

Of Grocery Stores and Barbershops: Slices of Taiwan in Ruan Guang-min's *Manhua*

by Antonio PAOLIELLO

Image [&] Narrative is a bilingual peer-reviewed e-journal on visual narratology and word and image studies in the broadest sense of the term.

Image [&] Narrative est une revue en ligne, bilingue, à comité de lecture, traitant de narratologie visuelle et d'études texte/image au sens large. *Image [&] Narrative* is part of / fait partie de Open Humanities Press et DOAJ.

Chief Editors / Editrices en chef : Anne Reverseau, Anneleen Masschelein & Hilde Van Gelder.

Abstract

Although not as popular as Japanese manga, Taiwanese comics, known as *manhua*, are an important cultural product, which is being promoted both locally and internationally through several governmental initiatives. Ruan Guang-min is among the most well-known contemporary *manhua* artists, the author of many graphic narratives that circulate domestically and, through translation, abroad too. The main characteristic of his oeuvre is that it is often set in the rural milieu, and it nostalgically reflects on the simplicity of small-town life. In this paper, I will focus on two of his works, namely *The Grocery Store* and *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop*, paying special attention to some of their cultural-specific features. Through an analysis of the two *manhua*, my aim is to show that the Taiwanese elements in Ruan's graphic narratives can be perceived differently depending on the readers' background: for local readers they have a nostalgic and sentimental impact, while for foreign audiences they represent a window to Taiwanese society and culture.

Keywords:

Manhua, Ruan Guang-min, Comics, Taiwan, *The Grocery Store*, *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop*

To quote this article

Antonio Paoliello, « Of Grocery Stores and Barbershops: Slices of Taiwan in Ruan Guang-min's *Manhua* », *Image É Narrative* n°24/2 - 2023, p. 197-215.

Please submit your texts for the Varia section to anne.reverseau@uclouvain.be

Of Grocery Stores and Barbershops: Slices of Taiwan in Ruan Guang-min's *Manhua*

by Antonio PAOLIELLO

Introduction

While many of us are probably familiar with Japanese manga (漫画)¹, or at least know about their existence, only some might be aware of how big the comics industry is in the rest of East and Southeast Asia. Although often overshadowed by their Japanese counterpart, South Korean *manhwa* (만화) and Chinese-language *manhua* (漫畫) from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan are important cultural products that not only circulate locally, but also regionally and globally, thanks to translation.² Moving slightly south, we find *komiks* from the Philippines, which are so deeply embedded in the country's national culture that they are not only considered the "National Book", but back in the 1990s, "they [were] the basis for one in every two movie plots" (Lent 1995, 185).³

In a recent press release, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan acknowledged manga and their animated counterpart, *anime* (アニメ), as valuable tools for cultural diplomacy contributing to a better understanding of the country abroad (MOFA Japan 2022). Similarly, the government of the Republic of China (Taiwan)⁴ is hoping to capitalise on its diverse artistic production and to export its culture to other countries. In this respect, comics have been given special attention: acknowledging their key role in showcasing Taiwan's unique features, the Ministry of Culture of the RoC has begun to actively promote *manhua* production and their global circulation through the establishment of

1 Throughout this paper, I will not italicize the term "manga", while I do use italics for other words denoting comics in their respective languages. The reason behind this choice is that while the term manga has officially entered the English language, the others have yet to be incorporated.

2 For instance, *Feel 100%* (百分百感覺), created by Hong Kong artist Lau Wan-kit (劉雲傑) between 1996 and 2007, was so popular at home that in 2021 Hongkong Post issued a set of six stamps, two stamp sheetlets and associated philatelic products featuring characters and scenes from the *manhua* (Hartwig 2021). The *manhua* was so successful that it even crossed over to the filmic and television realms, with several movies and one TV series, all loosely based on the original storyline. On an international level, it won the Gold Award at the Second International Manga Award organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2008 and was released not only in Asian countries such as South Korea and Malaysia, but also in Italy and the United Kingdom.

3 Interestingly, the earliest comics strips in the Philippines are generally attributed to writer and national hero José Rizal (1861-1896), who used them for satirical purposes against the Spanish colonizers and clergy (Lawagan 2017).

4 "Republic of China" (RoC) is still the official name of the political entity formed by the main island of Taiwan and other minor archipelagos and islands, such as Orchid Island, Penghu and Kinmen. In this paper, I will use the acronym RoC when referring to it politically, and Taiwan when dealing with it culturally.

grants and other initiatives (Zemanek 2022).

At present, Ruan Guang-min (阮光民) is one of the better-known and beloved Taiwanese *manhua* artists, the author of successful graphic narratives,⁵ including the two-volume series *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* (東華春理髮廳) (fig. 1) and the five-volume series *The Grocery Store* (用九柑仔店) (fig. 2), both adapted into TV series. Often set in the rural milieu rather than in big urban centres, his heart-warming stories focus on the lives of men and women – young and old alike – in small-town Taiwan and highlight many culturally loaded local elements. Additionally, thanks to translation, many of Ruan's *manhua* have managed to travel beyond the island, reaching not only neighbouring Japan, but also places as far as the Arab world, France, Germany, and Italy where publication rights have been arranged thanks to Books From Taiwan and Taiwan Comic City – two important government initiatives which I shall analyse later – thus contributing to put Taiwan on the global map. Through this study, I aim at analysing what type of Taiwanese elements are present in his works and to what extent they communicate the country's cultural specificities.



Fig. 1 Characters of *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop*



Fig. 2 Characters of *The Grocery Store*

⁵ I employ the expression “graphic narrative” to denote a “narrative work in the medium of comics” (Chute and DeKoven 2006, 767) and here I use it interchangeably with *manhua* and comics.

To better contextualise Ruan Guang-min and his oeuvre, I will start by sketching a brief introduction to the recent history of *manhua* in Taiwan, paying attention to how the official discourse promotes its development and its global circulation. Then, I will focus on Ruan's position in the industry and will analyse some of the features of his comics stressing specifically what is Taiwanese about them.

Graphic narratives in Taiwan

Although Japanese manga continue to dominate the Taiwanese comic scene,⁶ in recent years local production has experienced a vigorous growth, partly thanks to official initiatives such as *Creative Comic Collection* (CCC – 創作集) which, unlike other online platforms and comic magazines, is neither produced nor distributed by private publishers, being born out of the RoC's National Science and Technology Council in 2009. The relationship between locally produced *manhua* and Japanese manga is complex: one could say that while the first are constantly overshadowed by the latter – at home and abroad – Taiwanese graphic narratives are undeniably indebted to their Japanese counterpart, since “Japan, which occupied Taiwan during most of the first half of the twentieth century, brought comics to the island even before Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces arrived in 1949” (Lent 2015, 98). The island saw its first locally produced comic book only in the early 1950s, when Liu Hsing-chin (劉興欽) drew *Xunxianji* (尋仙記 Record of the Search for Immortals) (Lent 1999, 24), a 16-page booklet ironically intended to dissuade children from reading comics which, however, was so successful that turned then-elementary-school-teacher Liu into one of the leading Taiwanese cartoonists (Gao 2002, 13), who depicted the rural milieu as it experienced enormous social and political changes.

Taiwan's comics industry suffered a serious setback in the following decade when the RoC government imposed strict censorship on all locally produced *manhua*, through the issuance in 1962 of the *Guidance and Counselling on Printing Comic Books Act* (編印連環圖畫輔導辦法), which would be repealed only in 1987, when Martial Law was finally lifted. As Chen (2018) points out, although the Act was designed primarily to “protect the innocence of children by regulating content that [the Nationalist government] thought might germinate unrealistic ideas or compromise ethics”, it also restricted more formal aspects ranging from the length of dialogues to drawing techniques. Even so, the first half of the 1960s is still considered a golden age for Taiwanese comics (Lee 2018, 24), since it was not until 1966 that the Ministry of Education, through its National Institute for Compilation and Translation (NICT), began accepting applications for censorship, causing many previously uncensored comics to be reported and subsequently confiscated (Lee 2022). Because of the heavy governmental control affecting local production, rea-

⁶ According to recent figures, out of the 6,154 comic books published in the RoC in 2021, 5,645 of them were translations of foreign works. Of these, the overwhelming majority were Japanese manga (5,525 items), followed at great distance by South Korean *manhwa* (59 items) (National Central Library 2021, 26). Additionally, while translated graphic narratives account for almost 92 percent of all comics published in the country, it does not necessarily mean that the remaining 8 percent is constituted solely by Taiwanese *manhua*, since mainland Chinese and Hong Kong ones are not translated items, despite being categorised as “foreign”.

ders turned to Japanese manga which, although banned since 1965, were brought in by diplomats, expatriates and locals who were allowed to leave the country (Lee 2018, 43). Hence, these foreign products, often with very explicit sexual and violent content, flooded the country illegally and were made available through unauthorised translations on which the NICT turned a blind eye.

Although negative for the local industry which would be left agonising for the next twenty years, the influx of graphic narratives from Japan meant that Taiwanese readers had access to more varied content and were exposed to more diverse information, knowledge, and cultural items (ibid., 7). As noted by Chen and Chuko (2004, 886-887), the audience's interest in this type of comics spurred many local cartoonists to draw manga-style *manhua*. Therefore, it is undeniable that, while on the one hand the local industry saw itself jeopardised by the aggressive influx of pirated manga, it also benefited from it.

Although Taiwanese artists had to cope with extremely low pays, the fact that readers preferred to rent their works rather than buy them, and that society at large looked down at them (Lent 2015, 101), with the lifting of Martial Law, things started to look more promising, and artists gradually gained freedom to draw and express themselves. Another cause for this sort of renaissance of Taiwanese comics can be found in the promulgation, in 1992, of the *Copyright Act* of the RoC, aimed at "protecting the rights and interests of authors with respect to their works" (Ministry of Economic Affairs 1992, Article 1). Article 91 established imprisonment of up to five years or payment of a hefty fine for all those – such as the publishers of pirated manga – who violated "the economic rights of another person by means of reproducing the work without authorization with the intent to sell or rent".

Hence, many publishers such as Tong Li Publishing (東立出版社), which since its establishment in the latter half of the 1970s and until 1992 "was the largest producer of pirated comics, redoing more than 1,000 titles in all" (Lent 1999, 195), not only rapidly adapted to the new regulations,⁷ but also began to scout local talents. As early as January 1992, Tong Li set up the Comics Newcomer Award, thus showing their commitment in nurturing local production. That same year, this engagement was made even clearer by inaugurating two monthly magazines entirely devoted to Taiwanese *manhua*, namely *Dragon Youth Monthly* (龍少年月刊) and *Star Girls* (星少女月刊). The first centred on science fiction, campus life and adventure graphic narratives, while the second included romance stories (Lent 1995, 195).

However, Japanese manga continue to dominate the scene, constituting the bulk of the graphic narratives published and consumed by the Taiwanese public. To counter-balance this situation, several initiatives have been promoted since the turn of the new century. For instance, 2002 saw the inauguration of the Best Comics Awards, jointly organized by the Chinese Publishers' Development Foundation and the Comic Artist Labour Union of Taipei (Phipps 2002). The Chinese Comic Publishers Association and the

7 Already in November 1991, Tong Li was the first Taiwanese company to procure a licence to legally publish the Chinese-language version of a Japanese manga, namely *Cypher* by Narita Minako (成田美名子), originally serialised at home between 1985 and 1990. Only two months later, it also acquired the rights to the Taiwanese edition of *Akira*, a massively successful post-apocalyptic cyberpunk manga series by Ōtomo Katsuhiro (大友克洋) (Tong Li 2004).

Government Information Office established the Graphic Novel Awards the following year to recognize the achievements of ten *manhua* artists who had published at least one book-length graphic narrative. These awards also came with a monetary prize (Lent 2015, 113). A few years later, in 2010, the Ministry of Culture took up the baton by establishing the Golden Comic Awards which have run yearly ever since. More recently, in 2021, “[t]he Government Comic Award was introduced to encourage private organizations, guilds (associations), legal persons, groups, or individuals to create comics with government agencies” (Golden Comic Awards 2022), thus reinforcing governmental commitment with local artists.

On the international market, Taiwanese *manhua* seem to be living a new golden age due to a combination of local official support and foreign interest. The efforts of former Minister of Culture Cheng Li-Chun (鄭麗君) were crucial in recognising the domestic and foreign potential of locally produced comics, as demonstrated by the setting up of the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA, 文化內容策進院) in 2019, which “supports the development of Taiwan’s creative content industry” (TAICCA 2023). One of the leading programmes of this governmental agency is the Taiwan Comic City (TCC), a trilingual (EN-FR-JP) project of cultural diplomacy, which gives voice – literally – to local comics. Currently, it “presents 15 Audio Comics (short, animated videos dubbed in different languages) for international audiences to experience Taiwanese comics in various formats” (TAICCA 2022). At the same time, the website also proposes a catalogue of recent locally produced graphic narratives especially aimed at foreign publishers and agents.

Similarly, Books From Taiwan (BFT), another TAICCA-funded initiative, promotes Taiwanese literature abroad through a selected list of titles by Taiwanese authors. The peculiarity of BFT is that, apart from the classic categories of fiction, non-fiction, and children’s books, it also showcases almost 100 comic books whose foreign rights are available to buy. Additionally, BTF also advertises the Grant for the Publication of Taiwanese Works in Translation (GPT), set up by the Ministry of Culture and awarded biannually “to encourage the publication of Taiwanese works in translation overseas, to raise the international visibility of Taiwanese cultural content, and to help Taiwan’s publishing industry expand into non-Chinese international markets” (Books From Taiwan n.d.).

While praiseworthy, these initiatives of cultural diplomacy would have little meaning if foreign readers were not exposed, in their home countries, to Taiwanese *manhua*. Hence, the presence of Taiwanese artists and publishers at international festivals and other events is crucial. For instance, since 2012 *manhua* from Taiwan are hosted in their own pavilion at the Angoulême International Comics Festival (Zemanek 2022). The 2022 edition of Lucca Comics & Games, the biggest event of its type in Europe, saw the presence of two artists from the island, namely Chang Sheng (常勝) and Zuo Hsuan (左萱),⁸ as well as a delegation of the Taipei Representative Office in Rome (Redazione 2022). These events contribute to pave the way to (and are a result of) *manhua*’s presence in overseas bookshops, newsstands, and online platforms. For instance, Chang Sheng’s works have been translated into languages such as English, French, Italian, Japanese, and Korean, while Zuo Hsuan’s two-volume graphic narrative *Rites of Returning* (神之鄉) has been

⁸ Zuo Hsuan has also represented Taiwanese *manhua* at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2017 (Ministry of Culture 2017).

translated into French, Italian, Japanese and Vietnamese.

Works by Taiwanese artists are also appreciated in a highly competitive and developed market such as the Japanese one, as proven by the fact that they are often the recipients of awards at the prestigious Japan International Manga Award founded in 2007 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹ Additionally, some *manhua* are also commercially available in the country: by mid-June 2022, one could already count around a dozen Japanese translations of Taiwanese comics. Among these, there is also Ruan Guang-min's *The Grocery Store*, commercialised between January and July of that year (Sawai 2022).

Ruan Guang-min and cultural-specific elements in two of his *manhua*

Born in 1973 in Douliu, a mid-sized city in Western Taiwan, Ruan Guang-min is perhaps one of the better-known contemporary *manhua* artists. Proof of this are the numerous awards he has won throughout his career spanning more than two decades, the international circulation of his oeuvre and the fact that his works have also crossed over to other media.

Domestically, he has received, among others, the Taiwan Comic Dream Park Comic Awards (2014) and the Golden Comic Awards for Comic of the Year in 2012, 2017 and 2020 and for Best Cross-Media Application in 2020. On the international level, he was the recipient of the Silver Prize at the 14th Japan International Manga Award (2020) and was an invited guest at the Angoulême International Comics Festival (2012 and 2018) and at several events in Germany, coinciding with the release of the German version of *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* in 2018. He was also a co-host of the Taiwan Comics Night (2018) at the Society of Illustrators in New York. He is also one of the few Taiwanese artists whose works are consistently the object of interest of foreign publishers. Apart from the already mentioned *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* and the Japanese edition of *The Grocery Store*, the latter has also been (or is being) translated into Arabic, French, and Italian. Additionally, *Railway Sonata: the Four Seasons* (鐵道奏鳴曲) is being translated into Italian, rights for the French translation of *The Seasoning of Happiness* (幸福調味料) have been sold to Editions Kotoji, and Living the Line Books, an American publisher, has secured those for the English edition of *The Illusionist on the Skywalk*.

It must be noted that Ruan Guang-min's *manhua* have garnered global attention and recognition not only because of their intrinsic appeal, but also thanks to the backing of government-led initiatives. Notably, his graphic narratives have been included in the BFT catalogue, thus facilitating their promotion and distribution to foreign markets. In

⁹ For instance, *Sea You There and Us* (貓與海的彼端) by artist Monday Recovery (星期回收日) and writer Chen Chiao-jung (陳巧蓉) won the Silver Prize in 2022; while in 2020, *The Funeral Concerto* (送葬協奏曲) by Rimui Yumin (韋離若明) was the Gold Award winner and *The Illusionist on the Skywalk* (天橋上的魔術師) by Ruan Guang-min, a graphic adaptation of famous Taiwanese writer Wu Ming-yi (吳明益)'s short story collection of the same title, received the Silver Award.

addition, his works enjoy significant prominence on the Taiwan Comic City website, providing further evidence of their acclaim and global reach. Yet another example of official support for his oeuvre can be found in the government providing subsidies, through its GPT programme, to publishers who wish to translate his *manhua* into foreign languages. For instance, Nool, Two Virgins Co. Ltd., and Editions Kotoji have received economic aid ranging from 100,000 to 600,000 NTD (roughly between 3,000 and 18,000€) for the publication of *The Grocery Store* in Arabic, Japanese and French, respectively. While the general and overarching themes in Ruan's *manhua* appear to have remained consistent throughout his career (the everyday life and emotions of small-town people), it is worth noting that the backing of government-led initiatives has played a key role in elevating his work to the global stage. As a result, it is likely that he now also creates his works with a foreign audience in mind.

As far as cross-media is concerned, *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* was the first, and still one of the very few, Taiwanese *manhua* to be adapted for TV, and was turned into a 40-episode series that aired on TTV, the national broadcaster, between 2012 and 2013. Similarly, *The Grocery Store* was adapted into a 10-episode series, which was shown in Taiwan on free-to-air television and online platforms in 2019. It was also broadcast internationally in countries such as Malaysia and Japan and on the American streaming website Rakuten viki.

Ruan Guang-min's *manhua* are reminiscent of Japanese manga in many ways: from the fact that they are generally drawn in black and white – which, however, is a common feature of both Japanese and Taiwanese comics – to the delicate and simple lines and to the fact that many of his tall and slim characters are physically somewhat suggestive of those drawn by manga artists such as Inoue Takehiko (井上雄彦), Ikegami Ryōichi (池上遼一) and Samura Hiroaki (沙村廣明).¹⁰ Interestingly, Ruan mentions the three *man-gaka* among his main influences (Axian, 2019). In terms of themes and storytelling too, the Japanese influence in his oeuvre is palpable. In fact, his career took a significant turn when he discovered Taniguchi Jirō (谷口ジロー)'s work, especially *A Disant Neighborhood* (遥かな町へ).¹¹ The story, rather than just the drawing style and the appearance of the characters, had an emotional impact on him and sparked his interest in creating his own *manhua* with a focus on realistic, everyday life (ibid.), hence becoming one of the most prominent Taiwanese slice-of-life comic artists.¹²

10 These Japanese artists became internationally known for comics such as *SLAM DANK* (スラムダンク), *Crying Freeman* (クライング フリーマン) and *Blade of the Immortal* (無限の住人), respectively.

11 The manga tells the story of Hiroshi Nakahara, a middle-aged salaryman, who unknowingly boards a train to his old hometown to pay his respects at his mother's grave. Because of an unexplained event, he is transported back in time more than three decades, where he finds himself reunited with his family and memories that he had long forgotten.

12 The expression *slice of life* refers to “a popular genre of manga and anime dealing with mundane, everyday events and circumstances, often within institutional settings such as the workplace or school” (Baudinette 2016, 115). Taiwan, too, has its good share of locally produced slice-of-life *manhua*, which are promoted abroad as well. Apart from Ruan Guang-min's works, other successful comics dealing with daily everyday life include those by Zuo Hsuan (see footnote 8), Monday Recovery and Rimui Yumin (see footnote 9) as well as award-winning *Brides, Weddings & Li* (婚

Perhaps, this is Ruan's most outstanding feature as a *manhua* artist: his ability to depict simple life stories and deep human feelings in a sensitive, empathetic, but also humorous way. He is capable, through illustrations and dialogues to "bring back collective memories shared by all those who lived on the island" (Ministry of Culture 2018), thus promoting what I consider a heart-warming type of Taiwanese-ness; one that, while heavily dependent on nostalgia and a shared common history, is palatable for foreign readers, too. Because of its attention to mainly non-urban settings and a simpler lifestyle, his oeuvre is somewhat reminiscent of local *Nativist literature* (鄉土文學), a current which developed during the Japanese occupation of the island (1895-1945) and was especially vibrant in the 1960s and 1970s. It appears to me that Ruan's graphic narratives share the main concern of the nativist literary movement which, according to Passi (2019), denotes a deep preoccupation for the life of common Taiwanese people, often menaced by industrialisation, the capitalist economy, and Japanese and American imperialism. Hence, I consider Ruan Guang-min as having ideally taken up the baton of many nativist writers from the second half of last century. It might precisely be his nativist approach to graphic storytelling what makes his works attractive and able to compete with manga, since when it comes to *manhua* "[t]he appeal for local readers is the cartoonists' ability to appropriate local street talk, festivities, and folklores not available in Japanese comics" (Lent and Shiau 2008, 725).

Additionally, Ruan's graphic narratives are borne out of a social context that has seen the surge of nostalgia as a cultural theme. According to Neri, such trend has influenced a variety of cultural products and has led to an increase in the use of nostalgic elements from the recent past, which have consistently received a positive reception and have contributed to the rise of retro or vintage aesthetics. As a result, this nostalgic attitude has emerged as one of the most prominent aesthetic movements of the 2000s in Taiwan (2019, 2).

The role of nostalgia in constructing a local, quintessentially Taiwanese identity is clearly noticeable in *The Grocery Store*, a story which, according to Zhou (2019), is about how old things survive to the passing of time and how young people discover their self-worth. Published between 2016 and 2019, this highly successful *manhua* revolves around Chun-lung, a young man who has traded his small-town life for the big city. However, after his grandfather falls ill, he is confronted with his own unhappiness in the city and decides to return to his hometown to take care of the family business: the local grocery store that also functions as an unofficial community centre where townspeople share their ordinary lives.

It is interesting to note that, although to foreign readers – perhaps even to those proficient in the Chinese language – the original title might not tell much, it works as a marker of nostalgia for the Taiwanese audience. The word translated as "grocery store" is not the Mandarin 雜貨店 (*záhuòdiàn*) but the Taiwanese 柑仔店 (*kám-á-tiàm*), a term deeply connected to the simpler small-town lifestyle before the advent of supermarkets and the ubiquitous convenience stores. In today's Taiwan, *kám-á-tiàm* is, in fact, synonymous with the old times, as this type of stores were typically seen on the island in the post-war period. Back in the 1950s, they were not only commercial outlets where locals could buy almost everything but, being among the few places where telephones were available, they

禮大作戰) by Jiji (吉吉) and *Day Off* by Dailygreens (每日青菜).

also served an important communication purpose. Moreover, similarly to what happens in *The Grocery Store*, they were places of social aggregation, spaces where locals gathered to form emotional ties and where important public and private announcements were made (Heisong Bowuguan n.d.). Ruan's use of a Taiwanese rather than a Mandarin word in the title of the *manhua* can be seen as a deliberate decision aimed at creating a nostalgic mood from the onset. The title functions as a clear statement of intent, indicating that the storyline will revolve around a bygone era. However, non-Taiwanese readers may need to thoroughly peruse the pages, scenes, and dialogues to grasp the cultural context and fully appreciate the intended retro atmosphere. Thus, while the Taiwanese audience could immediately identify the nostalgic tone, foreigners may need to delve into the story to comprehend and appreciate such nuances. In my opinion, Ruan's decision is an act of defiance: a nostalgic resistance to modern, fast-paced, consumeristic society.

In the same *manhua*, the presence of the Vietnamese caregiver who cares for one of the elderly characters is a reference to a peculiar aspect of contemporary Taiwanese society. Although a marginal character, she serves a crucial function in providing realism to the social context depicted and offering valuable insights into Taiwanese society. Through this female character, Ruan Guang-min realistically portrays a social phenomenon that has taken place in Taiwan in the last decades: eldercare has gradually switched hands, from the offspring of the elderly to migrant women from countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam (Huang and Soong 2013, 177).

Additionally, the frames of the *manhua* are dotted with places and products recognisable to local readers, be them shop signs in the background, retro-looking placards, such as the tobacco and liquor licence plate (fig. 3), or labels on containers. For instance, in the first chapter, Chun-lung can be seen taking a can of Taiwan Beer from the fridge and using an Asus smartphone, both local brands (fig. 4). By incorporating recognizable elements of daily life, such as brand names and advertisements, Ruan Guang-min aims to create a sense of familiarity and authenticity, which clearly appeals to local readers' emotions and experiences. The use of local references also reflects the intention to celebrate and preserve local cultural identity.



Fig. 3 *The Grocery Store 1*



Fig. 4 *The Grocery Store 1*

In the same chapter, Ruan draws the small Beitian Temple (fig. 5) located in his native Douliu, which local readers will immediately recognise as a Taoist temple dedicate to Guan Gong, a Chinese guardian deity. They will also infer that a character is troubled by something, since in Taiwan temples are the to-go places when in need of spiritual support or when one wants to ask the gods for advice on a thorny situation, as perspicaciously noted by Meg Sawai, the Japanese translator of the *manhua*, who admittedly found this graphic narrative so cultural-specific that she had to add context and explanations for Japanese readers to fully grasp the meaning behind it (Sawai 2022).

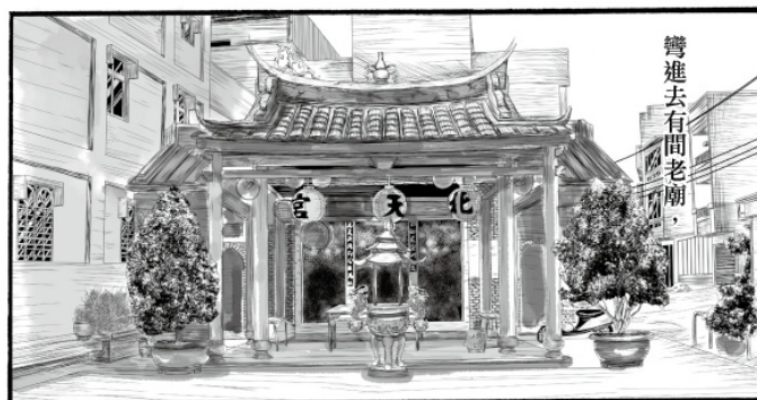


Fig. 5 *The Grocery Store 1*

A similar setting to *The Grocery Store* can be found in *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop*, the first volume of which was published in 2010 and the second in 2021. Here too, Ruan Guang-min decides to set the action in a traditional business – which also serves as a place of social assembly for older patrons who go there to chitchat and gossip – to tell an intimate story of family ties in which a brother and his half-sister meet and get close to each other after their father's death. This *manhua*, too, presents small-town Taiwan somewhat nostalgically. As Ruan himself admitted in an interview, commercial outlets like Dong Hua Chun are slowly dying out, since they have only slim chances of surviving the competition from large chains. His works, therefore, also serve a memory-keeping purpose, since such places are likely to disappear, and future generations will use them to go back – ideally – to a world that will no longer exist (Kalkhof 2018). Hence, I consider Ruan Guang-min's role to be more than that of a graphic storyteller: he has deliberately taken upon himself to be the a sort of recent historical archivist.

In my opinion, the first frame of the story (fig. 6) shows a clear Taiwanese scene, with its two-story, flat-roofed grey building, so typical of the island's small towns and even of more traditional neighbourhoods in big cities such as Taipei and Kao-hsiung. Similarly, another full-colour frame depicting magnolia blossoms (fig. 7) is a clear cultural marker that, however, might not be as evident to foreign readers. The protagonist's hand is sketched holding said flowers so typical of the island in the summertime. Magnolia blossoms have a profound local cultural connotation: it is common to offer them to deities and ancestors and it is not unusual to see peddlers selling them to locals who use them as natural air fresheners for their cars and homes.

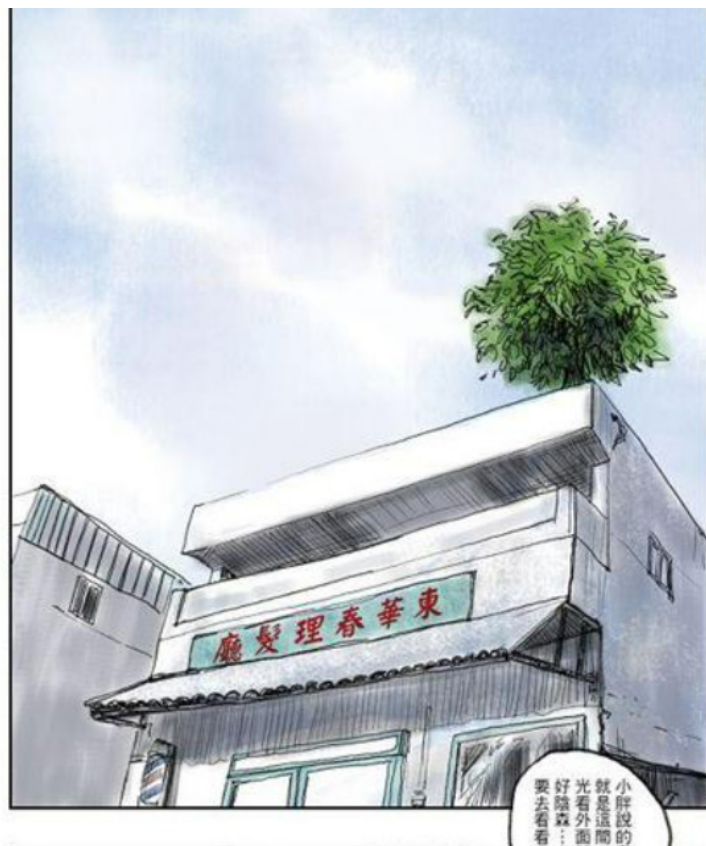


Fig. 6 *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop 1*

Fig. 7 *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop 1*

Likewise, other elements such as motorcycles and street markets, which are almost ubiquitous in Taiwan, are presented in a very realistic way. One example is Ruan's drawing of the semi-transparent plastic shopping bags with stripes that are typical of wet markets (fig. 8); these can transport the reader to the bustling and lively atmosphere of these commercial and social interaction hubs. The vitality of such sites in Taiwan is a marker of localness, since unlike what happens in other cultural contexts where big retailers have undermined their centrality, Taiwanese consumers still prefer traditional markets because of – among others – the social benefits they provide: the familiarity and long-term relationships they have with the vendors are significant reasons for their preference. Local stores with friendly and helpful staff who prioritise customer satisfaction are more likely to attract their patronage (Huang et al. 2015, 248). If we consider that the wet market experience is an essential part of Taiwanese culture, reflecting the country's history, social structure, and values and that such locations are spaces for social interaction, cultural exchange, and community building, where people from different backgrounds come together to buy and sell goods, share stories and experiences, and build relationships, it is possible to appreciate Ruan Guang-min's drawings and storylines in a broader cultural context and to understand how it might resonate with local readers.

Fig. 8 *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop 2*

Another common sight in the *manhua* is the Pacific Ocean. While this might seem obvious, considering that Taiwan is an island, it is in tune with the re-conceptualization of the country that urges to revisit its mainly land-centred narrative. The frames depicting the wide, open sea and those that compel the reader to focus their attention to the vastness of the ocean (fig. 8 and 9) serve, therefore, as marker of Taiwanese-ness, especially in contrast to China. In fact, it must be noted that, since the 1990s, a new concept of Taiwanese culture emerged, which portrayed Taiwan as *a country of the ocean* in contrast to China as the *country of the vast land*. This imagery suggested that Taiwan was more open and outward-looking in cultural interactions, while China was more introverted and emphasized agrarian roots. By emphasizing the differences between Taiwanese and Chinese culture, this discourse aimed at creating a cultural identity for Taiwan that was distinct from China (Chiu 2009, 1076). In this sense, it appears that some foreign readers, too, have noted the value of Ruan's oeuvre in affirming a clearly Taiwanese identity. For instance, a review of the German edition of *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* says: "I find a manga from Taiwan an important contribution to raising awareness of the country vis-à-vis the dominance of the People's Republic of China in the rest of the world" (Buchdokter and Family, *my translation*).

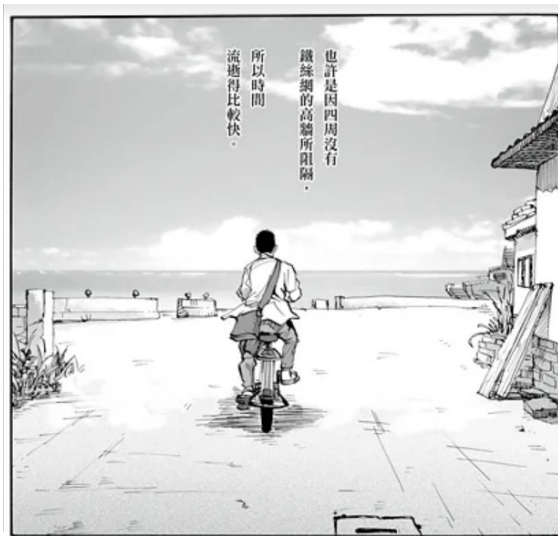


Fig. 9 *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* 1

On page 77, nostalgia and Taiwanese-ness blend naturally. Ruan's delicate drawings show elements that have been at home in the barbershop for years such as the hairdryer, the clock on the wall, the "chair that has gotten old under the weight of the memories of so many patrons" (fig. 10). Additionally, he also sketches a photograph of Teresa Teng (鄧麗君) (fig. 11), probably the most famous Mandopop singer of the 1980s who achieved stardom status throughout much of East and Southeast Asia. The same artist also appears on one of the full-colour frames at the beginning of the *manhua*, where Ruan Guang-min draws the cover of one of her albums (fig. 12). Despite the politicisation of Teng's persona on both sides of the Taiwan straits,¹³ she is unquestionably associated with Taiwan, so

13 She was the daughter of a RoC military official from the Chinese mainland. She opposed

much so that she has been dubbed the “island’s most famous export” (Hsu 2015). This cultural marker, however, might be not perceived by readers hailing from countries – especially outside Asia – where Teresa Teng was not popular, and an explanatory note might be needed.

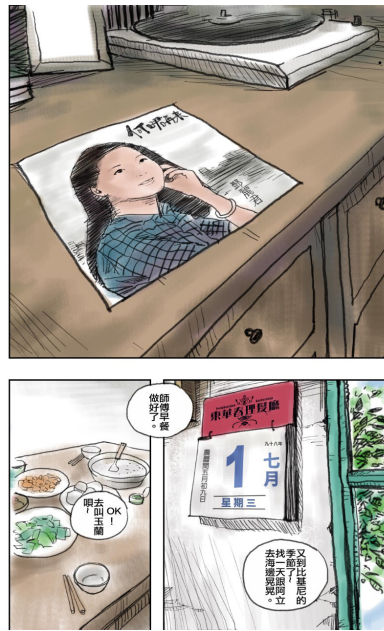


Fig. 10 *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop 1*



Fig. 11 *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop 1*

Communist rule over China so fervently that she never acceded to set foot and give concerts in the People’s Republic of China, even after that country’s government lifted the ban on her music (Hsu 2015).

Fig. 12 *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop 1*

Conclusion

This study shows that local elements, which contribute to mark Ruan Guang-min's *manhua* as uniquely Taiwanese, serve two different functions, depending on whether the reader shares the same social and cultural knowledge as the author or is a foreign one with little to no exposure to Taiwan. As it is evident from the examples provided in the previous section, Ruan's oeuvre highlights slices of local life and culture easily recognisable for the Taiwanese audience. Many of these culturally loaded elements lean on nostalgia and, therefore, have a sentimental impact on local readers who, through these *manhua*, often recall the simplicity of bygone days and small-town Taiwan. And yet, while nostalgia can certainly be defined as "that peculiarly painful but nonetheless irresistible sensation of not just remembering the past, but of dwelling on it, circling around it and experiencing again its bittersweet, close-yet-distant otherness" (Salmose and Sandberg 2022, 191), in Ruan Guang-min's oeuvre it is certainly more soothing than painful, more reassuring than bittersweet.

International audiences, on the other hand, might not be able to easily decode such items and might not infer their nostalgic value. Besides, the way in which both graphic narratives are officially marketed for international audiences downplays or silences the nostalgic factor altogether. For instance, the BFT presentation of *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* stresses only its "emotional authenticity, warmth, and humour", while *The Grocery Store* is promoted with a global perspective, emphasizing its universal values instead of relying on a nostalgic portrayal of Taiwanese culture. By stating that "it tells in simple, affecting language and images the story of returning to one's roots – or, at least, negotiating fairly with one's past", BFT seeks to appeal to a broader audience beyond the island by highlighting themes and messages that resonate with people from different cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, foreign readers might still be able to interpret both *man-*

hua as Taiwanese, especially if explanations in the form of footnotes or other paratextual elements are provided. Therefore, cultural-specific graphic narratives such as *The Grocery Store* and *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* also appeal to international audiences, as proven by their translation into other languages and the recognition they have received at important events such as the Japan International Manga Award. Additionally, they can serve as an important tool of cultural diplomacy, as shown by the fact that they are promoted internationally by the official discourse through several governmental initiatives such as TCC and BFT. In the specific case of Ruan Guang-min's works, four of them are included in the BFT catalogue compiled to promote Taiwanese literature abroad.

Bibliography

Axian. 2019. "Ruan Guang-min yu Ta Bi Xia de Taiwan Renqingwei 阮光民與他筆下的台灣人情味" [Ruan Guang-min and the Taiwanese Human Touch in his Works]. *Jiaoliu – Exchange*, 165. <https://www.scf.org.tw/article-1-129-10885> (accessed March 8, 2023).

Baudinette, Thomas. 2016. "An Evaluation of Physicality in The *Bara* Manga of *Bádi* Magazine." In *Manga Vision: Cultural and Communicative Perspectives*, edited by Sarah Pasfield-Neofitou and Cathy Sell, 107-124. Clayton: Monash University Publishing.

Books from Taiwan. n.d. *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop*: https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books_info.php?id=465 (accessed March 10, 2023)

Books from Taiwan. n.d. *Grant for the Publication of Taiwanese Works in Translation (GPT) Application Guidelines*. https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/images/grant_img/download.pdf (accessed February 1, 2023)

Books from Taiwan. n.d. *The Grocery Store*: https://booksfromtaiwan.tw/books_info.php?id=172 (accessed March 10, 2023)

Buchdoktor and Family. 2018. Review of *Donghuachun Friseursalon* by Ruan Guang-min. *Amazon.de*, May 27, https://www.amazon.de/-/en/Guangmin-Ruan/product-reviews/390581692X/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews (accessed March 14, 2023)

Chen Ji-jiang 陳姬江 and Chuko Cheng 諸葛正. 2004. "Yingxiang Taiwan Bentu Manhua Chanchu zhi Xiangguan Yinsu Jiexi 影響台灣本土漫畫產出之相關因素解析" [Relative Affected Factors of Taiwan's Local Comic Output]. *The 9th Design Symposium of the Design Institute of the Republic of China*, 885-890. <https://class1.dcollege.cyut.edu.tw/~daclab/wood/2004-t03.pdf>

Chen, Julie. 2018. "Tales of Taiwan's Comic Artists: Persecution, Isolation and Endless Talent." *The New Lens*, January 25. <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/88234> (accessed February 1, 2023)

Chiu, Kuei-fen. 2009. "The Production of Indigeneity: Contemporary Indigenous Literature in Taiwan and Trans-Cultural Inheritance." *The China Quarterly*, 200, 1071-1087. doi: 10.1017/S0305741009990634

Chute, Hillary L. and Marianne DeKoven. 2006. "Graphic Narrative." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 52(4), 767-782.

Gao De'er 高德爾. 2002. "Cexie Liu Xingqin de Taiwan Fengqing: Manhua, Minsu Hua, Faming 側寫劉興欽的臺灣風情 – 漫畫、民俗畫、發明" [Profiling Liu Hsing-chin's Taiwan: Comics, Folk Art, Inventions]. *Quan Guo Xin Shu Zixun Yuekan*, 165: 12-17.

Golden Comic Awards. 2022. *Golden Comic Awards & Connection+*. <https://gca.moc.gov.tw/home/>

- [en-us/introduction](#) (accessed February 1, 2023)
- Hartwig, David. 2021. "Hong Kong Post's 'Feel 100%' stamps cross visual media." Linn's Stamp News. <https://www.linns.com/news/world-stamps-postal-history/hong-kong-post-s-feel-100-stamps-cross-visual-media> (accessed February 1, 2023)
- Heisong Bowuguan 黑松博物館. n.d. "Taiwan Lao Ganzaidian Huaijiu gushi 老台灣柑仔店懷舊故事" [The Nostalgic Stories of the Old Grocery Stores of Taiwan]. *Wushi Niandai Bowuguan*. <https://rb.gy/30vfgf> (accessed February 2, 2023)
- Hsu, Hua. 2015. "The Melancholy Pop Idol Who Haunts China". *The New Yorker*, August 3. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-melancholy-pop-idol-who-haunts-china> (accessed February 2, 2023)
- Huang, Chi-tsun et al. 2015. "How do Wet Markets Still Survive in Taiwan?" *British Food Journal*, 117(1), 234-256. doi:10.1108/BFJ-05-2013-0136
- Huang, Hong-Ming and Jenn-Jaw Soong. 2013. "ASEAN Migrants: A Boon for Taiwan's Aging Populace." *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 1(2), 177-189. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-440444>
- Kalkhof, Maximilian. 2018. "Die Leute Werden Durch Meine Comics in Eine Welt Blicken, Die Es Nicht Mehr Gibt." *Goethe Institut Taipei*. <https://www.goethe.de/ins/tw/de/kul/mag/21364474.html> (accessed March 9, 2023).
- Lawagan Ernee. 2017. "The History of Philippine Komiks." *Ernee's Grocery*. <http://erneelawagan.blogspot.com/2017/08/the-history-of-philippine-komiks.html> (accessed February 1, 2023)
- Lee I-Yun 李衣雲. 2018. "Taiwan Dazhong Wenhua zhong Chengxian de Lishi Renshi: Yi Manhua wei Zhongxin (1945-1990) 臺灣大眾文化中呈現的歷史認識: 以漫畫為中心 (1945-1990)" [Historical Understandings in Taiwanese Popular Culture: A Focus on Comic Books (1945-1990)]. *Si yu Yan*, 56(3), 7-73.
- Lee I-Yun 李衣雲. 2022. "Zhanhou Manhua 'Disu' Shi: 1940 nian - 1980 nian 戰後漫畫「低俗」史: 1940年~1980年" [A 'Vulgar' History of Post-war Taiwanese Comics: 1940-1980]. *Kam A Tiam*, <https://tinyurl.com/msnkyb6u> (accessed February 1, 2023)
- Lent, John A. 1995. "Comics in East Asian countries: A contemporary survey." *International Journal of Popular Culture*, 29(1), 185-198.
- Lent, John A. 1999. "Introduction: The Comics Debates Internationally: Their Genesis, Issues, and Commonalities." In *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, edited by John A. Lent, 9-41. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press.
- Lent, John A. 2015. *Asian Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Lent, John A. and Hong-Chi Shiao. 2008. "Seeking Inwards, Looking Outwards: Taiwanese Cartoonists' Quest to Transcend Japanese Influences." *International Journal of Comic Art*, 10 (2), 718-736.
- Ministry of Culture. 2017. "Reading Taiwan to emphasize originality at Frankfurt Book Fair." *Latest News - Ministry of Culture*, October 3. https://www.moc.gov.tw/en/information_196_75193.html (accessed February 1, 2023)
- Ministry of Culture. 2018. "Taiwan comic artist Ruan Guang-min to tour four German cities." Global Outreach. https://www.moc.gov.tw/en/information_316_84245.html (accessed February 1, 2023)
- Ministry of Economic Affairs. 1992. *Copyright Act*, <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=J0070017> (accessed February 1, 2023)
- MOFA Japan. 2022. "Pop-culture Diplomacy." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. November 4. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/exchange/pop/index.html> (accessed February 1, 2023)
- National Central Library 國家圖書館. 2021. *110 Nian Taiwan Tushu Chuban Xiankuang ji Qushi Baogao* 110 年臺灣圖書出版現況及趨勢報告 [2021 Report on the Current Situation and Trends

of the Publishing Sector in Taiwan]. Taipei: National Central Library.

Neri, Corrado. 2019. "This Moment, Back then: retro imaginary, nostalgia and memories in contemporary Taiwan visual culture." *Monde Chinois nouvelle Asie*, 57. <https://univ-lyon3.hal.science/hal-02278837> (accessed March 9, 2023).

Passi, Federica. 2019. "La scrittura naturalistica a Taiwan, tra locale e globale." *Sinosfere – Costellazioni*, 7. <https://sinosfere.com/2019/10/01/federica-passi-la-scrittura-naturalistica-a-taiwan-tra-locale-e-globale/> (accessed February 1, 2023)

Phipps, Gavin. 2002. "Taiwan's Comic Saga." *Taipei Times*, February 24. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2002/02/24/125260> (accessed February 1, 2023)

Redazione. 2022. "Una delegazione dell'ufficio di rappresentanza di Taipei in Italia a Lucca Comics and Games." *Lucca in Diretta*, October 28. <https://www.luccaindiretta.it/cultura-e-spettacoli/2022/10/28/una-delegazione-dellufficio-di-rappresentanza-di-taipei-in-italia-a-lucca-comics-and-games/317819/> (accessed February 1, 2023)

Ruan Guang-min 阮光民. 2019. *Yongjiu Ganzaidian 用九柑仔店*(1-5) [The Grocery Store], Taipei: Yuan-liou.

Ruan Guang-min 阮光民. 2021. *Donghuachun Lifating 東華春理髮廳* (1-2) [Dong Hua Chun Barbershop], Taipei: Yuan-liou.

Salmose, Niklas and Eric Sandberg. 2021. "Literature and Nostalgia: Vestiges of Paradise." In *Intimations of Nostalgia: Multidisciplinary Explorations of an Enduring Emotion* edited by Michael Hviid Jacobsen, 191-210. Bristol: Bristol University Press. doi:10.46692/9781529214789.011

Sawai Meg 澤井Meg. 2022. "Manhua Shengxian Taiwan de Zhengshi Mianmao: Taiwan Manhua Yongjiu Ganzaidian Yihou Suogan 漫畫呈現臺灣的真實樣貌——臺灣漫畫《用九柑仔店》譯後所感" [Comics Showcase the True Face of Taiwan: Thoughts on the Translation of the Taiwanese Comic *The Grocery Store*]. *Nippon.com*, July 27. <https://rb.gy/uchdsf> (accessed February 1, 2023)

TAICCA. 2022. "TAICCA Launches 'Taiwan Comic City' to Promote Taiwan's Original Comics in English, French, and Japanese." *Taiwan Creative Content Agency*. <https://en.taicca.tw/article/5bd90ad5> (accessed February 1, 2023)

TAICCA. 2023. "About TAICCA." *Taiwan Creative Content Agency*. <https://en.taicca.tw/page/about> (accessed February 1, 2023)

Tong Li 東立. 2004. "Dongli Chubanshe Nianjian 東立出版年鑑" [Tong Li Publishing Timeline]. *Tong li Online*. <https://www.tongli.com.tw/about-tongli2.htm> (accessed February 1, 2023)

Zemanek Adina. 2022. "What are Taiwanese Comics?" *Taiwan Insight*, November 21. <https://taiwaninsight.org/2022/11/21/what-are-taiwanese-comics/> (accessed January 30, 2023)

Zhou Wenpeng 周文鵬. 2019. "Manban Jinxing, que You Zhuduo Liangshen Dazao de Xushi Wuqi: Ping Ruan Guang-min Yongjiu Ganzaidian 慢板進行，卻有諸多量身打造的敘事武器：評阮光民《用九柑仔店》" [Slow-paced but with many tailor-made narrative weapons: on Ruan Guang-min's *The Grocery Store*]. *OpenBook*, July 15. <https://www.openbook.org.tw/article/p-62277> (accessed February 2023)

Antonio Paoliello is Tenure-eligible Lecturer at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain) in the Department of Translation, Interpreting and East Asian Studies.

Email: antonio.paoliello@uab.cat

