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# FRAMES OF MEMORY: THE CINEMATIC PAST IN A TAIWANESE GRAPHIC NOVEL[1]

**Recommended citation:** Paoliello-Palermo, Antonio. "Frames of Memory: The Cinematic Past in a Taiwanese Graphic Novel". *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 10.2 (2024). DOI: https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2024.18.02.

**Abstract:** The nostalgic recollection of the past is central to contemporary cultural production, yet its intersection within Sinophone comics remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining how recent graphic novels from Taiwan engage with the island's cinematic past and focuses on their role in preserving the country's collective memory and constructing national identity. By conducting an analysis of *Back Street Dusk* (*Xiaoshi de Houjie Guangying*, 2018) by Jason Chien (Jian Jiacheng, 1978–), through the lens of nostalgia studies, I contend that this graphic novel intertwines a nostalgic gaze on the island's cinema, particularly the Hokkien film industry (1950s–1970s), with Taiwan's cultural and political history. By perusing how Chien's work contextualizes and voices the challenges faced by this industry under Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist rule, this research highlights the role of graphic novels as both archives and tools for identity formation, while positioning their authors as not merely artists, but also keepers of cultural memory.
**Keywords:** *manhua*, Taiwanese graphic novels, collective identity, Hokkien-language cinema, *Taiyupian*.

## Introduction

During the summer of 2024, as I wandered through the streets of Taipei, I was struck by the proliferation of flea markets and so-called "vintage" stores. These venues, often brimming with toys, magazines, and LPs from the latter half of the 20th

[1] Research for this paper was made possible thanks to a grant for foreign scholars awarded by the Center for Chinese Studies at the National Central Library in Taipei, Taiwan.

century, appeared to cater to a burgeoning interest in a bygone era. What captivated me even more, however, was the demographic of those browsing the stalls and purchasing these items: predominantly people in their twenties or early thirties — an age group unlikely to have experienced these products in their original context. Yet their gaze seemed imbued with a sense of nostalgia, as if they were engaging with memories of a past they had never lived. This observation prompted me to reflect on the concept of nostalgia and its various manifestations in contemporary Taiwan, particularly in how it resonates with younger generations.

On the same visit to the island, I observed that the graphic novel[2] sections of local bookstores consistently featured works focused on Taiwan's recent history, whether from the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945) or the decades following, up until the end of Martial Law in 1987. This prevalence suggests that the comic medium reflects a strong engagement with the past. Many of these works approach history through a nostalgic lens. In this article, I will concentrate specifically on those that explore the rise and decline of the Hokkien-language film industry, which primarily produced low-budget films from the mid-1950s through to the late 1970s. Research on *Taiyupian* — literally "Taiwanese-language films," a Mandarin term used in English-language scholarship to refer to Hokkien cinema produced in Taiwan[3] — has noticeably increased in recent years. This is evidenced, in Anglophone academia, by a dedicated issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* published in 2020 (Berry and Rawnsley, eds.) and an edited volume on the same subject scheduled for release in November 2024 (Berry et al., eds.).

This paper seeks to contribute to this growing body of work by adopting a distinct and underexplored perspective: I will investigate how contemporary graphic narratives portray *Taiyupian* and examine how they evoke feelings of nostalgia in readers while contributing to the development of a collective identity through memory. To achieve this, I will begin by reviewing several works that explore the relationship between nostalgia, memory, and narrative, both generally and specifically within the context of graphic novels. I will then turn my focus to Taiwan,

[2] Although I acknowledge the ongoing debates regarding the nomenclature of the medium and its various forms, in this study, I will employ the terms *comics*, *graphic narrative*, *graphic novel*, and *manhua* interchangeably to refer to the subject of the present research: sequential art from Taiwan that employs images arranged in a specific order to construct a narrative.

[3] The irony of using a Mandarin term to describe film production in another Sinitic language has already been pointed out by Berry and Rawnsley ("Introduction" 72). Although the correct romanization of the Sinitic script should be *Tai-gi phinn*, reflecting the Hokkien pronunciation, I will adhere to the more widely accepted pinyin transcription, *Taiyupian*.

briefly examining the current landscape of the island's *manhua*—the Chinese term for comics and sequential graphic narratives—and the phenomenon of "retromania,"[4] a term that aptly describes the Taiwanese people's sentimental fixation on the island's recent past. Following this, I will analyse *Back Street Dusk* (*Xiaoshi de houjie guangying*, 2018) by Jason Chien (Jian Jiacheng, 1978–), as a case study intertwining a nostalgic reflection on the past with Taiwan's Hokkien-language film industry. Through this examination, I will demonstrate how local graphic narratives can function as archives for cultural memory while simultaneously helping to promote an identity distinct from other Sinophone contexts.

## Nostalgia, memory and graphic narratives

In her seminal work on the subject, Svetlana Boym articulated that "nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (Boym xiii). However, she emphasised that nostalgia transcends mere spatial considerations, observing that "actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams" (Boym xv). Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia, asserting that "[r]estorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory" (Boym 49). In other words, while the former approach tends to foster a sense of yearning aimed at resurrecting and restoring the past—sometimes with a nationalistic tone—the latter recognises the irrevocability of that past. Instead, it encourages critical reflection and analysis, allowing the past to inform and, perhaps, influence the present.

A particularly useful concept for my analysis is "vicarious nostalgia" (Busi Rizzi, Always at Home 36), which describes a longing for something one has no direct experience of. The scholar argues that this yearning for the past, which is neither inherently positive nor negative, represents a complex emotion shaped by various factors, including cultural narratives, personal experiences, and the need for a cohesive sense of identity (Busi Rizzi, Always at Home 70). In Taiwan, for instance, the experience of Japanese colonisation evokes a sense of nostalgia among some

[4] For instance, Reynolds, in his *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, "investigates the entire range of contemporary uses and abuses of the pop past. This includes phenomena such as the vastly increased presence in our lives of old pop culture" (Reynolds xiii). Or Zaks, who describes it as "a type of value-based perception of the past when it acquires an autotelic (intrinsically valuable) nature in cultural thought, dominating in the system of temporal modalities, either putting it to the back-burner or even crowding out the present and the future from awareness" (Zaks 170).

*benshengren* (literally, "people from the province"), an ethnic Han Taiwanese group—primarily of Hokkien and Hakka descent—who settled on the island before or during the Japanese occupation. In contrast, the *waishengren* (literally, "people from outside the province"), Chinese Civil War migrants and their descendants who sought refuge in Taiwan, experience nostalgia rooted in their direct or vicarious sense of exile and their inability to return to their homeland, the Chinese mainland.[5]

Busi Rizzi's idea of vicarious nostalgia is especially relevant to the graphic novel examined here, as *Back Street Dusk* was created by an artist and aimed at an audience with no firsthand exposure to *Taiyupian*. This is because they were either too young or not yet born when these films were prominent on the island (1950s–1970s)[6]. The novel is linked to a cultural narrative — the disappearance of *Taiyupian* —a nd to individual experiences, such as one character's direct involvement in the industry. Furthermore, as we shall see, it indirectly promotes a collective identity that is inherently Taiwanese, rooted in the island's Hokkien-speaking community.

Although her examples are primarily drawn from Western graphic narratives, Busi Rizzi notes in another study that many contemporary graphic novelists can be regarded as nostalgic to varying degrees. Their narratives often engage with (pseudo)autobiography, expressing feelings of yearning and grief tied to significant events, while simultaneously evoking a sense of the past through references to popular culture. This emphasis on nostalgia is shaped by their profound awareness of the medium's history and cultural significance (Busi Rizzi, Portrait of the Artist 16).

Nostalgia is thus linked to the recollection of experiences, which do not always have to be firsthand. The connection between graphic narratives and memories proves particularly fruitful, as it facilitates the recuperation of overlooked aspects of a past not necessarily experienced by the artist or audience. It also enables the re-emergence of forgotten people and voices, as in the case of *Taiyupian*. Nabizadeh, for instance, argues that "comics can help recover marginalised and minority voices from the peripheries of representation" (1). In discussing literature, Sánchez Zapatero similarly observes the existence of a "literatura de la memoria" (literature of

[5] As suggested by Phyllis Yu-ting Huang, this nostalgic sentiment has "turned into a heavy cultural and identity burden for the second-generation mainlanders who were born in Taiwan, educated to love China, and presented with the dramatic sociopolitical transformations of democratisation and Taiwanisation in the 1990s" (Huang 95).

[6] While it is not completely impossible that both author and readers had watched these movies, it is highly improbable since they "not only disappeared from public screenings but were also scrubbed from the past" (Liao 69).

memory), which provides a platform for marginalised and silenced groups excluded from mainstream historical narratives (Zapatero 29). This is precisely what *Back Street Dusk* achieves: it recuperates a cinematic tradition that, while immensely popular from the 1950s to the 1970s, has since been marginalised and largely forgotten. Nabizadeh also contends that there is a notable similarity between the act of recalling and the medium of comics, as the panels in a graphic novel can be interpreted as points of memory, contrasting with the gutters that represent forgetfulness or unconscious recollection (Nabizadeh 5).

In 2018, Ahmed and Crucifix edited *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles*, a collection of essays examining how memory shapes the study of graphic narratives. In their introduction, they argue that "memory is a key word in contemporary comics studies, as evinced by the attention accorded to the representations of personal and collective memories in comics" (Ahmed and Crucifix, Introduction 2). They further assert that this relationship is mediated through two primary frameworks: archives and styles (Ahmed and Crucifix, Introduction 3).

In my view, comics fulfil a dual role as both archives and tools for engaging with memory. They act as archives by preserving personal and historical narratives, often drawing on physical archival material, as seen in *Back Street Dusk*. Their artistic style—incorporating visual imagery, textual interplay, and layout—directly influences how memories are constructed and recalled. This interplay between style and memory is fundamental to the medium, as "[c]omics have the potential to signal memory recall and disruption not only by their choice of plot and theme but also by hard-wiring such memory work into the fabric of the word-image project" (Gorrara 113). Through this structural and thematic interplay, graphic narratives mimic the processes of memory, blending moments of recollection with gaps of forgetting.

Nostalgia further deepens the relationship between memory and style, serving as both an emotional framework and a creative force. By evoking a reflective — and sometimes vicarious — longing for the past, graphic novels utilise nostalgia to navigate memory. This combination of memory, style, and nostalgia allows the medium to recover marginalised voices, rekindle forgotten histories, and foster a dynamic engagement with the past.

## Taiwanese comics and "retromania"

Before analysing *Back Street Dusk*, I will briefly contextualise the current state of the comics medium in Taiwan. Although local comics may not yet enjoy the same level of global recognition as Japanese manga, they are currently experiencing a remarkable golden age, both domestically and internationally. While manga still dominate the market on the island, locally produced graphic narratives have made significant strides, particularly since the early 2000s. The revival of local *manhua* production can be attributed not only to the high quality of recent works but also to substantial government support aimed at promoting their creation and distribution. A notable example is the *Creative Comic Collection* (CCC – *Chuangzuo Ji*), a digital platform dedicated to Taiwanese comics, launched in 2009 under the auspices of the National Science and Technology Council of the Republic of China (Taiwan).[7]

The relationship between *manhua* and manga has historically been complex. While manga continue to overshadow *manhua* both locally and globally, contemporary Taiwanese graphic narratives owe much to manga, particularly since the 1960s. In 1966, the *Manhua Shencha Zhidu* (Comic Review System) was introduced in Taiwan under the strict control of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT). This stringent censorship severely curtailed the creativity of local artists, leading many to cease production and forcing publishers to rely on Japanese imports. Consequently, locally produced *manhua* nearly vanished during the 1970s. While censorship negatively impacted the industry, the influx of Japanese works satisfied the public's appetite for this form of entertainment. As a result, Taiwanese artists born in the 1960s and raised in the 1970s were heavily influenced by these works. By the 1980s, these artists came together to revitalise the local scene, exemplified by the publication of *Huanle Manhua Ban Yuekan* (*Happy Comics Bi-Monthly*) between 1985 and 1988, which marked a significant milestone in Taiwan's comic history (C. Huang).

The industry's prospects began to improve following the implementation of the Copyright Act in 1992, which sought to protect authors' rights and interests. As a result, publishers such as Tong Li, one of the major distributors of pirated Japanese comics, were compelled to adapt swiftly to the new regulations. This shift prompted them to scout for local talent and focus on domestic production (Lent 195). As noted

[7] https://www.creative-comic.tw. It was originally also published in print form, though the paper edition has since been discontinued.

by Paoliello, the early 21st century saw intensified efforts to bridge the gap between Japanese and Taiwanese graphic narratives. A pivotal development in this regard was the establishment of the Golden Comic Awards in 2010 by the Government Information Office, later managed by the Ministry of Culture. These awards significantly raised the profile of Taiwanese *manhua*. Former Minister of Culture Cheng Li-Chun, now Vice President of the Republic of China, played a key role in advancing these initiatives. Her efforts culminated in the creation of the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA), which has been instrumental in promoting Taiwanese comics on a global scale. One of TAICCA's flagship projects is Taiwan Comic City (TCC)[8], a multilingual online platform showcasing Taiwanese graphic narratives. The platform features animated sound comics dubbed into English, French, and Japanese, making them accessible to international audiences. Additionally, it offers a catalogue of national comics specifically designed for foreign publishers and agents. Another TAICCA-supported initiative, *Books from Taiwan* (BFT), promotes Taiwanese literature overseas. The BFT website currently features around one hundred *manhua* titles available for international rights, alongside fiction, non-fiction, and children's and young adult literature.

As Neri observes, vintage culture is pervasive in contemporary Taiwan, manifesting across various aspects such as fashion, retail, advertising, discourse, and visual culture. It serves as a significant marker of modern life, evidenced by the striking prevalence of images, reproductions, quotations, and references to the island's recent history (Neri, Rétro Taiwan). Visitors to Taiwan often encounter expressions such as *guzao wei* (literally, "taste of the past"), *huaijiu* ("nostalgia"), and *fugu* ("vintage" or "retro") used in marketing food, commodities, cultural products, and even experiences. Elsewhere, Neri argues that as the notion of self-identification as Taiwanese becomes less controversial—at least within the island — reflecting on the formative years of Taiwan's democratic system and its period of international isolation offers an opportunity to develop a more assertive and coherent understanding of cultural and collective identity (Neri, This Moment 4). I contend that such reflections on the past should extend beyond the periods of democracy and isolation to include the fifty years of Japanese occupation, which profoundly shaped a distinct local identity.

[8] https://taiwan-comic-city.taicca.tw.

*Manhua* have undoubtedly been influenced by this *retromania*. In recent years, many Taiwanese comics have adopted a nostalgic lens to explore both national history and personal experiences. While numerous graphic narratives exemplify this trend, this study will mention only a select few to provide an understanding of the phenomenon. One notable example is Ruan Guang-min's five-volume graphic novel *The Corner Store* (*Yongjiu Kam-a-tiam*, 2016–2019), which won Best Comic at the 2017 Golden Comic Awards. The title itself incorporates the Hokkien term *kam-a-tiam*, evoking a sense of nostalgia as it refers to small-town or neighbourhood shops that have largely been supplanted by ubiquitous convenience store chains. The *manhua* resonates with Taiwanese readers by invoking memories of objects, places, and human interactions typical of the 1970s and 1980s. In doing so, it functions as an archive, reinforcing a collective identity rooted in a shared, recent past.

Other works adopt a sentimental view of the colonial era, often presenting a naïve perspective. While not necessarily idealising Japanese occupation, these narratives tend to simplify its political, social, and historical complexities, offering a reductive portrayal of Japan's colonial legacy. This can be attributed in part to the fact that, unlike in China and South Korea — where the Japanese occupation is generally remembered negatively — Taiwan often reflects on this period as one of economic growth, stability, and relative peace (Lin, par. 2).

*Manhua* set during the colonial era are particularly intriguing because they complicate the generational distinction identified by Ching (Ching 82): a younger generation engaging with Japanese culture through a consumerist lens versus an older generation whose connection to Japan is shaped by their lived experiences of identity, societal structures, and feelings of rejection.[9] In fact, most readers of these graphic narratives are younger Taiwanese who have no personal experience of the colonial era. This complexity suggests that these *manhua* are not merely entertainment products; rather, they play a significant role in reshaping the multiple ways in which Taiwan understands its historical relationship with Japan.

One example is Zuo Hsuan's *The Banana Sprout* (*Bajiao de Ya*, 2022 – ongoing), recipient of the 2023 Golden Comic Award. Set in 1930s Taiwan, this coming-of-age *manhua* centres on two students at the prestigious Taihoku Higher

[9] Some scholars have observed the existence of a "Japan complex" in Taiwan, reflecting a nostalgic or idealized view of the Japanese colonial era, often voiced by older generations who lived through it. This sentiment is characterized by a longing for the perceived order, stability, and prosperity Taiwan experienced during Japanese rule (Berry, Imagine).

School[10]: Yeh Hsing-chiao and his eccentric Japanese roommate, Nanjo Untaro. As they collaborate to establish a literary journal, they uncover a shared passion for literature, despite their contrasting backgrounds and perspectives. Similarly, the award-winning (The 2022 Golden Comic Award) *Priceless: A Taiwanese Painter in Paris* (*Wujia zhi Hua: Bali de Zhui Guang Shaonian*, 2021–2022) by HOM also unfolds in the 1930s and recounts the true story of Yang San-lang, a prominent Taiwanese painter of Western art who travelled to Japan and later to Paris to refine his techniques. In both *manhua*, the Japanese occupation is used as a nostalgic backdrop, portrayed as an environment enabling young, talented Taiwanese individuals to thrive, thereby suggesting an uncritical fondness for the past. Through their young protagonists, these narratives resonate particularly with contemporary high school and university students, reflecting the challenges of pursuing personal aspirations and forging social connections. Moreover, they contribute to constructing a collective memory of the colonial period for those without direct experience of it. In this sense, they affirm that "comics are concerned with transmitting the memory of a more or less distant past to a broad audience of readers" (Alary 18).[11] Through the medium of comics, these works captivatingly inform younger generations about the roots of Taiwan's society and culture, fostering an awareness that national identity is, in part, shaped by the influences of the colonial era.

The years following Japanese rule and preceding Taiwan's democratic transition — typically marked by the lifting of Martial Law in 1987 — have also provided a rich backdrop for literary and graphic narratives. Sean Chuang's two-volume graphic novel *'80s Diary in Taiwan* (*80 Niandai Shijian Bu*, 2013), as its title suggests, stands as a testament to a bygone era and can "be regarded as the memoir of a whole generation" (Zemanek 400). Similarly imbued with urban nostalgia and an almost archaeological significance are the 2020 graphic adaptations by Ruan Guang-min and Sean Chuang of Wu Ming-yi's *The Illusionist on the Skywalk and Other Stories* (*Tianqiao Shang de Moshushi*, 2011). Both artists meticulously recreate Taipei's Chunghwa Market—a once-iconic space demolished in the 1990s — as it appeared in the mid-1980s. By doing so, the work transforms each page into a repository of collective memory, shaping the identities of those who lived

[10] Established in 1922 under the Taiwanese Governor-General, served as the predecessor of today's National Taiwan Normal University.

[11] "[L]a historieta se preocupa por la transmisión a un amplio público lector de la memoria de un pasado más o menos remoto". My translation.

in or experienced Taipei during that time through depictions of a shared yet vanishing past, often imbued with bittersweet yearning.

Sean Chuang is also known for his three-volume graphic novel *Local Heroes: Taiwan New Wave Cinema* (*Chao Lang Qun Xiong*, 2022–2024), which explores the film reform movement led by a new generation of Taiwanese directors between 1982 and 1987. These filmmakers adopted a realist style to portray themes rooted in social reality, offering an unfiltered glimpse into the everyday lives of ordinary Taiwanese people. The *manhua* serves both as a nostalgic homage to a group of filmmakers who "managed to accomplish so much despite working within an authoritarian system that suppressed independent thought" (Chuang) and as an effort to document a pivotal chapter in the history of Taiwanese cinema.

These examples "are very effective memorial objects in capturing, representing, and telling individual and collective history" (Busi Rizzi, Nostalgia in Comics par. 5). Given Taiwan's unique geopolitical context, it is evident that nostalgia in these comics also serves a political and identitarian function. While they address different forms of nostalgia — colonial, as seen in *The Banana Sprout*; generational, in *'80s Diary in Taiwan*; and urban, in *The Illusionist* — they collectively underscore the distinctiveness of the Taiwanese experience. This stands in contrast to mainland China, which neither endured fifty years of Japanese occupation nor experienced Chiang Kai-shek's martial law, its eventual lifting, and the subsequent democratisation of society. These events have been pivotal in shaping a unique Taiwanese identity.[12]

## Film nostalgia in *Back Street Dusk*

In the context of the local film industry and its relationship with graphic narratives, the works of Jason Chien, supported by the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute (TFAI), warrant particular attention for their nostalgic engagement with the past and their contribution to constructing a Taiwanese identity through the recovery of collective cinematic memory. Notably, three volumes have emerged from this fruitful collaboration: *Back Street Dusk*, which explores the restoration of classic films and Hokkien-language cinematography; *The Movie Painter* (*Hua Dianying de Ren: Shouhui Haibiao de Meihao Shiguang*, 2021), in which Chien revisits the golden age

[12] In contrast, China strongly rejects the notion of a separate Taiwanese identity, viewing it as the product of colonial nostalgia and disconnected from actual reality (Liew).

of hand-painted movie posters, highlighting their significant role in the history of local cinema; and, most recently, *Memories of an Actress* (*Nüling Huiyilu*, 2023), which narrates the journey of Pai Hua, a young actress striving to find her place within the *Taiyupian* industry during the 1960s.

In Chien's works, particularly in *Back Street Dusk*, the nostalgic gaze on the past is explicit and directly endorsed by TFAI, an official cultural institution. By focusing on films, actors, and other cultural agents of the Hokkien-language filmic tradition, all three *manhua* emphasise the distinctive features of local filmmaking that set it apart from other Sinophone cinemas, such as Hong Kong's Cantonese-language productions or Mandarin-language films in mainland China. I contend that these works are more than just nostalgic artefacts; they serve as crucial tools for shaping a collective identity. However, it is important to recognise that Hokkien-language productions were themselves influenced by creations from other Sinophone geographies, a fact that *Back Street Dusk* does not address. For instance, a minor industry in Hong Kong produced films in the Amoy dialect,[13] which were subsequently imported to Taiwan. These movies enjoyed significant success among local audiences, who could understand them without translation due to the mutual intelligibility of the Amoy dialect and Taiwanese Hokkien. The popularity of these films inspired local entrepreneurs to produce *Taiyupian* (Taiwanese-Language Cinema 2).

Before embarking on the analysis of the graphic novel, I will briefly contextualise Hokkien-language cinema within the framework of pre-democratic Taiwan. Local films in the Hokkien language first emerged in Taiwan in the mid-1950s, becoming the dominant force in local film production, with annual releases exceeding one hundred titles by the early 1960s (Liao 69) and totalling more than one thousand between the 1950s and 1970s. However, the growth of this cinema was stifled as the KMT regime sought to promote Mandarin as the dominant language, marginalising other local languages in the process (Chih. Su 76). Records indicate that no *Taiyupian* were produced in 1980. Between 1971 and 1979, only 44 Hokkien-language films were produced, averaging fewer than five per year. This stands in

[13] The Amoy dialect is a variety of Hokkien spoken in the city of Xiamen (historically referred to as "Amoy") and its surrounding area in southern Fujian, a province of China.

stark contrast to 1969, when 84 *Taiyupian* were released, a figure that plummeted to just 18 the following year (Feng 272).

What, then, led to the collapse of such a vibrant film industry, plunging it into oblivion? Was it solely the result of the KMT's policies, which systematically favoured Mandarin cinema and elevated the official language imported from the mainland after the 1949 communist victory in China? Scholars suggest that the decline resulted from a combination of factors. While the Nationalists' language policies undoubtedly played a critical role, other contributing factors included the generally low quality of many productions and a heavy tax burden. The rapid rise of *Taiyupian* in the 1960s created excessive competition and diluted production resources, leading to poor working conditions and, consequently, subpar quality and simplistic storylines. Moreover, a 1954 ruling imposed a 10% tax on film screening revenues, which increased to 15% by 1956 and soon surged to 30% (Feng 273–75).

The decline of Hokkien-language cinema can also be attributed to changes in the international market for *Taiyupian* and technological developments in the film industry. By the late 1960s, political instability in Southeast Asia — an important market for *Taiyupian* due to the presence of many ethnic Chinese communities speaking varieties of the Hokkien language — disrupted the export of all domestic films. Simultaneously, the expansion of Hong Kong's major Cantonese-language film companies into Southeast Asia further marginalised *Taiyupian* in its primary foreign market (Feng 278).

Moreover, Hollywood's transition to full-colour productions in the mid-1960s triggered a global reduction in black-and-white film stock, prompting film industries worldwide to adopt colour. However, the increased production costs associated with colour films, combined with a lack of government support and limited access to export markets, rendered this transition economically unfeasible for Hokkien-language filmmakers. The situation deteriorated further when major suppliers of black-and-white film stock from France, Canada, and Italy ceased exports to Taiwan in 1968, 1970, and 1972, respectively. Additionally, filmmakers were prohibited from importing raw film stock independently, exacerbating the constraints on *Taiyupian* production (Chih. Su 83–84). Thus, the convergence of discriminatory government policies, economic challenges, and global shifts in filmmaking practices precipitated the decline of Hokkien-language cinema, hindering its transition to colour and undermining its long-term viability. This decline is particularly ironic for an industry

that, as Berry suggests, represented the true beginnings of continuous feature film production on the island (An Alternative Cinema 141).

In the context of representing and recuperating the past within Taiwanese graphic novels, *Back Street Dusk* serves as a prominent example. The narrative unfolds through two parallel timelines: one set in present-day Taipei and the other in the 1960s. In the contemporary storyline, Hsiao-chung, a university student and aspiring influencer, discovers a collection of 35mm films in his family's attic. These movies, produced by his late grandfather Chiang Cheng-hsin—a fictional *Taiyupian* director—highlight the significance of this cultural heritage, a revelation that Hsiao-chung uncovers as the story progresses. Ah-le, an employee of the TFAI tasked with restoring *Taiyupian*, plays a pivotal role in the present-day narrative as he seeks to locate, catalogue, and preserve these lost Hokkien-language films.

The narrative also delves into the 1960s, where the focus shifts to the young Chiang Cheng-hsin and his friend Lee Chi-ming, who share dreams of becoming successful directors within the *Taiyupian* industry. This second storyline poignantly, though perhaps with an excess of sentimentality, illustrates their idealism and sacrifices. They invest their time and resources not only in film production but also in establishing a studio dedicated to Hokkien-language cinema. A particularly striking moment occurs when Chiang expresses his willingness to sell his family house in the village and mortgage his current home to pursue his cinematic ambitions (figure 1). In scenes such as this, as well as in others where Jason Chien conveys his message with greater clarity, *Back Street Dusk* assumes an activist role, shedding light on the unjust precariousness faced by the *Taiyupian* industry.


Figure 1 (p. 70)

The various challenges that have shaped the history of *Taiyupian* are effectively portrayed in *Back Street Dusk*, which, by interweaving two temporal storylines, bridges the past of this cultural production with present-day realities. In this context, the *manhua* becomes a space for reclaiming the collective memory of a once-thriving aspect of local culture, evoking nostalgia for a time characterised by both struggles and aspirations, as well as a considerable degree of sentimentality. Drawing on the concepts of archive and style, I argue that *Back Street Dusk* exemplifies how a graphic novel can document and preserve memories, reinterpreting them through a distinct stylistic device designed to connect the past to the present.

Regarding the struggles, some panels realistically illustrate the linguistic discrimination faced by Hokkien-language cinema, depicting characters openly discussing the subsidies allocated by the Nationalist government for Mandarin productions. They also highlight how certain *Taiyupian* were dubbed into the official language to qualify for these government grants (figure 2). This vividly underscores one of the many ways in which Taiwanese society was silenced under the KMT regime whenever it attempted to express itself in languages other than the official one. This scenario reflects a broader feature of the Taiwanese context during the years of Nationalist rule: the subordination of the island's languages, both Sinitic and Austronesian, to the imposed official language, perpetuating the linguistic hierarchy established during the Japanese colonial era. This sense of linguistic colonisation is echoed in the words of Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first democratically elected president in 1996, who once remarked:

> During the period of Japanese colonialism, a Taiwanese person could be punished by being forced to kneel in the sun for speaking Tai-yü [Hokkien]. The same situation persisted after Taiwan was returned to Chinese control. I understand this well, as I often visit rural areas to speak with people. Their lives are profoundly shaped by history. I believe the most unfortunate individuals are the Taiwanese, who have continually struggled to rise above their circumstances. This was the reality for Taiwanese people during the Japanese colonial era, and it did not change following Taiwan's recovery. I feel deeply about this (Lee qtd. in Hsiau 302).

It can therefore be argued that the historical and linguistic subjugation experienced under both colonial authorities and the KMT regime has profoundly shaped the Taiwanese psyche, significantly influencing the collective identity of those living on the island, particularly among communities traditionally speaking languages other than the official one, such as those involved in the *Taiyupian* industry.[14]


Figure 2 (p. 122)

The *manhua* also sheds light on the challenges faced by the Hokkien-language film industry in achieving technical advancements compared to Mandarin cinema, a disparity rooted in the government's preferential treatment of the latter, as previously discussed. In one scene (figure 3), the two protagonists from the 1960s storyline note that films in the official language were already being produced in colour. They recognise that for Hokkien productions to have any chance of survival and competitiveness, they would need to exert significantly greater effort. Here, the pathos of the illustrations and the determination of the characters encourage readers

[14] Despite that, one cannot overlook the fact that Lee Teng-hui's conceptualization of Taiwanese identity was largely exclusionary, encompassing only Hokkien-speaking Han people who settled on the island prior to the 1949 Nationalist retreat. This definition effectively marginalized not only the Mandarin-speaking Mainlanders who arrived with Chiang Kai-shek but also the Hakka and indigenous communities. Nonetheless, as Hioe points out, political initiatives in recent years have sought to redefine Taiwanese national identity by transitioning from an ethnic framework to a civic one, also in an effort to distinguish it from Chinese identity and promote inclusivity. This evolving definition has gradually expanded to incorporate groups that were initially excluded from the boundaries of Taiwanese identity.

to empathise with the plight of Hokkien-language cinema, framing it as an unjustly marginalised aspect of Taiwanese identity.


Figure 3 (p. 121)

Through his graphic novel, Chien assumes the role of an activist for the memory of Hokkien-language cinema, highlighting the substantial obstacles the industry has faced in its struggle for survival. While this focus on remembrance may seem self-evident, Chien's role as an archivist becomes even more apparent when considering that the *manhua* was commissioned by the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute (TFAI), "the only administrative institution in Taiwan specialising in the collection of audiovisual assets, with a mission to preserve, restore, research, and promote these assets, making them accessible to the public" (TFAI).

The substantial research underpinning this comic is evident from the very beginning. As some scholars have noted, *Taiyupian* drew heavily on themes and narrative techniques from Japanese melodramas, addressing social crises in personalised and emotional ways, often through the lens of family dynamics. Incorporating such techniques into Hokkien-language cinema offered a convenient means of engaging with the social discomfort prevalent in postwar industrial Taiwan (Wang 84). Chien astutely illustrates this connection at the outset of the graphic novel by depicting a scene from *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari*), a 1953 Japanese

drama directed by Yasujirō Ozu (figure 4). This reference reminds readers that, while *Taiyupian* cinema emerged in the postwar era, it remained indebted to and intertwined with influences from the former coloniser. The indoor setting, emblematic of Japanese *gendai-geki* (contemporary dramas) depicting the everyday lives of the middle class—a genre in which Ozu excelled—also features prominently in many *Taiyupian*. As Rawnsley observes, "Taiyupian's employment of the family home as a site of discourse for modernization is not unique" (136). In my view, this shared thematic focus reflects a clear influence of Japanese cinema on the island's Hokkien-language cinematic tradition.

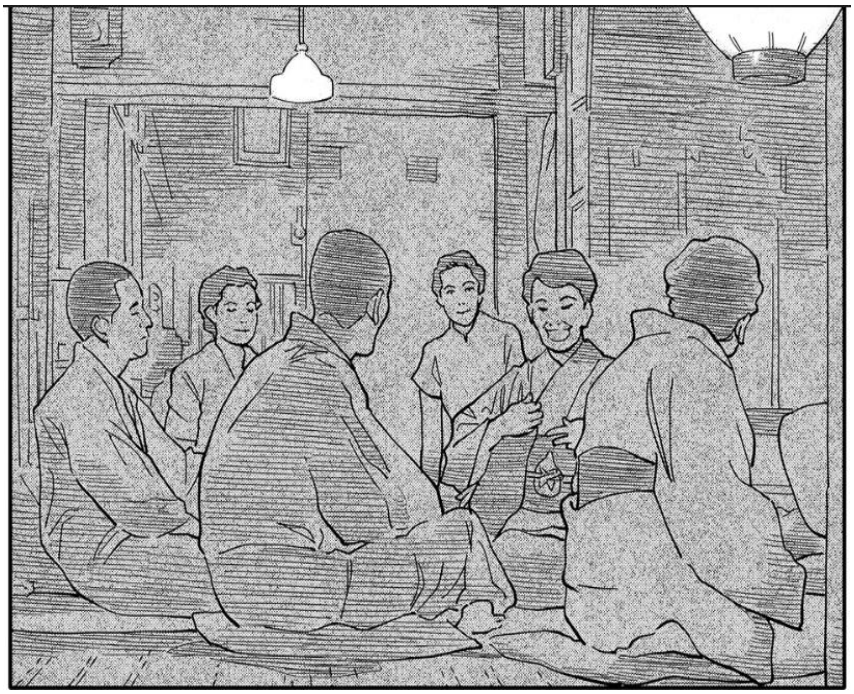

Figure 4 (p. 9)

What is particularly compelling about Chien's style of narration is his use of Hsiao-chung to guide readers through a step-by-step exploration of the Hokkien-language film industry. This narrative choice enables the audience—presumably younger readers born after the lifting of Martial Law—to relate to the character's perspective and confront their own lack of knowledge about this chapter in the history of local cinema. The generational gap in awareness is humorously illustrated in a scene where Ah-le, the TFAI employee, asks Hsiao-chung if he has seen any "old"

movies. Hsiao-chung's candid response, "Let me think… oh yes, *Cape No. 7!*",[15] highlights the divergence between his understanding of what constitutes an "old" film and the historical depth of Hokkien-language cinema (figure 5). Jason Chien's work is clearly driven by a desire to raise awareness of these cultural assets and to bridge the gap between his audience and previous generations. In a recent interview, he explained that he aimed to help readers appreciate the importance of preserving these archives and to underscore the critical role of institutions dedicated to safeguarding film history (Chien, Yuedu).


Figure 5 (p.30)

As the two narratives unfold, Hsiao-chung—and the readers alongside him—gains valuable insights into his family's history, particularly the challenges faced by his grandfather and a generation of young filmmakers eager to entertain a broad audience in their native language. By the conclusion of the graphic novel, Hsiao-chung realises that his quest to uncover his grandfather's *Taiyupian* legacy has not only unearthed a past submerged in oblivion but also enriched his own work as a content creator firmly rooted in today's digital age.

[15] For a detailed and insightful discussion on this Taiwanese film released in 2008, see Chiaoning Su's article, which explores the cultural phenomenon of *Cape No. 7* (*Haijiao Qi Hao*) and its impact on Taiwanese society. The scholar analyzes Wei Te-sheng's film through the lens of Taiwanese national cinema, highlighting its connections to memories of colonialism, anxieties about global economic and political systems, and the search for a distinct Taiwanese identity.

Throughout both narratives, Chien emphasises the interplay between the history of the film industry and personal stories. The relationship between Hsiao-chung and the previously unknown facet of his late grandfather's life underscores how personal narratives intersect with broader historical developments. This exploration of a previously silenced aspect of Taiwan's cinematic history deepens the understanding of the island's identity while illustrating how individual experiences contribute to collective memory. Although occasionally marked by overt sentimentality, the graphic novel effectively portrays these intersections, encouraging readers to recognise how personal experiences shape collective identity. This identity, in recent decades, has been influenced by the process of "Taiwanization," which emphasises local history, geography, cultural traditions, and languages. Initiated during President Lee Teng-hui's tenure and further advanced by Chen Shui-bian through various reforms (Yang 348), this movement finds resonance in the *manhua*, which aligns with the ongoing evolution of Taiwan's discourse on identity.

While the nostalgia in *Back Street Dusk* is experienced secondhand, or vicariously—to use Busi Rizzi's term—by the graphic novel's characters and readers, it retains a profound emotional resonance. The narrative adeptly taps into the experiences of a bygone generation of dreamers, capturing a complex spectrum of emotions. It portrays their optimism, frustration, and anger, allowing contemporary readers to connect with the sentiments their parents or grandparents may have felt during the vibrant yet nearly forgotten era of Hokkien-language cinema. Thus, the work transforms nostalgia for something neither the author nor the characters nor the readers have directly experienced into a shared, intergenerational memory with significant impact. Furthermore, while the graphic novel portrays the past through a narrative infused with nostalgic sentimentalism and idealised elements, it also critiques the restrictive policies of the autocratic government and, to some extent, reclaims the societal role of the Hokkien language.

## Conclusions

In summary, *Back Street Dusk*, as a contemporary *manhua*, holds significant value in promoting an identity rooted in the island's specific cultural products, such as Hokkien-language films, which represent distinctive elements of Taiwanese heritage. The efforts of the TFAI and Chien in producing this graphic novel are therefore

commendable. However, *Back Street Dusk* and *Taiyupian* should be read alongside cultural products that also reflect the other languages and traditions of the island, rather than being positioned as the sole representatives of Taiwan's shared cinematic past. To fully appreciate Taiwan's identity and history, these works must be contextualised and critically examined to avoid overshadowing the diverse dimensions of an inherently pluralistic nation. Taiwan's identity is complex and multifaceted, and any exploration of it would be incomplete without considering the experiences and contributions of its Indigenous peoples of Austronesian descent. These groups are often invoked to "challenge the notion of inherent 'Chineseness' of Taiwanese identity" (Kot) but deserve to be more than symbolic figures within broader cultural narratives.

Finally, while international circulation and recognition fall outside the scope of this study, it is worth noting that for Taiwan's identity to be fully understood in its complexity, works like *Back Street Dusk*, as well as those addressing issues concerning Indigenous peoples, Hakka communities, and post-1949 Han settlers, must reach audiences beyond the island and Sinophone communities. The success of such endeavours will largely depend on the active engagement of various stakeholders—from publishers to official institutions—in promoting these works internationally and facilitating accurate translations. Moreover, the broader impact of these narratives will be shaped by the global audience's receptiveness to the diverse social, linguistic, and cultural contexts they represent.

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