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 **Shaping a Cultural Tradition: The Picture Book in Taiwan,
1945-1980**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Shaping a Cultural Tradition:
The Picture Book in Taiwan, 1945-1980**

Shu-chu Wei (bio)

Taiwan returned to Chinese rule in 1945 after fifty years of Japanese colonization. In 1949, Chiang Kai-shek lost his battle to the Communists in the civil war and retreated to Taiwan. His government launched a Chinese educational system on the island, under which Taiwanese residents started to read publications in Chinese instead of Japanese. Most school children began to speak and read the new official language, Mandarin Chinese, without the usual guidance from their parents, who were themselves struggling to cope with the linguistic changes.¹ Picture books in Chinese with Mandarin pronunciations marked next to the words in a phonetic system called "*Chu Yin Fu Hao*" appeared as a way to help educate children.

Picture books in this format went through several states of evolution from the 1950s to the 1980s, mirroring the linguistic, pictorial, cultural, economic, political, and national interactions that took place on the island. During these changes, writers and illustrators looked everywhere for inspiration, but mostly to Western and Japanese examples because their own tradition tended to teach children as if they were adults. By the end of the 1970s, picture books began to appear in unique forms—blending traditional China, modern Taiwan, and the West. A new cultural tradition was thus created in the making of the picture book.

Because of the complexity of the issues shaping this Taiwanese genre, a complete historical survey is beyond the scope of this article. But to provide an overview for readers unfamiliar with thematic and formal developments of picture books in Taiwan, I will examine the most important and representative texts in roughly chronological order, making use of ideas and methodology presented by Barbara Bader, Molly Bang, and William Moebius. As Bader reminds us:

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and, foremost, an experience for a child.

As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on

the drama of the turning of the page.

On its own terms its possibilities are limitless.

(1)

At the beginning of Chiang Kai-shek's rule on Taiwan, the Ministry of Education barely had time or funding for textbooks, let alone bedtime stories for children. In the first two decades after 1945, a time of financial difficulties for most families, private publishers filled the vacuum with anything that could be produced inexpensively.² Comic books proved most popular.³ Every child rushed to buy, rent, or borrow the latest *Silang and Chen-p'ing* serial, depicting the fight of two heroes against evil forces with spying, captures, and rescue missions. This serial, by Yeh Hung-chia, continued for many years and seemed to go well with the government's propaganda about the Chinese communists as evildoers, whether or not the author so intended. Other best sellers included titles such as *Ta Shen P'o You Taipei* (Great Aunt from the Country Visits Taipei), *Hwa Hsiao Mei* (Little Sister Hwa), and *Hsiao Pang Ch'iu Wang* (The Little League Baseball Champion), a translation from a Japanese comic-book series. They were simple, creative, and entertaining, mostly printed in white and black or white and blue. The Great Aunt series, by Liu Hsing-ch'in, is of special significance as it details lifestyles and activities of local residents.⁴ It also reveals meaningful and often hilarious differences between the perspectives of the urbanites and country folk at a time when travel even within the island was a great event.

Another group of picture books, Chinese historical stories, was also widely available, but these were less creative than the comic books. Most of these stories depict brave heroes and diligent children greatly rewarded. Didacticism has always been an important part of Chinese education; however, some stories teaching the virtue of filial piety went overboard. For example, several publishers seemed to favor a classical anthology called *Twenty-four Tales of Filial Piety* and made the tales into picture books. One of the tales introduces a small boy, Wang Hsiang, who, on...

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Chinese and foreign folktales were also available. China has many traditional folktales; they should have served as a rich source for picture books, but they were somewhat neglected by the publishers. Most anthologies of Chinese folktales were published without illustrations or phonetic marks, being intended for more mature readers than children. Some were published with poor, dull illustrations, perhaps due to a lack of funding for qualified illustrators. Taiwanese folktales were either absent from most anthologies published in this period or limited to several "approved" tales. It is possible that this circumstance is the result of official censorship of Taiwanese local culture for political reasons; for example, students were not allowed to speak local dialects at school.

In contrast, European folktales, mostly from the collections of the Grimms and Hans Christian Andersen, were numerous and appeared in beautifully printed formats with fancy illustrations in color. I suspect the publishers simply copied the illustrations from the West, since at that time Taiwan did not recognize international copyright. As a result, Taiwanese children of many generations grew up more familiar with Snow White, Cinderella, Tom Thumb, and the Three Little Pigs than with Chinese folk heroes and heroines.

The 1960s saw the first large-scale, systematic official publications of picture books in Taiwan. These books were published by the Ministry of Education through funding from UNICEF. An editorial board, organized by the government in 1964, took charge of the selection of writers and illustrators, many of whom were nationally famous.⁵ Most of the books were well written and illustrated in splendid colors. They were indeed high-quality



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