

To Give Chinese Children “a Memorable China”: the Trend of Chinese Indigenous Picture Books

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Abstract:

The development of Chinese indigenous picture books is stimulated as well as pressured by foreign picture books which have dominated Chinese market of picture books since the end of the 20th century. Some Chinese artists began to seek the way of nationalization of picture books to give young children “a memorable China”. This nationalization refers to both national subject materials and traditional style of painting in picture books. Chinese indigenous picture books with the pursuit of nationalization are full of Chinese cultural spirits and aesthetic flavor in order to construct a “Chinese style” in the minds of both native and international readers. However, there are several problems in tensions between some important elements: culture and child-mind, tradition and modernity, words and pictures. Chinese indigenous picture books need to deal with these tensions appropriately and to improve the way of nationalization from diverse dimensions.

Key Words: Nationalization; Picture Books; Chinese Style

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This paper is part of the research projec: Comparative Study on Chinese and English Children's Literature (10YJC751077)

China has a long history of *Lianhuanhua* (Linked Pictures 连环画) which is a palm-size picture book using sequential drawings to represent a story. It is also called as “Kid’s book” since children are particularly fond of this art form. Starting from the ancient society, *Lianhuanhua* had been well-developed especially from the beginning of the 20th century and got prosperous in 1977-1985, while it dwindled in the late 1980s and nearly disappeared with the development of TV and foreign comics. Instead of traditional *Lianhuanhua*, a new type of 32-page, large-size picture books gradually developed in the 1990s. The early successful Chinese picture book with a national style is Cai Gao’s *The Fox Spirit in the Garden* that won “BIB (Biennial of Illustrations Bratislava) Golden Apple” in 1994. However, picture books were not valued in China then. The Chinese market of picture books did not spring up until the dawn of this century when a lot of foreign picture books were introduced into China. The influx of popular foreign picture books stimulates the creation of Chinese native picture books and brings much pressure to Chinese artists as well. A large number of foreign picture books have dominated the Chinese market. It seems difficult to promote the low status of native creations only by imitation of the foreign classics, so some Chinese artists try to make a breakthrough by promoting nationalization in creating stylistically Chinese picture books. Chinese native picture books with a distinguished national style have appeared much more frequently since 2005. Two important awards for Chinese picture books, Feng Zikai Medal and Xin Yi Award, were established in 2009 and 2010 respectively. The winners show the aesthetic trend of nationalization. Undoubtedly, it inspires creations of indigenous picture books to follow this “successful” way.

1. VARIOUS PRACTICES OF STYLISTICALLY CHINESE PICTURE BOOKS

The pioneers who have a distinct idea about creating stylistically Chinese picture books are Brothers Xiong (Xiong Lei and Xiong Liang), whose explicit purpose is to give Chinese children “a memorable China”, as Xiong Lei said, “It is very important to introduce Chinese culture to our children. Nowadays, Chinese children lack national identity and enthusiasm of national culture. They are unfamiliar with Chinese customs and legends, and even younger children know western Christmas more than native Spring Festival. This is a worrying phenomenon.” (Xiong, 2008) Some Chinese scholars pointed out that, “Construction of cultural order in children’s reading greatly influences children’s national identity and value position. Our children need the world vision, but it should be based on national standard. This is not only children’s cultural privilege¹, but also closely related to the future of the nation.” (Wang, 2010) Since picture books are the main reading materials in children’s early reading, people attach importance to this cultural field.

¹ It is said in the preamble of *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990), “Taking due account of the importance of the traditions and cultural values of each person for the protection and harmonious development of the child”.

Xiong's appeal about "creating China's picture books" is out of a cultural responsibility as well as a cultural confidence. Their works are not related to political ideology, but focus on conveying native cultural memory. "Our picture books are based on our philosophy. We pay close attention to our cultural tradition, use the conventional way of representation and carry forward our traditional painting approaches". (Xiong, 2008) From 2005 to 2011, Brothers Xiong have created several series of picture books with distinctively national styles. Their first prominent practice of nationalization is the series of *China's Picture books* (2007), including seven books: *A Little Stone Lion*, *The Earthen General*, *The New Year Monster*, *The Toy Rabbit Story*, *Kitchen God*, *Family Tree*, and *Dragon Slayers*. They are all about Chinese customary imageries or tales. Enlightened by an idea that "all things have psyches" in Chinese ancient culture, Xiong Liang conceives of every object as a living being and projects human emotions and thoughts into it.

The earliest and the most acclaimed book in this series is *A Little Stone Lion*. A little stone lion, a cultural image in southern China, witnesses everything that happened in the town, takes care of everyone and misses them after they leave. In terms of the theme, this story about love and solicitude can be regarded as a Chinese version of *The Giving Tree* (Shel Silverstein). Compared with the American counterpart, *A Little Stone Lion* has a distinctive trait of territory and is like a lyric poem rather than a story. The light color and the indistinct and vast feeling of the atmosphere in pictures embody the lyric spirit of Chinese traditional painting, while the images having a little bit cartoon style are somehow similar to the western picture books. This combination of the eastern and western elements is the common trend in this series. One noteworthy point is that there are special things on each cover of this series: two Chinese stamps. A stamp is a necessary component of Chinese traditional paintings. Chinese national painting is the union of poetry, calligraphy, painting and stamp which can reflect and shine mutually. In this series, one stamp is "绘本中国 (China's Picture Books)", the Chinese title of this series; while the other is the English title of each picture book. These two stamps also show the combination of the eastern and western directions, indicating creators' desire that stylistically Chinese picture books could go to the western world.

Many Chinese creators of picture books like to set stories in some particular areas as well as particular eras to enhance the regional or national characteristics. Zhou Xiang's *Morning Market in Lotus Town* (winner of Feng Zikai Medal in 2009) represents the typical life of Jiangnan area in the 1980s to convey a collective memory. Yao Hong's *Being Infatuated with Peking Opera* (winner of Feng Zikai Medal in 2011) is based on the Japanese invasion into China in the 1930-1940s. The story is set in Nanjing City where the holocaust took place in 1937. The Qinhuai River of Nanjing is chosen as the geographical scene and people's love for Peking opera² is represented as a national cultural interest. A number of pencil sketches and

² Peking opera arose in 18th century and has come to be regarded as one of the cultural treasures of China. This traditional opera combines music, vocal performance, dance and acrobatics together. Performers have elaborate costumes and types of facial makeup. Peking opera emphasizes meaning rather than accuracy.

dark colors represent the miserable memory, while the performance of Peking opera is in bright colors which highlight the charm of this traditional art and the happiness in the peaceful era. This picture book is full of sorrow for the damage of Chinese culture by the war.

Additionally, Peking opera as a unique traditional art form is often employed as a special subject material to create stylistically Chinese picture books, since it is a good way to convey some Chinese cultural spirit and aesthetics. Xiong Liang's second series entitled *Chinese Verve* (2008) is mainly about this national opera. In *Peking Opera Cat*, Xiong connected the patterns of cats' faces with the types of facial make-up of Peking opera and blended Chinese musical and painting elements together to represent the rhyme and soul of Peking opera through cats' stories. Xiong's pursuit of pure Chinese elements and spirits is much stronger in this series than in his previous series *China's Picture books*. Another main resource to show native flavour is well-known national literatures such as folk or classic pieces. For example, Cai Gao's famous works such as *Bao'er* and *Peach-Blossom Source* are adapted from the remarkable Chinese ancient short stories or verse.

Last but not least, eastern philosophy, as a deep layer of the national culture, is a profound topic of indigenous picture books. The representatives are Xiong Liang's *Va-jracharya Master and Drizzle Monster* (2011). The former is about a Buddhist notion of "emptiness". The structure of story is a circle that begins from Va-jracharya Master's question and ends with his intangible answer. Xiong separates the words and pictures into different pages, and arranges the page of words before the page of picture in order to make a slow-pace reading and give prominence to the feeling of "slowness and leisure" which is one of Chinese traditional life attitudes. In *Drizzle Monster*, the ink and gradual superimposition are applied to densely paint the sound, color and shape of the heavy rain, which fully conveys a Buddhist attitude: to endure and enjoy the suffering without complaint. Compared to his earlier works, these two picture books embody a thoroughly Chinese style. Xiong believes that it is insignificant if he makes picture books similar to that in the West, so he consciously tries to create picture books full of Chinese elements.

From the introduction of some representative nationalized picture books above, it can be generalized that stylistically Chinese picture books have strived to develop through exploring various national subject materials and adopting traditional painting techniques. The slogan on the cover of Brothers Xiong's first series of *China's Picture books* says, "China's Picture books bring children back home." The passionate catchword "home" represents the national culture, art, childhood and so on. This series has good sales in China and the copyright has been sold to some English countries. This demonstrates that Chinese picture books began to break out of the mould of foreign picture books in domestic market and to step into the Western.

This attractive way of nationalization has also been confirmed by cases of some overseas Chinese artists whose picture books with a distinctive Chinese flavor won some important awards in other countries, such as Yang Zhicheng (Ed Young) in the USA and Chen Jianghong in France. Yang's *Lang Po Po (Chinese Little Red Riding Hood)* that won Caldecott Medal and

Chen's *Han Gan* that won the best picture book of the Frankfurt Book Fair both utilize Chinese folk stories and Chinese painting techniques. The former adopts Chinese particular *Ping Feng* (a painting screen) technique, while the latter uses the approach of Chinese ancient *Gong Bi* (fine brushwork painting) to paint on silk. These two artists both have a responsibility of conveying Chinese culture and sharing it with the world.

Nationalization in the context of globalization has its important values, especially in those countries where indigenous picture books are at the late-developing stage. It contributes to build cultural identity for native children. National cultural identity means identification with national cultural icons and values. Cultural identity has three functions: "the basic value orientation of cultural group", "the bond of cultural group" and "the cohesive force of national development". (Zheng, 1992) Aiming to give children a deep China's memory, these nationalized picture books have opened a window for native children to look into their own culture and to cultivate an interest and a sense of pride of their native culture. In addition, picture books with a national style can also open a window for foreign children to know about China. The essence of aesthetic pursuit of nationalization is seeking difference from various cultures, so it is beneficial to the diversity of worldwide picture books.

2. PROBLEMS OF THE NATIONALIZATION OF CHINESE PICTURE BOOKS

However, how far can Chinese native picture books go on this way of nationalization? At present, Chinese native picture books take up only 10% of the domestic market of picture books, while the other 90% is still occupied by foreign picture books. Both quantity and quality of native picture books need to be promoted. There are a few problems especially in tensions between some relative elements in the indigenous picture books mainly resulted from the strong appeal of nationalization.

2.1 The first is the tension between culture and child-mind

The aesthetic pursuit of nationalization is mainly out of the anxiety about the loss of national and cultural identity. The increasing globalization of economy and western socio-culture has provoked cultural nationalism in many developing countries to resist cultural invasion by advocating their native cultures. Therefore, culture is usually the first element taken into consideration in creating stylistically national picture books. It is well-known that the starting point directly determines the aesthetic direction of the creation. The motivation from the cultural responsibility is not very appropriate for creating art works, because the real ideal mentality of art is just aesthetics that means artists are dedicated into "playing a pure game freely" (Schiller, 1985, 63), which is similar to the state of child-mind without any constraints. The over emphasized culture will bring some burdens or obstacles to the pure "game". What's more, child-mind is a good starting point to arouse younger children's empathy and interest.

Culture is often assimilated to "root" in China and "exploring root" is an important aspect of

rebuilding the national culture. Picture books are reckoned as “seeds of happiness” in Japanese scholar, Tadashi Matsui’s book entitled *Seeds of Happiness* (2007). He believes “Picture books have no utility value. They are not for studying, but for sowing happiness.”(8) By comparison, the metaphorical object -- root, brings readers a heavy and steady feeling, while the imagery of “seed” conveys a light and lively feeling. “Root” is usually only in a special field, while “seed” can go everywhere with the wind. Picture books with the characteristics of “seed” are more appropriate for younger readers. In fact, cultivating cultural roots is the wishful thinking of adults, but not from children.

Further, a national culture is not only represented by the concrete imageries or stories. It has a comprehensive scope, in which language conventions and thinking manners that penetrate inside of the words and icons are the really inherent and substantial elements that can adequately embody national cultural deposits. However, overemphasizing nationalization will probably lead creations towards a narrow way. Xiong Liang’s another series of picture books including *Interesting Chinese Characters*, *Twelve Chinese Traditional Festivals* and so on directly aims to improve the popularity of traditional culture through stories and traditional painting manners. This utilitarian idea prior to child-mind is definitely not the essential pursuit of picture books.

2.2 The second is the tension between tradition and modernity

Native artists with the idea of nationalization often cast eyes on traditional subject materials. Here, some key points should be considered: how can old traditions be renewed? How can the limited connotation of tradition be expanded to relate to modern society? Brothers Xiong have tried their best to explore this in their first series, but some picture books are not perfect, e.g. *Dragon Slayers* (2007). Dragon is a specific cultural icon of China. There are many stories about killing dragons in ancient legends, but this picture book tells a new story. The dragon slayers bring up strong children to kill dragons. With the decreasing number of dragons, the offspring can’t see any real dragon. At last, the children find few dragons left in the world, but they tell the frightened dragons that present children love them. Xiong aimed to weave Chinese ancient elements and modern ideas such as human cultural evolution and contemporary ecologicalism together. Nevertheless, most Chinese readers are inclined to regard it as a national fable, because the ending, which seems to explicitly point out a national theme “loving our dragons”, might limit the possibility of openness or hinder the comprehension of the implied modern meanings.

Another problem is that many artists focus too much on folk stories or ancient classic literatures which are rich areas of cultural deposits. However, excessively relying on these traditions might confine their innovation. It is necessary to create completely new stories to convey some modern meanings. The similar problem also exists in traditional paintings of nationalized picture books. Native artists having a strong opinion about nationalization are inclined to addict themselves to the traditional skills and seldom attempt modern or post-modern painting styles. Comparatively, Chinese traditional paintings create some space for readers’ imagination mainly

through leaving “blanks”, while many Western picture books manifest the amazing imagination not only through blanks, but also through surprising details or exaggerated transformation of some images in the picture which can attract children at their first glance. Some Chinese illustrators began to adopt some “modern” techniques to enhance the charm of pictures, e.g., Cai Gao’s *Bao’er*. This picture book is adapted from ancient literature *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. Cai Gao mainly employed the technique of Chinese traditional figure painting, which pays more attention to represent characters’ psyche vividly than their appearances, to portray the Chinese boy Bao’er who tries hard to protect his mother from an evil fox. There is an unconventional detail in the generally traditional pictures: Bao’er’s eyes are blue when he is investigating his mother’s illness. This abnormal color of a Chinese boy’s eyes implies his sharp insight. His eyes turn to be black after he wipes out the fox. This technique somehow belongs to modern manners. Children are very interested in finding such an extraordinary detail. Nevertheless, this kind of fantastic representation is not very abundant in Chinese picture books with traditional painting styles. Native creators need to absorb some modern artistic techniques to add new scenes in their field of nationalization.

2.3 The third is the tension between words and pictures

It is well-known that words and illustrations in picturebooks works together to tell the story. In the practice of nationalization of Chinese picture books, the relationship between words and pictures are not very desirable.

One problem is that creators usually pay more attention to stylistically national pictures than to words, since pictures can embody national style more directly. The representative artists of Chinese nationalized picture books are all fond of Chinese traditional paintings to convey national artistic spirits and to pursue a poetic verve and rhythm. To a great extent, it is the very stylistically Chinese traditional illustration that contributes to the success. Indeed, the style of picture books, defined by Nodelman (1988) as “all the aspects of work of art considered together” (77), is the combination of color, line, shape, and text. However, in some picture books with exquisite national illustrations, the words are not as creative and wonderful as pictures.

In addition, the aesthetic style of nationalized picture books is influenced by native artists’ nostalgia for the old customs or their own childhoods. They often choose a traditional style called *Xie Yi* (写意), which means the paintings rely on free strokes and shun details, and artists prefer conveying the spirit to the real similarity. However, picture books with *Xie Yi* style often lack absorbing plots to attract children, because their central goal is to convey an emotion or atmosphere. Thus, those artists who simply go in for the high level of stylistically national painting have encountered an embarrassment: too highbrow to be popular. The possible way to capture children is to consider children’s tastes as well as high standards of pure art.

Another problem is that some national stylistic picture books are just like “words + pictures”. Tadashi Matsui posed a famous formula “words × pictures = picture books” (2009, 217) to

describe the ideal relationship between words and pictures, which means words and pictures should interact to convey the whole meaning and style, and pictures can convey what words do not express, and vice versa. In the process of making picture books, some illustrators just draw in accord with the given words. This is resulted from the potential influence of Chinese long-history *Lianhuanhua* that uses linked pictures to explain stories. Most pictures of *Lianhuanhua* just simply show the scene of words. This shortcoming exists in quite a few contemporary nationalized picture books, e.g., series of *Picture books of Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (2010, illustrated by Shi Dawei and etc., adapted by Ma Lan and etc.) and series of *Chinese Ink Picture books* (2010, illustrated by Liang Peilong, written by Mei Zihan and etc.). The words of the two series are respectively adapted from Chinese classical literature and modern Chinese children's literature. Some pictures rigidly adhere to the words, and some words are too exhaustive. National subject materials plus national painting skills do not necessarily equal perfectly national picture books, if those two aspects can not dance intimately together to give readers an abundant aesthetic space. The tension between words and pictures should be seriously taken into consideration in making nationalized picture books.

3. CONCLUSION

As to the trend of development of worldwide children's literature, Maria Nikolajeva comments, "although the general exchange of information in the world is growing, children's literature is becoming more and more national and isolated" (1996, 43). As far as the nationalization of Chinese indigenous picture books is concerned, this pursuit in the new millennium can be considered as a kind of cultural self-defense in globalization as well as a strategy to propel native culture towards the world. The development of Chinese indigenous picture books that is still at the beginning stage, needs more exploration and improvement. In fact, nationalization is not an enclosed way. Advocating nationalization does not mean promoting conservative attitudes. Openness is necessary to any culture that hopes to breathe and grow vigorously. Native artists need to learn from the merits of worldwide classic picture books. Brothers Xiong with other artists and critics launched an organization in Beijing in 2008 to propel the creation of native picture books. Its title is "Soil of Five Colours"(五色土), which is inspired from Chinese traditional culture about "Wu Xing" (五行), the five basic elements of nature: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. The declaration of this organization is, "We cultivate neither flowers nor fruit, but soil." (Xiong, 2008) This "soil declaration" highlights the traditional factor for creating indigenous picture books. In order to promote the level of the indigenous picture books, the meaning of "Soil of Five Colors" must be expanded more widely: it is not only the soil of traditional customs and painting approaches, but also the soil of modern life and painting techniques; not only the soil of the eastern qualities, but also the soil mixed with the western elements; not only the soil of national culture, but also the soil of human's childhood. Native picture books growing in this colorful and nourishing soil will have fantastic flowers and fruits with national traits and flavours of childhood. The ideal goal of native picture books is to give Chinese children a brilliant "memorable China" as well as to give children throughout

the world a fantastic “memorable childhood”.

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