiwan reflects these global trends. An emphasis on the idiosyncratic, hand-crafted physicality of texts and personal distribution, which Tinker (2007) discusses in the context of US underground and alternative comics, is salient in Taiwan's thriving self-publishing milieu – a large *dōjinshi/tongrenzhi* (同人誌, Japanese-style zine) community, several 'reviews' publishing alternative works discussed by Norbert Danysz in this book, and individual artists selling their works directly to internet-based fan groups. Niche publishers such as Slowork (founded in 2013) or nos:books (established in 2008), specializing in documentary comics and visual art projects, respectively, broke new grounds by an emphasis on paper and print quality – the use of several paper textures that allow for tactile differentiation, cover design highlighting these differences, embossed covers, color printing, atypical formats, etc. Slowork's signa-

ture trait was a focus on disadvantaged groups, dehumanizing, exploitative practices, and social and political activism, counterbalanced by an exquisite quality of the printed books that served to re-humanize and ennoble these marginalized practices by aestheticizing them. However, the books' high prices worked as a counter-democratic force, restricting their accessibility to the economically privileged.

The last few years witnessed the continuation of this trend in material aesthetics, paralleled by an increase in accessibility and mass reproduction. More comics publishers, niche and mainstream, have joined the trend, and prices have decreased. Such evolution can be explained by the availability of state funding, by technological advancement allowing for budget-friendly print without the need for outsourcing to cheaper locations like the PRC (indeed, many of these books' paratexts include the phrase 'printed in Taiwan,' which also makes nationalist claims), and by increased standardization replacing atypical book sizes. The range of topics covered by these comics has widened, and they are also easily available through major bookstore chains and online booksellers. While most are self-contained works, some constitute networked experiments underscoring both print and digital materiality, as well as transmedia connections, which makes them interesting exercises in remediation.

Print materiality is a significant aspect of comics journalism, the genre to which *The Reporter File* belongs. The first edition of Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1993–1995) played upon the apparent dissonance between the seriousness of contents and scrupulous journalistic investigation, and the cheap instalment volumes adopted as publishing form – Sacco worked with existing mainstream conventions to recontextualize them (Chute 2016, 207). For documentary comics, print has constituted a meaningful choice, a form of cultural resistance to virtual, screen-based media and a claim to status associated with the social prestige of the printed book, whose publication involves cultural recognition by gatekeeping institutions and professionalization (Schmid 2016, 48–49). These cultural connotations of books as printed artefacts can also be applied to *The Reporter File*. Its preface introduces the printed book as a form of chronicling and archiving (Li 2022, 1), thus inscribing it within other (global and local) trends – a contemporary preoccupation with recording and remembrance as a source of identity, reflexively constructed in a fragmented world (Nora 1996), or the intensification of documentary experimentation after 9/11 and the multiplication of recording and archiving forms (Chute 2016, 5), echoed in Taiwan through various practices of recording historical events in real-time, as they unfold (Zemanek 2020).

The Reporter File underscores its materiality through various semiotic techniques (Figure 1). Material markers of filing conform with the book's title and its self-positioning as an archive of significant contemporary events. The darker

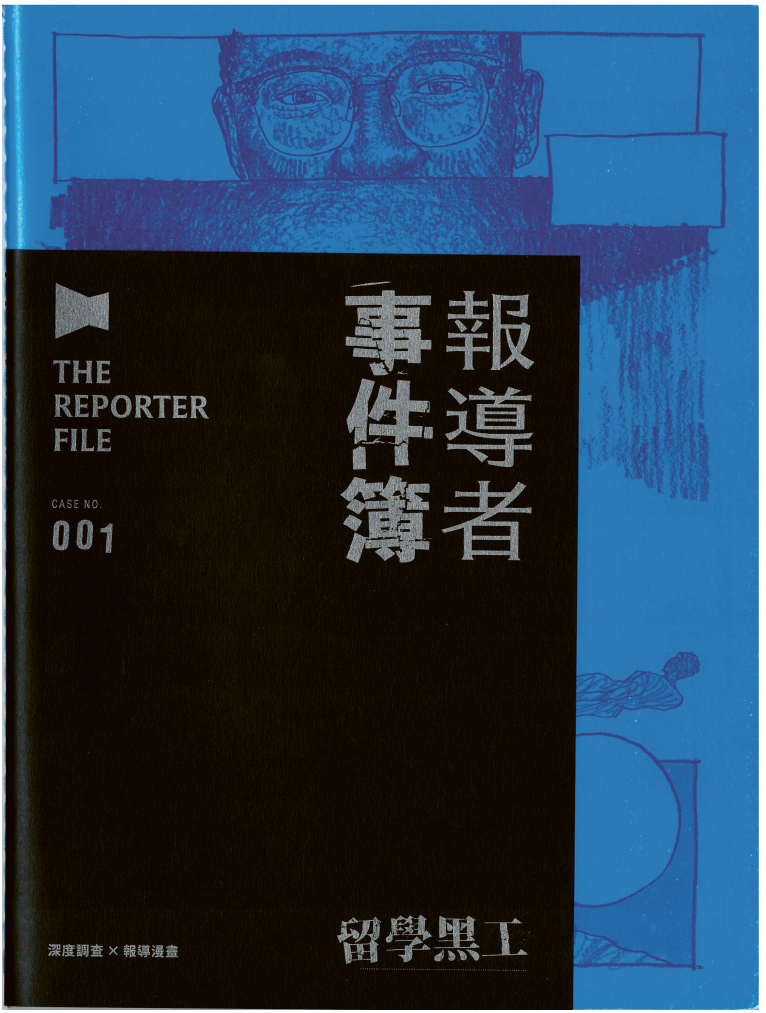

Figure 1: Front cover of *The Reporter File*, first volume: *Study Abroad Illegal Workers* (Li 2022). Reprinted with permission from the non-profit media organization The Reporter.

half-jackets, featuring the title and promotional captions, resemble a filing folder and bear thread stitching in contrasting colors on the spine. In addition, the word 'file' on the half-jacket and the number of the case mimic imprints made by rubber or metal stamps, with numbers imperfectly aligned by hand and surplus 'ink' around the characters. The presence of such elements can be deemed a form of analog nostalgia (Schey 2017, 28).

The two volumes' main covers are in striking blue and red, contrasting with the black and brown half-jackets. The two types of covers also contrast in texture: matt and rough for the half-jacket (with wood grain for the volume on illegal logging), and smooth, shiny for the main covers. A book's cover, title page, and additional blank pages usually mark its boundaries as an artefact and as fiction; they allow the reader to gradually enter the diegetic world and mark its separation from reality. *The Reporter File* eliminates this transition: its main front cover displays fragments of the comics contents, and it lacks a title page – the text begins and ends on the inner sides of the cover. This creates a sense of urgency about the topics addressed, instantly calling for the reader's attention.

Despite the established association between comics journalism and print, digital forms have also been developed more recently. Revealnews released a weekly series on inequality under Covid-19 (Pike, Bui et al. 2020). The Nib, a US website specializing in nonfiction comics (including comics journalism), published both online and in print between 2013 and 2023. *The Reporter File* mobilizes both kinds of materialities – print and digital. Each volume's contents (including the comics) are also available online as an interlinked collection of features, free of charge.[3] Each volume's graphic narrative is identical in both print and online forms. The articles are slightly edited in the book, and some of the hyperlinked contents from their online versions are replaced with notes. The online set of reports on illegal logging also contains articles and photographs not included in the book. Thus, the online version seems to be the primary and most complete form of publication, with the books as secondary. On the website, only the comics make reference to the printed books. The books, however, establish connections between the two materiality modes through manifold strategies, inviting parallel readings and reflection on the potential sources of pleasure offered by each. These strategies involve a complex interplay of immediacy (transparency in presenting the real, effacement of the medium), hypermediacy (emphasis on the act of mediation and opacity of the medium) and reverse remediation (simulation of medium-specific effects in another medium) (Bolter and Grusin 1999).

The comics in each volume are hand-drawn, which plays upon the logic of immediacy in highlighting the haptic process of drawing in pencil and imparts an affective, highly personal quality to the two stories focusing on specific, individual protagonists. This is especially the case for the first volume, which is hand-lettered, with the contours of panels and speech bubbles also drawn by hand, and

3 For the graphic narratives, see https://www.twreporter.org/a/uganda-students-in-taiwan-become-cheap-labors-comic and https://www.twreporter.org/a/illegal-logging-comic (acc. 19 February 2024).

whose print version mimics the graininess and reddish sheen of pencil graphite. But apart from triggering emotional immersion in the story, the hand-drawn and handwritten character of the comics also conforms to the logic of hypermediacy, marking the mediatedness of representation. A similar role is played by the combination of hand drawing and lettering with a computer-generated background in the first volume, which introduces an element of distance and contrast between the two techniques of mediation – analog (embodied) and digital. In the context of mangaesque comics (mainstream in Taiwan), whose text is usually printed, handwritten lettering might counter readers' expectations. Thus, it can be read as a strategy of distancing rather than immediacy, a marker of an alternative (distinctly non-mainstream) category – that of the (Western) graphic novel.

Reverse remediation is present in the hashtags printed on the back half-jackets of each volume (Figure 2), a form of expression originating in social media. Some of them play an informative role as thematic keywords linked to issues addressed in the investigative reports ('Ugandan students,' 'Taiwanese higher education,' 'indigenous peoples,' 'runaway migrant workers'). Others ('social justice,' 'human dignity,' 'societal survey,' 'mishandling of resources') play a role similar to that described by Mimi Papacharissi in her discussion of affective publics built and sustained by social media. Papacharissi views hashtags as "empty signifiers inviting ideological identification" (2016, 308), framing discursive devices and affectively charged forms of expression that can establish latent bonds with the potential of mobilizing networked publics for social and political activism. This role is in tune with The Reporter's profile of socially engaged journalism. Apart from linking with the digital version of the story and the news outlet's profile, the printed hashtags also work as visual branding – identically formatted hashtags occur in each article published on The Reporter's online interface as category buttons hyperlinking stories with similar topics.

The covers of each book also display QR codes that link to The Reporter's website, which further underscores the book's status as an integral part of a media network embodied in digital and print materialities, and the primacy of the former. Such systematic inter-referencing also encourages readers to compare the two versions of the graphic narratives. While the print versions have a more salient haptic quality, the online comics offer a more coherent visual experience. Both graphic narratives seem designed for online reading and vertical scrolling. Although Sensen's story is better adapted for book print by featuring several fragments designed as double-page spreads, both works' layout has a marked vertical flow: they contain many visual cues inviting vertical connections and guiding a vertical reading order.

The Reporter File, therefore, is an interesting experiment in transmedia connections and remediation, which emphasizes print materiality while simulta-



Figure 2: Hashtags on the back half-jacket of *The Reporter File* (Li 2022). Reprinted with permission from the non-profit media organization The Reporter.

neously placing it within a network that grants primacy to the digital mode. The printed books serve as 'new intertextual commodities' in P. David Marshall's terms, incorporating a 'play aesthetic' (2002, 73). By emphasizing material qualities and constructing links between the online and offline versions of the comics and investigative reports, the books build a structured form of interactivity, offering entertainment choices to a consumer endowed with agency. At the same time, the systematic linkages between the two materiality modes establish The Re-

porter as an intertextual brand and foster readers' loyalty to it. Apart from being standalone commodities, the two books also constitute promotional material for the news website and its brand.

The Reporter File – Comics Journalism?

The paratext (including inscriptions on the covers, and also the forewords) saliently frames this series as comics journalism. To my knowledge, this is the first instance of such labelling for Taiwanese comics. By foregrounding the graphic narratives (fragments are featured on the covers, and the comics open each volume) and advertising them as 'comics journalism,' *The Reporter File* seems to demonstrate commitment to legitimizing local comics' status as a 'serious' medium involved in social advocacy. The publication of this series and similar works on The Reporter's website attests to the institutionalization of comics journalism, a form whose time-consuming nature (as opposed to deadline journalism), significant space requirements and high demands for sophisticated, critical reading (Nyberg 2006, 109–110) usually relegate it to a freelance status and financial uncertainty outside traditional media corporations.

On the other hand, however, claims to seriousness are undermined. The graphic narratives do not constitute the majority of the content, although they are used as a selling point, and the two books are issued by a comics publisher. Both books include multiple formats: traditional journalistic accounts (texts with graphs, illustrations and photographs), and a photo essay in the second volume. Thus, comics are only part of a multimedia network of news reporting. Moreover, the two graphic narratives lack key traits usually associated with comics journalism.

The roots of (Western) comics journalism are often traced back to the US New Journalism of the 1960s (Chute 2016, 199), which questioned objectivity as a powerful, dominant value central to journalists' professional identity (Pauly 2014, 592). By being hand-drawn (hence, mediated representation), comics journalism disrupts the conventional 'invisibility' of the journalist and highlights the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the documentary genre – the ideal of objective representation and the impossibility of attaining it (Schmid 2021, 42). Under such circumstances, this comics genre adopts different strategies for constructing journalistic authority. It builds accountability through self-reflexivity and transparency about the fact-finding process and the construction of the reported events. It often highlights the presence of the artist as mediator while recording evidence on site (Schmid 2021, 12–13, 20). Works of comics journalism often pres-

ent multiple, even contradictory testimonies and observations, highlighting these contradictions as the inherent fragmentariness and individual character of experiencing events (Bake and Zöhrer 2017, 89), exposing rather than suppressing inaccuracies and even inviting readers to assess what is true (92). Thus, they elicit reflection on the multifaceted, contradictory nature of 'facts' and the positionality of the journalistic account. Comics journalism can also incorporate graphic representations of sources of information, maps, graphs, and other mediated representations that reproduce the complexity of reality or allow the reader to navigate it (Gutiérrez, Rodriguez, and Diaz de Guereñu 2018, 50, 53). They can offer comments placing represented events within a broader political, social or ethical context (Ludewig 2019, 28), or can adopt a 'mimetic mode,' realistically depicting people and their surroundings and thus authenticating the report as truthful or providing a sense of place (Ludewig 2019, 30).

In *The Reporter File*, the authors are emphatically present in artistic terms through a personal, recognizable, signature style (especially Lau Kwong Shing, whose style is more idiosyncratic and recurs in his other works for The Reporter). However, authors are absent in a political sense, as diegetic avatars taking visible responsibility for the journalistic account (a frequent trope in comics journalism). Instead of "foregrounding the role of the journalist as narrator" (Nyberg 2006, 111), *The Reporter File* series foregrounds the narration itself as performance: characters, their relationships and an emplotment of events organized in a cause-and-effect manner, facilitating existential or ethical conclusions and affective responses. The works create immediacy for the reader – an illusion of first-hand exposure to the protagonists' experience of events. The stories are highly mediated, but not transparent or self-reflexive about the process of mediation. Despite presenting complex and long-term phenomena, they are minimalistic in terms of background information or an in-depth, multifaceted approach – the textual reports in both books are far more informative and multi-dimensional than the comics.

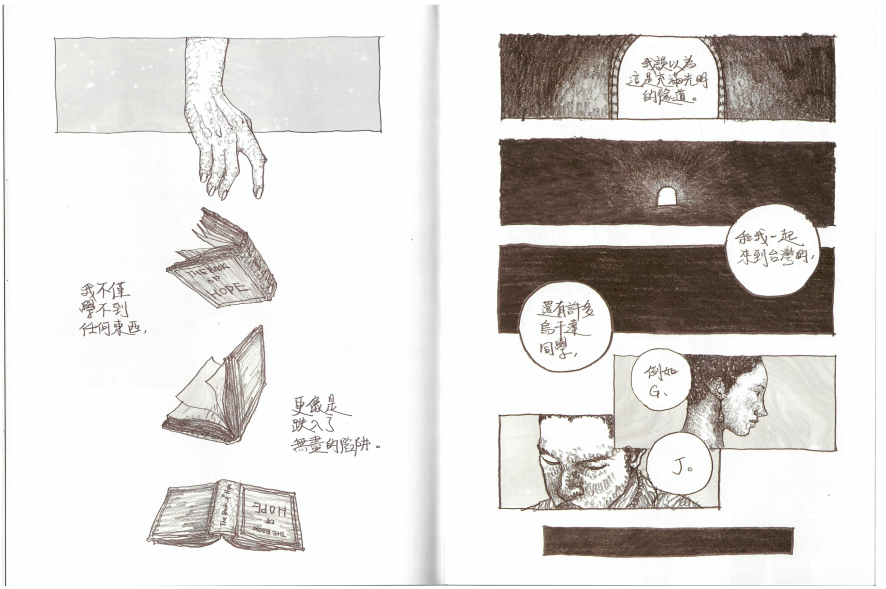

Figure 3: Emotional appeal in *Study Abroad Illegal Workers* (Li 2022, 11–12). Reprinted with permission from the non-profit media organization The Reporter.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Page 7: Not only was I unable to learn anything, but it seemed that I was falling down a bottomless pit.
Page 8: I had held the wrong belief that this would be a tunnel full of light. There were many other Ugandan students who had come to Taiwan with me: G, for instance, [and] J.

The text bubbles in *Study Abroad Illegal Workers* contain a first-person account from the perspective of Collines, a Ugandan student who recounts personal experiences and those of fellow students. At the visual level, readers have direct access to his thoughts and emotions through images depicting Collines' first glimpses of Taiwan on arrival or reminiscences of his home country, and visualizations of his growing despair in Taiwan – a metaphorical 'Book of Hope' held in his hand, then dropped, and a tunnel with a disappearing light at the end (Figure 3). In most cases, however, characters are positioned as external to the reader. Their direct gaze often targets the viewer. All characters are shown in class, unable to progress in their studies due to not knowing Chinese (the teaching language, despite having been promised English teaching), and at their jobs arranged by the Taiwanese university. Forced to work long hours with minimal pay, they are increasingly exhausted and unable to

cope with rising debts in tuition fees. Their environment is not depicted in detail. Collines' images of both Taiwan and Uganda are stereotyped, implying cultural hierarchies: landmark modern buildings in Taipei, military dictatorship and hunger in Uganda. Close-up representations of apartment buildings and work machinery in Taiwan consist of intricate parts drawn with crisscrossing lines. They close in towards the viewer or are shown without edge lines, creating an overwhelming effect and serving to enhance characters' psychological states rather than to build a sense of place or authentic surroundings.

The stories told by the graphic narrative involve several levels of mediation, or translation. The preface is explicit about the comics not being based on the artist's first-hand investigation, but on existing information and materials collected by The Reporter's journalists. The first-person textual narrative is in Chinese, a language which the protagonist does not know. He also provides a second-hand account of fellow students' stories. The preface also indicates that the comic aims to provide visualizations of characters, settings and events that were unattainable to journalists. Therefore, this work seems to build its reliability not on "conventional signifiers of truthfulness" (Bake and Zöhrer 2017, 85) specific to the comics journalism genre, but on "the myth of photographic truth" (Schmid 2021, 44).



Figure 4: *Crime Under the Sacred Trees* – shot-reverse-shot of mountain patrol Azhi and the poacher (Li 2023, 13–14). Reprinted with permission from the non-profit media organization The Reporter.

Crime Under the Sacred Trees is similar in viewpoint and emphasis on affective impact. The story is told from the perspective of Azhi, an Indigenous mountain patrol entrusted with preventing and punishing illegal logging. Readers can see both him and through his eyes, and eye contact between various characters and the reader is a salient visual strategy here too. Scenes depicted through the protagonists' eyes position him as a witness to events that constitute key aspects of illegal logging, and eye contact is designed to elicit strong emotional responses. Azhi is introduced while gazing at the woods (and the reader) as part of his job. This perspective immediately changes to a shot-reverse-shot over his shoulders, then the loggers', and finally an embodied view of what Azhi sees: the logger's piercing gaze and the barrel of his gun (Figure 4). In combination with irregularly shaped panels, a repeated image of the logger's gaze and a large sound character, this double-page spread creates an intense emotional effect. It underscores the vulnerability of forest guards, deprived of self-defence tools but compelled to face firearms. Through Azhi's eyes, the reader can also see captured poachers: Azhi's own uncle (also an Indigenous Taiwanese – who glances back at him) and an immigrant worker. These scenes display two groups (Taiwanese Indigenous and migrant workers) often involved in illegal logging, and probable situations – numerous members of Indigenous communities living in mountain area who take up this occupation.



Figure 5: Crime under the Sacred Trees: block of wood with hole resembling the poacher's gun barrel and a bottomless pit (Li 2023, 24–25).

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Page 24: Cut off the tree, these nodes resembled parasitic excrescences growing on the human body. With their mysterious and beautiful appearance, growing strong and sturdy in a world full of interest-based relations … they ended up fully engulfing the human soul.

Another scene seen through Azhi's eyes shows blocks of wood as seized evidence (Figure 5). Watching them, Azhi becomes engrossed in reflecting on the deep fascination with and desire for precious wood species and rare natural forms of wood growth, which fuel illegal logging. The round-shaped node in the wood block makes him think of the dangers of logging. The node resembles the poacher's gun barrel: dark, menacing and bottomless, with the potential to bring death (the gun) or obsessive desire (the rabbit-hole of wood collecting). The graphic narrative does not provide information on the reasons that make poaching an enticing job (despite its risks) for the Indigenous or immigrants practicing it, or more details on the work of forestry authorities. It mainly creates emotional impact and conveys the message of a deep, transgenerational bond between Indigenous peoples and forests, which frames protecting rare wood species as an ethical necessity. Like the earlier work, this graphic narrative is based on existing materials collected by professional journalists – the character Azhi does not correspond to a real person, but is a fictional output of collated interview data. In her foreword and the podcast on The Reporter website (The Real Story 2023), the artist emphasizes her inadequacy for journalistic fieldwork: a trip to a logging site with a forest guard caused revisions of visual representations in her work, but was physically arduous. Both books, therefore, present the comics artists as unqualified for journalistic fieldwork, which aligns them more with the middle-class, intellectual young readers rather than the marginalized groups they speak for.

Thus, paradoxically, despite their explicit generic claim, the comics in *The Reporter File* go against key principles of comics journalism. They tell stories in tune with the textual reports, but do not contribute medium-specific journalistic perspectives on events. The first volume's preface is open about the comics being primarily intended for affective goals: "achieving empathy," "emotional, visual experience." It also refers to mediation and immediacy: "guiding readers to retrace protagonists' footsteps at the event scenes", "helping readers wander in protagonists' inner and outer worlds." It positions the graphic narratives as an entry point to the reported theme, simple enough to reach "primary and secondary school students, employees of all trades, housewives and househusbands" (Li 2022, 1–2). In my podcast interview (Zemanek 2024), Sherry Lee, The Reporter's deputy CEO and editor-in-chief of *The Reporter File*, was equally unequivocal

about marketing and emotional appeal being these graphic narratives' intended roles; they did not inaugurate a new approach in terms of journalism practices. The institutionalization of comics journalism they exemplify is also limited: from the second volume onwards, the task of recruiting artists was outsourced to Gaea, the collaborating comics publisher. This approach can be read as a twofold manifestation of distrust: in comics' potential to tackle socially impactful topics in a complex, in-depth manner, and in the readers' agency and critical skills.

The Reporter's adoption of graphic journalism can be explained in the context of global coevalness. Both the model of journalism practiced by The Reporter and the graphic narratives it commissioned share many features with global trends in journalism, including comics journalism. The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed the rise of new forms of journalism (constructive, solutions, advocacy journalism) in media professional and academic circles, also adopted by media corporations. These new forms promote a contextual, constructive, activist approach, positive storytelling and connecting communities (Beckett and Deuze 2016, 2, 4). Eroding trust in the ability of mainstream media to represent reality in an accurate, honest manner, and contraction of media ownership by global conglomerates (Schmid 2021, 16) led to the emergence of independent, non-profit, public interest news outlets practicing a type of in-depth, watchdog, investigative journalism increasingly ousted by cost reductions and fast news. Such news outlets emerged in the US during the 1970s, but experienced a global boom during the first decades of the twenty-first century. Some of these initiatives, such as the US Center for Investigative Reporting (CRI), were designed as multi-platform, which included the use of animation and comics as a first-contact strategy for attracting new audiences (Rosenthal 2012, 20–21). Comics journalism is still published by Revealnews, the CRI's current trademark (the above-mentioned Covid-19 series).

Western models and international connections are also used by The Reporter as a strong element of self-branding and a key source for legitimization. The Reporter was inspired by the US-based ProPublica (Wang and Wang 2023, 59). The 'About Us' section of the website[4] underscores its membership of the Global Investigative Journalism Network, its international awards, cooperation and presence at international forums. The Reporter's innovations in storytelling formats are also intentionally grounded in international developments: the release of a game on A&E medical care in Taiwan was accompanied by an elaborate account (Jiang and Wu 2015) tracing the (Western) origins, roles of news games and academic research into this topic, with examples of games authored by renowned international outlets such as the BBC and ProPublica. Thus, The Reporter places itself in

4 https://www.twreporter.org/a/about-us-english-version (acc. 12 July 2023).

a position of (elite) intellectual authority. The foreword in the first *Reporter File* builds explicit connections with an established Euro-American comics journalism tradition, also made in the podcast promoting the second volume, which invokes Joe Sacco as a genre pioneer (The Real Story 2023). As revealed by Sherry Lee, the direct sources of inspiration for *The Reporter File* were works commissioned by Correctiv, a German investigative newsroom (Zemanek 2024).[5]

Whence and Whither Comics Journalism in Taiwan?

The Reporter File is not the only instance of graphic narratives on socially significant topics intended for affective impact. It is the first publication explicitly labelled comics journalism, but not the earliest such work in Taiwan. Slowork Publishing (mentioned earlier for its emphasis on material design, and in the chapter by Norbert Danysz) specializes in what it calls 'Asian graphic documentary' (亞洲報導漫畫).[6] *Frontline ZA* (Huang 2015), an anthology on political activism, contains several pieces that can be categorized as report or reportage, documenting current events (the 2014 Sunflower Movement) or presenting protests spanning several years with their underlying causes. Like the preface for *The Reporter File*, this book's cover blurb underscores not epistemological/factual, but affective truth: it exposes "suffering [...] or grievances," "the real bodily and emotional perceptions of people within social movements." The graphic narratives conform to this manifesto. Yang Yu-qi's (楊鈺琦) piece on workers' fights against the RCA factory for exposure to cancer-causing chemicals (Huang 2015, 9–23) employs largely metaphorical imagery with high emotional appeal. Huang Li-pei's (黃立佩) story on protests against the demolition of a leprosy sanatorium (its stigmatized patients' only home) presents physical and material damages through visual strategies eliciting emotional responses (Huang 2015, 24–32). But unlike *The Reporter File*, these works make mediation explicit through interviewers' visibility as an offscreen voice embodied in speech bubbles (Yang) or as a diegetic character

5 However, Correctiv comics are standalone works, resulting from an in-house system for recruiting and long-term, active collaboration with artists: https://correctiv.org/en/newsroom-updates/2023/04/18/call-for-applications-for-illustrators-graphic-novel-on-community-investigation/ (acc. 27 February 2024).

6 See the publisher's website and 'About' section that contains a definition of graphic documentary with references to Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco and Marjane Satrapi: http://www.sloworkpublishing.com/en/whatis.php (acc. 8 September 2023).

present onsite and impacted by fieldwork (Huang). In this respect, they are more aligned with the established characteristics of comics journalism.

The Reporter File is not the only work of comics journalism published by The Reporter, either. Its website includes two other stories: an account of Aboriginal reserve land used for non-Indigenous commercial interests (He et al. 2021), targeting a general public, and a metanarrative on the production of correspondent reporting after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, intended for children (Huang 2022). Despite the artist's declared aim to simplify facts, the Ukraine story is a very complex overview of news production as a networked process, a complexity enhanced by visual strategies. These strategies are employed for representing: the multiplicity of actors involved in news production (war correspondents on site and editorial teams in the home office), holding equally important decision-making powers; the multiplicity of factors informing decisions on dispatching correspondents to war zones; war reporting as a configuration of processes facilitated by contemporary technological connectivity, with outputs in a diverse array of media forms disseminated simultaneously; and migration from Ukraine as a specific, mainstream social phenomenon taking place in spaces usually associated with leisure tourism (airports, railway hubs, hotels, urban streets and houses) conforming to, rather than bypassing transborder governmentality. The aboriginal land story is a piece of solutions journalism rich in textual content, designed as a fictional comics narrative based on collated investigation and interview data. The visual elements contribute to underscoring the multi-layered character of reserve land transactions exploiting legal loopholes, the fragmentation and erosion of reserve land resources, and economic constraints imposed on Indigenous communities by illicit transactions. The setting of the story in a school soon to be sold to a hotel developer has potential for emotional impact through associations with the Confucian emphasis on education and the role of schools as ideological apparatus nurturing community and cultural identity.

Another graphic narrative (Toilet-Roll Cat 2021) issued by a mainstream publisher, whose paratext does not make explicit generic claims, is an interesting example of locally embedded evolution. Far from the political engagement of traditional comics journalism, this book embodies another type of reporting, focused on lifestyle and entertainment, reminiscent of Japanese-inspired travel magazines popular in Taiwan, which feature local cuisines, hotels and other facilities. It is published in standard size, but in full color, with exquisite paper and print quality. The artist (and narrator) presents various hot spring locations, based on information collected by herself and friends, with much attention paid to amenities, material objects and sensorial experiences. Apart from the diegetic presence of the author's persona during field trips, the process of mediation and framing is made explicit by showing negotiations with the editor regarding book structure

and content and by explaining why characters are represented as animals. The inclusion of information on the artist's expenditure of government funding for this project offers insight into the specificities of comics in Taiwan and the current environment for creative labor.

Final Comments

This study sheds light on recent evolutions of comics in the digital era and on strategies for adapting to new media literacies and forms of reading experience based on media convergence. It counters fears that digital comics might pose a threat to this medium, condemning it to become a 'retro-technology' with limited social relevance or impact (Stein 2016). My discussion joins existing research into webtoons (Pyo, Jang and Yoon 2019, Cho 2021) which shows that the medium of comics is thriving, albeit in new material formats engendered by platformization, which entails new possibilities and challenges (Kim and Yu 2019). I explore the position of comics journalism within a different kind of platform: an independent news website committed to socially engaged journalism and to innovation in employing a diversified network of media formats. My study also shows that print has not become an obsolete materiality for comics. *The Reporter File* can be inscribed within a broader trend of emphasizing material aesthetics and material qualities that contribute to textual meaning, made more democratically accessible through recent state support. The Reporter attempts to maximize its audience outreach by employing comics published in both digital and print formats while expertly connecting them in complex ways and constructing the printed version as a 'new intertextual commodity' not only pleasurable in its own terms, but also guiding readers towards the website. The choice for such a marketing strategy may be motivated by an intention to engage different kinds of audiences with different patterns of comics consumption, discussed in an article on The Reporter website (Hong and Chen 2022): a younger digital native generation preferring web comics, accustomed to platforms but with limited experience of reading comics, and an older generation of readers having grown up reading paper comics and using rental shops (hence the instances of analog nostalgia in the print version of *The Reporter File*).

This chapter demonstrated that trends in Taiwan are coeval with, and inspired by, global developments in journalism, comics, digital and print media. International connections are strategically emphasized by The Reporter as a means for self-legitimization and self-positioning within an international network of independent media. The two graphic narratives in *The Reporter File* are explicitly

marketed as comics journalism, a genre of Western origin associated with both investigative reporting and a highbrow, authoritative status. However, their contents and prefaces mainly exploit emotional appeal. The use of comics in these books can thus be seen as a new version of the old journalistic technique of outsourcing expressions of emotion by ascribing them to interviewed sources as part of a "strategic ritual of emotionality" that complements "the strategic ritual of objectivity" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020, 184). In the post-truth era, trust is a key issue for news media. It would appear that *The Reporter File* (a complex, multimedia undertaking) can elicit trust for the commissioning media outlet, rather than trust in comics and their potential for specific contributions to journalism. The 'serious' investigative work is entrusted to professional journalists (i.e., traditional intellectuals). This division of tasks seems to reflect earlier comics-related practices in Taiwan, illustrated by the emergence of the CCC series (which Norbert Danysz addresses in his chapter), a collaboration between Academia Sinica and young comics artists – a belief that 'good' comics can only be produced under top-down, elite academic guidance.

The preoccupation with emotional appeal in *The Reporter File* and earlier Taiwanese comics on political activism may be linked with older local discursive practices. 'Speaking bitterness' (*suku*, 訴苦) is a narrative pattern based on 'the logic of the wound' that blends individual stories into collective memories, thus mobilizing them for political aims: building the nation and national subjects. This practice gained dominance in Maoist China but is discussed by Berry and Farquhar (2004) also in the context of pre-1949 Chinese and post-war Taiwanese cultural production. The emphasis on affective engagement for *The Reporter File* comics can also be explained as reflecting a global 'emotional turn' in journalism, motivated by the need for establishing and maintaining connections (with reliable sources, attentive publics) in an era of digital, networked communication, which redefines established frameworks of professional objectivity (Beckett and Deuze 2016, 2). The open acknowledgment of affective intent in *The Reporter File*'s prefaces can be read as the strategy of building trust through transparency about the normalization of emotion (4). As discussed earlier, storytelling strategies in these graphic narratives solicit compassion and frame the issue in terms of ethical necessity, which resonates with the mechanism of triggering moral outrage through emotional content in digital and social media (Crockett 2017) (and thus can be interpreted as another instance of remediation). This mechanism is a double-edged sword: it can inspire positive collective action against social and political injustice, but also exacerbate ideological polarization and social conflict.

But comics journalism in Taiwan and at The Reporter can also be viewed in a less pessimistic light, as a transitional, experimental phase. Traditional comics journalism is often produced by artists with journalistic training. The cited serialized

works on Revealnews.org were authored by comics artists trained as journalists or artists specializing in documentary comics, supported by experienced comics journalism scriptwriters outsourced from The Nib. The Reporter's collaborating artists lack previous experience in the genre or are only beginning to build it: Lau Kwong Shing, the author of *Study Abroad Illegal Workers*, has recently started to address Hong Kong politics (2021).[7] The two short stories published by The Reporter are more in tune with genre conventions than *The Reporter File*; their ambiguous status as comics journalism may be due to the in-house author's non-specialized education as graphic designer (which applies for many comics artists in Taiwan) and her main contribution to the website. The book on hot springs may herald future developments towards local and regional specificity in comics journalism, rather than conformity to established Western conventions.

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7 The Chinese-language edition of this work, published in Taiwan, is available to readers in the UK free of charge, through the HK Books Borrowing and Sharing Centre (港書館), https://hkbookcentre.uk/ (acc. 4 September 2024). It is also available for purchase at the online bookstore In Common Breath: The UK Hongkonger Bookstore (同呼吸• 英倫香港人書店), https://www.in-common-breath.co.uk/ (as of 4 September 2024).

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