

Narrating Taiwan's past through comics: Wind Chaser Under the Blue Sky as a case study

Narrar el pasado de Taiwán mediante cómics: Wind Chaser Under the Blue Sky como estudio de caso

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Abstract: Comics were once dismissed as not being a serious medium on the assumption that their primary purpose was to entertain. However, the situation has gradually changed over recent decades thanks to a process of academic legitimization and, most importantly, numerous works that challenge the idea of their belonging to a lowbrow medium. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, for instance, challenges readers to confront the horrors of the Holocaust, and the graphic biography *Erdoğan*, by journalist Can Dündar and illustrator Anwar, examines the life and deeds of Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In the Sinophone world, particularly in Taiwan, graphic novels also address serious themes, such as history and social issues, including LGBTQ rights, collective memory, and national identity. This article focuses on *Wind Chaser Under the Blue Sky* by Taiwanese author Jason Chien as a case study to illustrate how a graphic novel can incorporate multiple issues from the country's recent past, especially those related to the immediate postwar period marked by the withdrawal of Japanese colonizers and the arrival of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist forces. To do this, I will first analyse the historical context on which the work is based, then contextualize the environment in which it was produced, and finally, through a close reading of the graphic novel itself, demonstrate how the author addresses significant events such as the 1945 Raid on Taipei, the repatriation of Japanese nationals after World War II, and the reconstruction of Taiwan's rail infrastructure.

Keywords: Taiwanese history; Taiwanese comics; Japanese colonization; repatriation; Wind Chaser Under the Blue Sky

Resumen: Años atrás los cómics no solían considerarse un medio serio debido a la suposición de que su propósito principal era entretener. Sin embargo, la situación ha cambiado gradualmente en las últimas décadas gracias a un proceso de legitimación académica y, más importante aún, a obras que desafían la idea de que pertenecen a un medio de baja cultura. *Maus* de Art Spiegelman, por ejemplo, obliga a los lectores a mirar a los horrores del Holocausto, y la biografía gráfica *Erdoğan*, del periodista Can Dündar y el ilustrador Anwar, examina la vida y los actos del líder turco Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. En el mundo sinófono, especialmente en Taiwán, las novelas gráficas también tratan temas serios, como la historia y cuestiones sociales, incluidos los derechos LGBTQ, la memoria colectiva y la identidad nacional. Este trabajo se centra en *Wind Chaser Under the Blue Sky* del autor taiwanés Jason Chien, para ofrecer un estudio de caso sobre cómo una novela gráfica puede tratar múltiples asuntos del pasado reciente del país, especialmente aquellos relacionados con el período de la posguerra, marcado por la retirada de los colonizadores japoneses y la llegada de las fuerzas nacionalistas de Chiang Kai-shek. Primero se analizará el contexto histórico en el que se basa la obra, luego se contextualizará el entorno en el que se ha producido y, finalmente, a través de una lectura de la novela gráfica, se expondrá cómo el autor aborda eventos significativos como el bombardeo aéreo de Taipei de 1945, la repatriación de ciudadanos japoneses después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y la reconstrucción de la infraestructura de Taiwán.

Palabras clave: historia de Taiwán; cómic taiwanés; colonización japonesa; repatriación; Wind Chaser Under the Blue Sky

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Supplementary information ↓

1. INTRODUCTION

Comics, in their contemporary form, have existed since at least the late nineteenth century (Giner Monfort, 2021, sec.1). Nonetheless, the academic study of graphic narrative is a relatively recent development. Despite Smith and Ducan's (2017, p. xxiii) observation that scholars in countries as diverse as Brazil, France, and the United States were already developing courses on comic art in the early 1970s, it is also true that these efforts remained largely overlooked in academic discourse until the beginning of the current century, which witnessed the proliferation of learned societies, such as the Canadian Society for the Study of Comics,¹ founded in 2010, the Asociación Cultural Tebeosfera², established in 2009 in Spain, and the Associação de Pesquisadores em Arte Sequencial,³ instituted in Brazil in 2012. Furthermore, scholarly publications in the form of journals, monographs, and edited volumes highlight the growing academic interest in comics. For example, *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*⁴ has been dedicated to graphic narrative research since 2010, and *CuCo, Cuadernos de cómic*,⁵ published by the University of Alcalá in Spain, has been a significant contributor to the field since 2013. Book-length studies have explored graphic narratives from various angles, addressing topics ranging from history (Earle & Lund, 2023) to translation (Zanettin, 2008; Rodríguez Rodríguez & España Pérez, 2016), narratology (Mikkonen, 2017), migration (Kauranen et al., 2023), and legislation (Fernández Sarasola, 2024). While this diversity of approaches demonstrates a clear multidisciplinary interest in the medium,⁶ it also indicates that «academically the medium is still struggling to find its own space within the structure of cultural studies, as it currently falls between the disciplines of literature, fine arts, and cultural analysis» (Arttime Otil, 2023, p.57).

Although «often dismissed as simple or childish» (Wierszewski, 2014, part 2) and, therefore, unable of addressing important subject matters, one can easily find examples of graphic narratives that challenge this assumption and cater, if not exclusively, at least primarily, to an adult audience. For instance, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) forces readers to grapple with the atrocities of the Holocaust, while the graphic biography *Erdoğan* (2021) by journalist Can Dündar and illustrator Anwar explores the life and actions of Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, one of the most contentious political figures of our time. Spanish artist Paco Roca's graphic narratives also prompt readers to consider sensitive and profound themes, such as loneliness and aging in *Arrugas* (2007, published in the United Kingdom in 2015 as *Wrinkles*), and postwar Spain in his recent work *Regreso al Edén* (2021).

Turning eastwards, manga and Korean *manhwa* and webtoons have also frequently delved into serious topics. By way of illustration, one can mention *Helter Skelter* (ヘルター スケルタ, 2003 in standalone book format) by Japanese mangaka Kyōko Okazaki, and *Your Letter* (연의 편지, 2019 in physical book

¹ <https://www.comicsscholars.ca/>

² <https://asociacionculturaltebeosfera.blogspot.com/>

³ <https://blogdaaspas.blogspot.com/#>

⁴ <https://www.comicsgrid.com/>

⁵ <https://erevistas.publicaciones.uah.es/ojs/index.php/cuadernosdecomic/index>

⁶ This multidisciplinary perspective is also reflected in a special issue of the academic journal *Ocnos. Revista de estudios sobre lectura*, edited in 2023 by Josep Ballester and Noelia Ibarra-Rius, which includes articles on topics such as migration, diversity, literary education, and multimodal translation, among others.

format) by Korean artist Hyeon A Cho. Set against the backdrop of the fashion industry, the former paints a stark portrait of the exploitation and abuse faced by women in the pursuit of beauty and recognition. First published in the 1990s, Okazaki's work eerily foreshadows the themes that would come to the forefront with the #MeToo movement, shedding light on the power dynamics and systemic issues that perpetuate abuse and exploitation in various industries. The latter, while appealing to a younger audience, is far from simplistic or juvenile and addresses significant issues such as bullying, childhood anxieties, and isolation. And the list of examples could continue extensively.

Shifting our focus to Taiwan, it is evident that numerous local graphic narratives, known as *manhua* (漫畫) in Chinese, delve into profound themes, too. For example, *Blossom* (百花百色, 2018) by D.S. tackles a significant identity issue: the protagonist, a young girl, confronts questions of gender within a traditional social context that is undergoing transformation following the legalization of same-sex marriage, which made Taiwan a pioneer in LGBTQ rights in Asia. Another interesting example would be *A Trip to the Asylum* (瘋人院之旅: 整個世界就是你的精神病院, 2020) by Pam Pam Liu which has a crucial mission: to challenge stereotypes by exposing the inner lives of psychiatric patients and shedding light on the painful realities they face during treatment in mental health facilities. *Son of Formosa* (來自清水的孩子, 2020, 2021), written by Yu Pei-yun and illustrated by Zhou Jian-xin, is a four-volume biography of human rights activist Tsai Kun-lin (1930-2023) and, indirectly, follows the development of Taiwan from Japanese colony to modern democracy, touching upon events such as the forty-year White Terror Period beginning in 1947, the expulsion of the Republic of China from the UN in 1971, and the end of martial law in 1987. These examples confirm that «the recognition of comic's communicative function and ability to lead complex issues and question to an adult reader, means a way of exploring new themes, formats and genres» (Ibarra-Rius & Ballester, 2023).

Local history appears to be a topic extensively explored by Taiwanese *manhua* artists, as evidenced by the numerous publications set back in time or focusing on specific historical events. This situation might draw parallels with the Franco-Belgian context where, as Brancato (2017, p.124) argues, historical comics have found their most significant and original expression, establishing a prominent position within the *bande dessinée* market and receiving considerable attention from readers. A similar situation can be observed in the Spanish context: according to data provided by Matly (2014), between 1976 and 2013, Spanish comic production included 206 works addressing the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), comprising 68 full-length albums and 138 short stories.

Many recent *manhua* are set during or immediately after the Japanese colonial era, spanning from 1895 until Japan's surrender at the end of World War II in 1945. This illustrates how contemporary artists engage with a significant period in the island's history. Examples include *Priceless: a Taiwanese Painter in Paris* (無價之畫: 巴黎的追光少年, 2021, 2022) by HOM, a two-volume graphic novel tracing the artistic journey of renowned local painter Yang San-lang from colonial Taiwan to Japan and eventually to Paris during the 1930s;⁷ *The Banana Sprout* (芭蕉的芽, 2022, 2024) by Zuo Hsuan, also set in 1930s Taiwan and revolving around the daily lives, academic pursuits, and literary endeavors of two high school classmates – one Taiwanese and one Japanese – who have contrasting personalities and identities; *Plant Collectors' Notebook* (採集人的野帳, 2021, 2023, 2024) by Ejan, a four-part graphic novel, set against the backdrop of Japanese imperial botanical studies in the 1920s, and documenting the lives of historical figures associated with the Taipei Botanical Garden's herbarium. In my opinion, besides the shared timeframe, these graphic narratives often depict Japanese rule through a nostalgic lens that softens the harsh realities of colonization and subjugation by an external power. In contrast, Ruan Guang-min's *Tsit kuáinn tshìn-á* (一桿秤仔, "The Steelyard", 2023) takes a more direct approach by focusing on the brutality of the colonizer. This graphic novel is an adaptation of the groundbreaking short story by Lōa Hō, the father of modern Taiwanese literature, first published in 1926.

This article delves into *Wind Chaser Under the Blue Sky* (青空下的追風少年, 2023; *Wind Chaser*, hereafter) by Jason Chien (簡嘉誠 in Sinitic script), a graphic novel that uses Taiwan's recent history

⁷ In 2022, the graphic novel received the Golden Comic Award for best *manhua*, one of the highest accolades in the Taiwanese industry, and has also recently been translated into Italian and French.

as its backdrop, particularly the complex situation following World War II, marked by the withdrawal of Japanese colonizers and the arrival of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist (or Kuomintang, KMT) forces. The main objective of this study is to demonstrate that Taiwanese *manhua* do not shy away from historical matters, thereby illustrating that graphic narratives transcend mere juvenile entertainment. Specifically, using *Wind Chaser* as a case study, I will analyze how Taiwanese comics incorporate sensitive themes from the past and make them relevant for today's readership. The reasons for choosing Chien's *manhua* are manyfold. Firstly, because the work addresses a broad spectrum of significant historical issues, ranging from the Allies' air bombing of Taipei in 1945 to the subsequent arrival of mainland Chinese personnel following Japan's surrender, from the forced repatriation of Japanese nationals to the reconstruction of the island's damaged railroads. Secondly, because within Taiwan's comic industry, *Wind Chaser* holds a particularly distinguished place: not only did it win the top honor at the Japan International Manga Award in 2024, but it achieved this feat unanimously, a remarkable recognition by any standard (Yang & Yang, March 6, 2024). Lastly, since historical research played a crucial role in the genesis of *Wind Chaser*, the *manhua*'s very existence is deeply tied to the past. This is evident, among other things, in the fact that the work was inspired by historical documents on Taiwan's railway stored by the National Archives Administration.

In the following sections, I will perform a comprehensive examination of Jason Chien's *Wind Chaser*. This analysis will be conducted in three stages. First, I will delve into the historical context that forms the foundation of the graphic novel. Next, I will investigate the environment that fostered its creation. Finally, through a close reading of the *manhua*, I will demonstrate how Chien incorporates significant historical events – the 1945 Taipei Air Raid, the post-World War II repatriation of Japanese nationals, and Taiwan's infrastructure reconstruction – into his narrative. Comics are defined by a unique language that combines textual and visual elements. The textual component supports the visuals to varying degrees, while the visual aspect encompasses elements like panel sizes, kinetic lines, speech bubbles, and color (de Cabo Baigorri, 2014, p.362). My analysis will take both components into account.

2. HISTORICAL ISSUES IN *WIND CHASER UNDER THE BLUE SKY*

Published in 2023 in Taiwan, *Wind Chaser* is Jason Chien's⁸ most recent *manhua*. Set immediately after the 1945 "retrocession" (光復, *guangfu* in Chinese, meaning "to recover"), which marks the liberation of Taiwan from fifty years of Japanese colonization and its "return" to Chinese rule,⁹ the narrative frequently shifts to wartime Taipei through flashbacks. This technique allows the reader to move between the war and postwar environments, which, despite being politically and socially distinct, are deeply interconnected – the latter emerging as a direct consequence of the former.

The graphic novel opens with a visceral portrayal of wartime Taiwan, dominated by military aircraft, deafening explosions, and the air thick with the smell of gunpowder, immediately immersing the reader in the historical context. This opening scene echoes Arttime Otil's observation of Spanish comics focused on the country's civil war. The scholar contends that «[s]ome graphic novels use visual impact to capture the reader's attention, even appearing to want to elicit a reaction» (Arttime Otil, as in Alonso, October 7, 2023).

⁸ Although Chien earned a BA in English, he then turned to art and storytelling. He began his career as a financial cartoonist and created storyboards for animation studios and advertisements. Chien's creative drive led him to develop his own original graphic novels, both independently and in collaboration with others. *Time Train* (時空鐵道之旅, 2013) stands out as one of his most celebrated works, earning critical acclaim and the prestigious Golden Comic Award in 2013. More recent publications, such as *Back Street Alley* (消逝的後街光影, 2018), *The Movie Painter* (畫電影的人: 手繪海報的美好時光, 2021), and *Memories of an Actress* (女伶回憶錄, 2023), further established his reputation as a masterful storyteller. These *manhua*, which celebrate the past of Taiwan's film industry, were created in collaboration with the Taiwan Film & Audiovisual Institute (TFAI 國家電影及視聽文化中心) and showcase Chien's ability to blend his artistic vision with historical elements.

⁹ I use the term "return" in quotation marks because, strictly speaking, Taiwan had never been governed by the Chinese state prior to this period, hence it was rather a "cession". Indeed, up until 1945, the Republic of China, established in 1912, had never exercised any control over the island. Its predecessor, the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), was the last mainland authority to oversee it, but it had ceased to exist by the time Taiwan was liberated from Japanese rule.

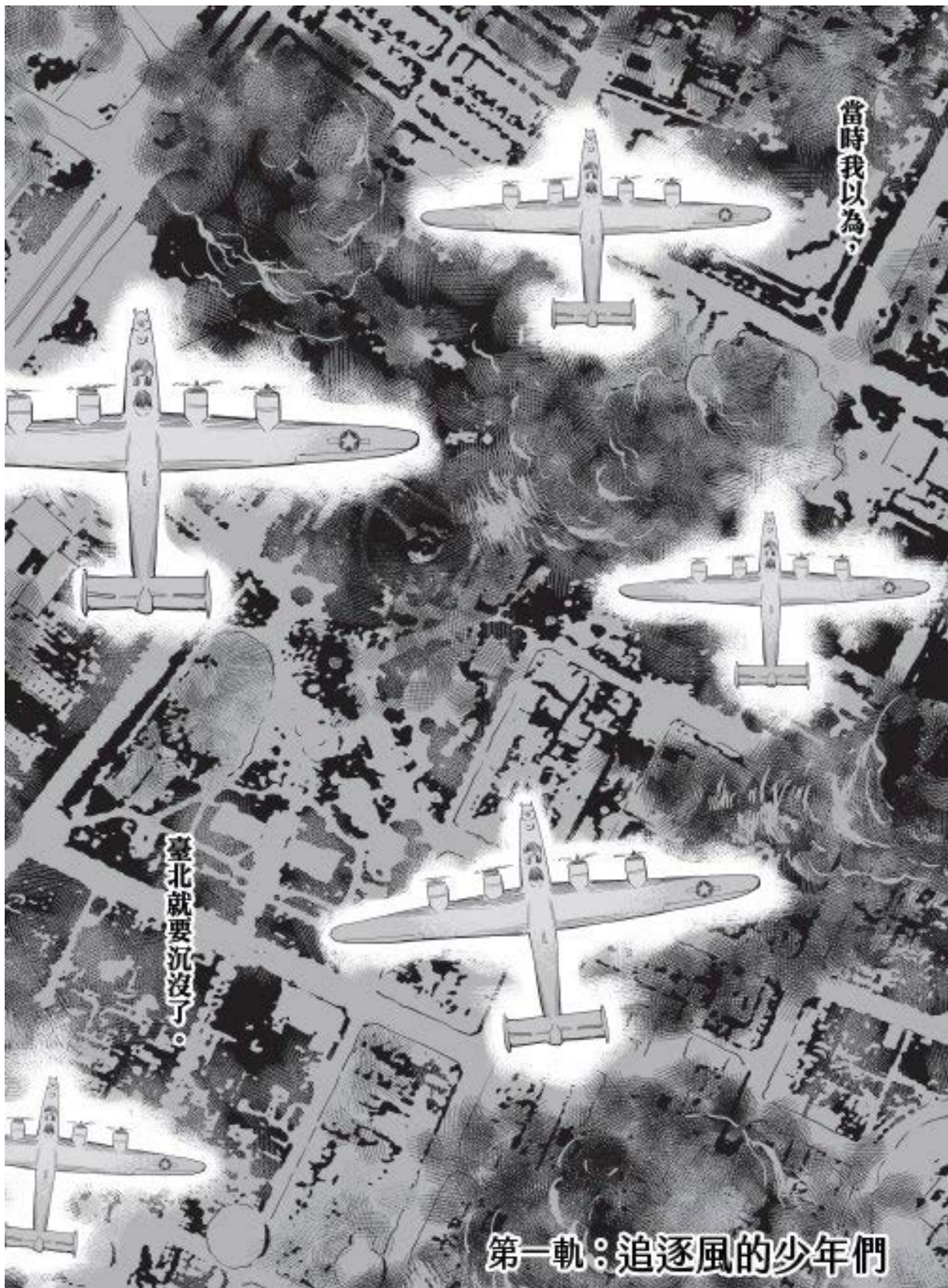


Figure 1. Tapei Air Raid. Source: *Wind Chaser*, p. 4.

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Amidst this chaos, we meet two passionate young men, united by their love for running and a shared ambition to leave their mark on Japanese athletics. One, Miyahara Ryo, an ethnic Japanese, is the

son of a railway technician and possesses a deep fascination with trains, a passion he shares with the other, initially known as Ida Tachimori. The postwar narrative, instead, focuses on Yin Li-sen (Tachimori's Sinitic name adopted after the Chinese Nationalist takeover), a local Taiwanese, as he pursues his dream of becoming a railway engineer, trains for the inaugural provincial games, and encounters Mr. Miyahara, Ryo's father. This meeting by chance unveils the elder Miyahara's grief over the loss of his son during the Taipei Air Raid – depicted in the opening (see [figure 1](#)) – and of his wife. Mr. Miyahara's character also serves to introduce an important theme within the narrative: the complex emotions surrounding repatriation to Japan. Having lived in Taiwan since childhood, Mr. Miyahara, like many others, no longer identifies with Japan, reflecting the personal and cultural disconnection experienced during this period by local ethnic Japanese. Although the graphic novel was intended to highlight the challenging conditions of Taiwan's railway network during wartime and its subsequent reconstruction, making the «train narrative» central, it also presents intimate stories. This approach allows fictitious characters to share experiences that may resonate with the Taiwanese public, echoing tales they might have heard from their parents or grandparents.

To better understand these historical elements, it is necessary to briefly contextualize Taiwan's situation in the first half of the twentieth century. This includes the period of Japanese colonization, the wartime era, Japan's withdrawal following its defeat in World War II and the subsequent takeover by the Republic of China.

2.1. Japanese rule over Taiwan (1895-1945)

In 1895, due to the Qing Dynasty's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Manchu rulers of China were compelled to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki, thus relinquishing sovereignty over Taiwan to a new emerging regional power: the Japanese empire.¹⁰ This marked the commencement of Japan's fifty-year rule over the island at the end of the nineteenth century. As suggested by Lee (2014, p.100), being Japan's first overseas territory, Taiwan was envisioned as a «model colony», which led the government to prioritize advancements in the economy, industry, and infrastructure. This included the construction of a railway network, implementation of vaccination programs, and the provision of running water. While these initiatives primarily served Japan's interests by tapping into Taiwan's resources, they also established a basis for the island's future growth and development. In the early years of colonial rule, the foundations for the effective governance of the colony were established. This was facilitated by an influx of people from Japan proper and Taiwan was by no means an exception. At the start of this period, 16,000 Japanese civilians relocated to Taiwan, integrating with the military contingent already stationed on the island (Connelly, 2009, p.14).¹¹ By the end of the colonial period, these settlers and their descendants numbered approximately 500,000 (Katakura, 2016). Watt (2009, p.2) notes that at the time of Japan's surrender following its defeat in World War II, about 9 percent of its population, which totaled 72 million, resided in its colonies.

It is quite common, even among the Taiwanese population, to regard the period of Japanese rule as the pinnacle of modernization. This perspective often overlooks or minimizes the various atrocities committed by the Japanese colonizers during their occupation. For instance, Lee (2014, p.102) describes that era as «literally the beginning of Taiwan's modernization (or westernization)». Furthermore, in its section on the Japanese colonial period, the National Museum of Taiwan History in Tainan places significant emphasis on governmental and administrative matters, underscoring the view that this era was crucial for the development of Taiwan's modern state infrastructure (Vickers, 2013, p.26).

¹⁰ Ching (2001, p.20) contends that Japan's colonial empire was unique for its concentration in northeastern Asia. Moreover, demographically both Taiwan and Korea, Japan's primary colonies, shared a significant racial and cultural affinity with the colonizers. This cultural connection distinguished Japan from other imperial powers, especially European ones, and profoundly influenced its approach to colonial governance.

¹¹ Between 1895 and 1945, although all inhabitants of Taiwan were considered Japanese subjects, the colonial administration classified the population into three primary groups: the *naichijin* (内地人, literally “people from the mainland” or Japan proper), the *hontōjin* (本島人, literally “people from the island”), referring to the ethnic Chinese residents of Taiwan, and the *banjin* (蕃人, roughly translated as “barbarians”), which encompassed the Austronesian aborigines (Katakura, 2016).

2.2. The wartime era

As Louzon (2018, p.164) contends, World War II saw a slow ramp-up of Taiwanese involvement in the Japanese military. Initially, the colonizer harbored anxieties about equipping their Taiwanese subjects, fearing potential allegiance with China. However, beginning in 1937, Taiwanese men were recruited for various support roles in Chinese regions sharing similar dialects. This was followed by a shift towards volunteer enlistment in the army (1942) and navy (1943). Finally, with the looming threat of an American invasion of the island, conscription was introduced in January 1945. This is vividly depicted in *Wind Chaser* (figure 2), where Ryo and Tachimori are shown running on school grounds under the watchful eye of a military trainer shouting: «You need to strengthen your bodies and prepare to contribute to the future of the Greater Japanese Empire!» (Chien, 2023, p. 18).¹² By the end of the conflict, a staggering number of more than 200,000 Taiwanese men had served the Japanese army in various military capacities.



Figure 2. Military training at school. Source: *Wind Chaser*, p.15

During the final years of Japan's rule, amidst escalating wartime hostilities, Taiwan experienced significant casualties, affecting both Japanese military personnel and local civilians. One of the bleakest episodes in the island's wartime period occurred on May 31, 1945, when a squadron of three American aircraft conducted low altitude bombing raids over downtown Taipei, transforming it into a desolate landscape. This event marked a tragic turning point, with more than 3,000 innocent civilians either killed or injured (Zhong, 2020). Jason Chien's depiction of the event deserves commendation for its historical accuracy, as he chooses to open his graphic novel with an event that has only recently gained renewed attention in public consciousness. The autocratic KMT government, which governed postwar Taiwan, deliberately downplayed the bombings because the United States, which conducted the raids, was a wartime ally. Moreover, the KMT aimed to reinforce the narrative that Taiwan was an integral part of China, and highlighting the bombings would have undermined this perspective (Cheung, June 7, 2015).

2.3. The “return” to Chinese rule

The incorporation of Taiwan into the Republic of China came on October 25, 1945. However, this “re”unification was not as smooth as anticipated. As noted by Copper (June 24, 2024), while the

¹² This and all subsequent translations from the original Chinese are my own.

island became indeed part of China, at first it was not treated as a standard Chinese province. In fact, Chiang Kai-shek surprised many by appointing a governor-general, a position mirroring the one held by Japanese military governors. This decision reflected the challenge of filling the void left by the departing colonizer: officials, administrators, and technicians. Taiwan's economy, which had been heavily integrated with and dependent on Japan's, needed restructuring too. Additionally, the legal and cultural systems inherited from Japanese rule required replacement with new frameworks. The situation was further complicated by the fact that Taiwan, unlike other colonies such as Korea and Manchuria, had undergone significant "Japanization" (Gold, 2016, p. 41). This, along with the new administrators' frequent distrust of local citizens suspected of collaborating with the Japanese, made assimilating the island into the framework of mainland Chinese provinces particularly challenging.

The process of integrating Taiwan into the Republic of China involved various policies aimed at reducing Japanese influence among the local population. One significant initiative was the replacement of Japanese with Mandarin, the official language of the new administration. However, this policy encountered numerous challenges since, despite Mandarin being a Sinitic language like Hokkien and Hakka, the primary tongues spoken by the island's Han population, it bore little resemblance to them and was largely unintelligible to most Taiwanese people. Hence, the complete linguistic substitution only occurred after the Nationalists retreated to the island in 1949.

Another strategy the new administration implemented to de-Japanize and, at the same time, Sinicize the island focused on sports. Hwang and Chiu (2010, p. 42) note that under Japanese rule, sports played a key role in promoting Japanese identity, with events featuring the raising of the imperial flag, the national anthem, and speeches from officials. Given the strong association with fostering a Japanese consciousness among the locals, upon taking over the island, the KMT government initially aimed to erase the Japanese sports legacy. When their strategy proved unsuccessful, they began to use sport games for propaganda purposes. Modeled after the colonial era events, the new ceremonies were now «presided over by the KMT party chairman, and the requisite singing of the national anthem, the president's keynote speech, reciting of slogans, the singing of patriotic songs, dances and drills, these events now directly served the interests of the state» (Hwang & Chiu, 2010, p. 43-44). *Wind Chaser* depicts the First Provincial Sports Games, where the protagonist Yin Li-sen participates as a track and field athlete. The opening ceremony featured Chiang Kai-shek himself delivering the opening speech to a cheerful audience, underscoring the significance the new administration placed on such events.

Regarding population, the initial years following Japan's withdrawal from Taiwan are notably marked by the repatriation of Japanese settlers and their descendants, a theme prominently featured in Jason Chien's work, particularly through the character of Mr. Miyahara, Ryo's father. These settlers and their descendants, known as *wansei* (灣生, literally "Taiwan born"), were initially optimistic due to the lenient treatment by the then-administrator Chen Yi (陳儀). However, the situation changed rapidly, as the KMT administration not only expedited the repatriation of Japanese nationals but also froze their assets, allowing them to return to Japan with only 1,000 yen in cash and minimal personal belongings, as shown in *Wind Chaser* as well. This abrupt shift rendered their lifetime efforts futile, transforming them from former rulers into foreigners, and fostering the realization that Taiwan was no longer their home. This impressed upon them the hardships of being citizens of a defeated nation (Ou, 2003, p.204).

Just like Mr. Miyahara, many of these individuals were technicians who were difficult to replace, especially during a period when Taiwan urgently needed such highly skilled personnel to rebuild its infrastructure. It is for this reason that, in the early postwar days, the Railway administration still employed a significant number of Japanese personnel, many of whom held managerial roles. Upon the Chinese takeover, the local railway system counted almost 6,000 Japanese employees. However, following the first wave of repatriations in 1946, this number dwindled sharply to less than 500. These retained personnel were predominantly involved in management and technical roles within the maintenance department. After the completion of the second repatriation round, the number of Japanese employees further reduced to only 39 (Hsu, 2011, p.85).

The departure of engineers and technicians exacerbated the challenges of restoring Taiwan's rail network to operational standards. Reconstruction of the rail system was crucial in the immediate postwar period, as highlighted in *Wind Chaser*. The infrastructure had suffered extensive war damage and neglect: over half of the sleepers were rotted, rails were worn, bridges and roadbeds had collapsed in multiple locations, nearly half of the locomotives were damaged, carriages were in disrepair, equipment was unusable, and maintenance facilities were incomplete. These conditions rendered the system non-operational across the entire network. Extensive repairs were necessary, including the restoration of stations and buildings across the island, the renovation of workshops in the two main centers of Taipei and Kaohsiung, and the maintenance of the telecommunications system. The scope of these reconstruction efforts underscores the significant challenges faced during this period (Ye, 2014).

3. TELLING THE "TAIWAN STORY" THROUGH COMICS

Jason Chien's work addresses all the above historical themes, either through in-depth exploration or brief references, offering a portrayal of life under Japanese colonial rule and during the immediate postwar period. He examines the uncertain futures of young men, both ethnic Japanese and local Taiwanese, who faced potential conscription. Additionally, *Wind Chaser* delves into the Japanese contribution to Taiwan's railway infrastructure, which was crucial for colonial modernization efforts. He also investigates the complexities associated with the withdrawal of the Japanese and the arrival of mainland Chinese, focusing on postwar reconstruction and the identity challenges faced by mainland Japanese settlers in Taiwan. In doing so, Chien provides valuable insights into the diverse dynamics of Taiwanese society during those times.

It should be noted that *Wind Chaser*, as a cultural and entertainment product recounting events from Taiwan's recent past through personal stories to illustrate a broader national narrative, is not an isolated case. Recently, in the local comics industry there has been a notable increase in graphic narratives that center on specific aspects or individuals – whether real or fictional, well-known or obscure – who lived through challenging or significant times. Interestingly, many of these *manhua* have been created through collaborations between publishers and government agencies, frequently facilitated by grants and financial support from the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA 文化內容策進院),¹³ a state institution dedicated to the production, distribution, and promotion of Taiwan's cultural and creative industries, including comics, both at home and abroad.

Among graphic narratives that address Taiwan's recent history, notable examples include *Priceless – A Taiwanese Painter in Paris* by HOM and *The Banana Sprout* by Zuo Hsuan, both of which are set in the 1930s. *Priceless* was created in collaboration with the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (NTMoFA 國立台灣美術館), which operates under the direct supervision of the country's Ministry of Culture. Also focusing on specific events connected to the island's past are three other *manhua* by Jason Chien, which the artist created in partnership with the TFAI (see footnote 8), a public institution dedicated to preserving and restoring local audiovisual material: *Backstreet Alley* examines the rise of the Hokkien-language film industry in the 1960s and its subsequent decline in the 1970s; *The Movie Painter*, set in the 1960s, focuses on the artists who manually painted film posters; *Memories of an Actress* is the story of Bai Hua, a fictional actress whose career shifts in the late 1960s due to the rise of cable television and increased government support for Mandarin-language movies.

All these instances illustrate a local environment supportive of comic productions set in or dealing with the past, particularly the twentieth century, often endorsed and facilitated by official institutions. This trend reflects a nostalgic fascination with history. Neri (2019, p. 2) noted that «[i]n recent years a nostalgia (huaijiu) mood has overwhelmed many cultural products in Taiwan: the quantity of nostalgic expressions for the recent past, and the enthusiastic response they invariably arouse make the retro mania (or vintage attitude) one of the most important aesthetic trend [sic] of the years 2000».

¹³ <https://en.taicca.tw/>

Regarding the colonial era depicted in works like *Wind Chaser*, *Priceless*, and *The Banana Sprout*, audiences are presented with a somewhat sanitized image of the colonizer. This aligns with Neri's (2015, par.12) observations that there has been an increase in texts fondly and nostalgically exploring Japanese cultural heritage in recent years. While the scholar primarily discusses this phenomenon in relation to films by contemporary Taiwanese directors, highlighting their complex and ambivalent connection with Japan characterized by nostalgia, daydreams, and regret over the departure of the former colonizer, I argue that similar sentiments are also portrayed in the graphic narratives mentioned here. Neri (2015, par.18) contends that this perspective may arise because, for Taiwan – a nation facing diplomatic isolation and enduring ongoing threats from China – Japan serves as an ideological, social, and political reference point. This view persists despite dissenting voices within the island that do not share the same enthusiasm for the former colonizer, focusing instead on remembering the injustices of the occupation. According to Berry (August 11, 2022), many Taiwanese, particularly the older generation, harbor a «Japan complex», characterized by memories of the occupation era viewed through a lens of fond nostalgia. However, according to the scholar, immersing oneself in films depicting the Japanese colonial era could also serve as a means of diverting attention from China's looming presence over the island (Berry, August 11, 2022), a perspective that could similarly apply to graphic narratives.

4. WIND CHASER AND ITS PORTRAYAL OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

In this section of the study, I will examine how Jason Chien uses *Wind Chaser* to portray the historical elements discussed in section 2.3. Specifically, attention will be given to the 1945 Taipei Air Raid, to Japan's withdrawal from the island and its handover to China, to the reconstruction of the railway infrastructure, and the repatriation of Japanese settlers and *wansei*.

As mentioned in section 2.2, the 1945 air raid over Taipei stands out as one of the darkest episodes of World War II concerning Taiwan. In just two pages at the beginning of the *manhua*, Jason Chien powerfully evokes the devastation and helplessness of Taipei and its residents as American aircraft bomb the city. A full-page image (see figure 1), dominated by dark shades of grey and black, conveys the profound impact of the event, accompanied by minimal text stating: «At that time, I thought that Taipei was about to fall» (Chien, 2023, p.4). This opening flashback is deliberate, as it foreshadows a pivotal event in which Ryo loses his life, leaving his friend Tachimori/Li-sen burdened with a sense of guilt that will shape many of his subsequent life choices.

This event also serves to underscore the historical context wherein both Taiwanese men and ethnic Japanese soldiers fought alongside each other under the Japanese empire, thereby presenting a narrative that diverges from the typical colonizer-colonized dynamic. This theme recurs throughout the story, such as when the young protagonists and their classmates – comprising Taiwanese, Japanese settlers, and *wansei* – face uncertainty over whether they can pursue their aspirations or will be conscripted to the frontline (Chien, 2023, p.38). Mr. Miyahara's desire to understand what happened on that day allows the author to explore the events more profoundly. It is revealed that Ryo and Tachimori/Li-sen were dispatched to Taipei by their commander to fetch medication crucial for saving civilian lives. In my view, Chien's portrayal humanizes war events, and although he does so with a touch of naivety, he shifts away from a simplistic narrative of virtuous Allies versus villainous Japanese imperialists. Instead, he delves into the lives and motivations of ordinary individuals embroiled in the conflict. This approach offers the author the opportunity to re-tell Taiwan's colonial and wartime history in a way that overlooks Japan's oppressive actions, corroborating my idea that insights from scholars like Neri (2015, 2019) and Berry (2022) on a somewhat romanticized representation of this era in films apply to graphic narratives as well.

A few months after the Taipei Air Raid, Japan capitulated, leading to the withdrawal of its military and civil administration from the island. As a result, Taiwan was ceded to the Republic of China, which assumed control over local affairs. One significant change under the new administration was the shift in the official language from Japanese to Mandarin, also known as Standard Chinese or *guoyu* (國語, meaning “national language”). This transition posed a substantial challenge for many Taiwanese people, as the majority spoke Hokkien, Hakka, Austronesian languages, or Japanese, rather than Mandarin. In *Wind Chaser*, this

linguistic shift is illustrated through various scenes. Although Japanese was initially retained to ease the transition, the difficulty of adapting to Mandarin is evident. For instance, Tachimori/Li-sen notes during a university lecture (see figure 3) that, «while professors still teach in Japanese, there are now almost no Japanese students left in the classroom – a scenario that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago» (Chien, 2023, p.15). The visual language of the scene also reinforces this shift: the room is only partially illuminated by sunlight, with the Japanese script on the blackboard in shadow, symbolizing the fading presence of the language of the colonizer on the island as it was gradually supplanted by Mandarin.

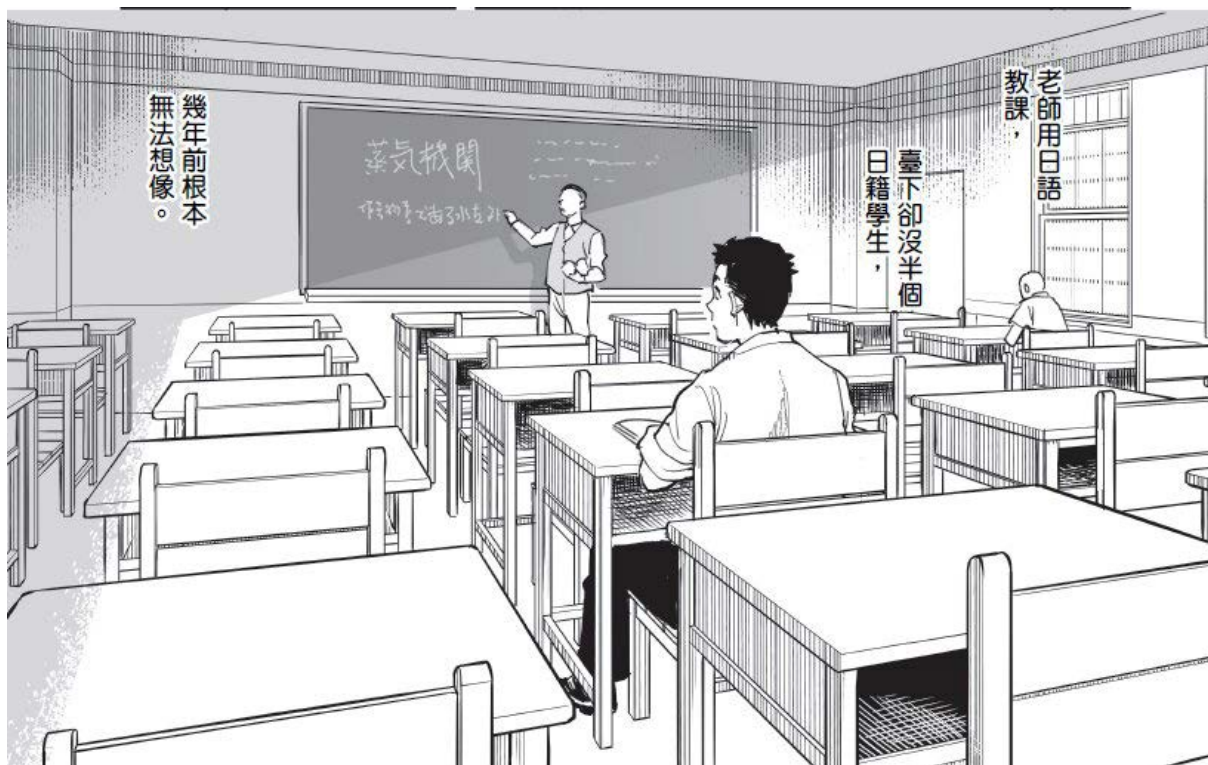


Figure 3. The linguistic shift from Japanese to Mandarin. Source: *Wind Chaser*, p.15

Further discussing the new language policy with a fellow student, Tachimori/Li-sen remarks: «Who would have thought that at our age we would have to study a completely new language from scratch» and he continues: «And to think that, at first, many people didn't want the Japanese teachers to stay on. It's a good thing they didn't leave; otherwise, we wouldn't understand a thing now» (Chien, 2023, p.16). These dialogues highlight the unfamiliarity of Mandarin to the islanders. While this is certainly accurate, it also suggests a nostalgic sentiment towards the former colonizer, who provided a language of instruction that was accessible and familiar to the local population. Chien conveys the idea that, during times of significant change, familiarity with Japanese acted as a stabilizing anchor for many locals. However, the graphic novel fails to explicitly mention the colonial administration's policy of linguistic assimilation, which aimed to Japanize the island by enforcing the use of Japanese as the sole acceptable language in all public settings and mandating the adoption of Japanese names (Liu, 2012, p.112). This aspect is indirectly highlighted in the narrative through the character of Ida Tachimori/Yin Li-sen, the Taiwanese protagonist who initially goes by a Japanese name but transitions to a Chinese identity after 1945. This shift is illustrated by one of his ethnic Japanese classmates, who dresses in a traditional yukata and says: «Ida, over here! Oh, sorry, I got it wrong again! Now I must call you "Yin", using your Chinese surname» (Chien, 2023, p.85). As noted by Cheung (February 7, 2016), many reverted to their Chinese names immediately after the Japanese surrendered, even prior to the KMT's official implementation of a reversal policy.¹⁴

¹⁴ Due to the reversal policy, confusion arose when the KMT started confiscating all properties belonging to Japanese people, since it was hard to distinguish between property owned by the colonizers and those belonging to Taiwanese with Japanese names. The situation led to numerous disputes in the early days of Chinese rule over the island (Cheung, February 7, 2016).

In the *manhua*, the portrayal of the KMT forces is neutral, yet they are by no means depicted as the saviors of the island. For example, when Tachimori/Li-sen contracts cholera and is hospitalized, the narrative indirectly attributes the disease to China, characterizing it as an epidemic-afflicted region: «Following the war, cholera spread to Taiwan from mainland China due to a shortage of health control personnel at the island's ports. The epidemic originated in the south and spread northward. This led to the initiation of a large-scale vaccination campaign and the implementation of rigorous environmental sanitation measures. Official statistics for 1946 indicate 3,809 cholera cases on the island, resulting in 2,201 fatalities» (Chien, 2023, p.98). As Liu (2014, par.23) observed, there was a concerted effort to curb the spread of epidemics originating from China by introducing updated port quarantine regulations at the end of 1946. Operations at the ports were managed by local personnel under the guidance of KMT officials trained by American advisors. Moreover, the *manhua* subtly highlights that, beyond not casting Chinese mainlanders as post-war saviors, Taiwan's historical, cultural, and social divergence from China after fifty years of Japanese rule has rendered the island a unique and non-assimilable entity.

Linked to the arrival of the Chinese forces is the rehabilitation of the war-damaged railway network. As KMT officials strive to expedite the reconstruction of these railways, it becomes evident that their efforts are not driven by the necessity to restore the island's transportation infrastructure, but rather by a desire to present a favorable image of themselves. This sentiment is echoed by a senior official who emphasizes that «We cannot afford any mistakes. This year's provincial games are an opportunity to celebrate the first anniversary of the island's liberation. Do you understand, therefore, how significant they are? The Generalissimo [Chiang Kai-shek] himself will attend the opening ceremony» (Chien, 2023, p.60). Thus, it becomes clear that these initiatives are undertaken to make an impression on Chiang Kai-shek during his visit to Taiwan. From Chien's portrayal, it is evident that the KMT officials were more focused on impressing the new ruler rather than catering to the island's actual needs. Their efforts to rebuild the railways seemed less about restoring essential infrastructure and more about crafting a positive image, revealing their detachment from the real struggles of the local population.

One of the most poignant issues addressed by *Wind Chaser* in relation to the transfer of Taiwan from Japan to the Republic of China is the repatriation of Japanese settlers and *wansei*. Chien skillfully humanizes the personal stories of those who had called Taiwan home for decades. For many of them, Taiwan was the only home they knew, having left Japan during their childhood, as illustrated by the case of Mr. Miyahara, or having been born on the island and never having set foot on the *naichi* (內地, literally "mainland"), as Japan proper was known. In a flashback (see figure 4) to years before the 1945 events, visually distinguished by grey panels and slightly wavy panel borders, Mr. Miyahara explains this to Ryo. The son asks: «Dad, when did you arrive in Taiwan?», to which he replies: «About thirty years ago, I wasn't even in elementary school yet!» (Chien, 2023, p.66). Later, when asked by Tachimori/Li-sen to describe his hometown in Japan, the man acknowledges that it is markedly different – and harsher – compared to the island. He reflects: «I have lived in Taiwan for so long that my memories of that snowy country have become blurred. Here, on the other hand, I have found a mild and pleasant climate. Taking the train has always been a delightful experience» (Chien, 2023, p.182). Mr. Miyahara's unwillingness to leave Taiwan is clearly illustrated, as the narrator observes that «the one who was most reluctant to leave was the first to get the repatriation notice. Mr. Miyahara's heart is just not in it; this is a significant blow for him» (Chien, 2023, p.77).



Figure 4. «Dad, when did you arrive in Taiwan?». Source: *Wind Chaser*, p.66

The repatriation of ethnic Japanese to the *naichi* certainly evoked strong emotional responses and shattered their sense of belonging, while also affecting their financial situation. This is exemplified by one of Mr. Miyahara's acquaintances suggesting: «A friend of mine had a stall in Kodamachō [a neighborhood in colonial Taipei]. If you need to sell anything before returning home, I can ask him» (Chien, 2023, p.77). As one of Tachimori/Li-sen's Taiwanese friends clarifies: «Ethnic Japanese preparing for repatriation are permitted to leave the island with a maximum of one thousand yen. That's why they are trying to sell all their belongings» (Chien, 2023, p.85).

At the conclusion of the graphic novel, we witness Mr. Miyahara boarding a train likely bound for the nearest port for repatriation. Nonetheless, the narrative ends with Tachimori/Li-sen reflecting on the enduring legacy of Mr. Miyahara and his son, thereby implicitly recognizing the contribution of ethnic

Japanese to Taiwan: «He's gone. Yet both Mr. Miyahara and his son have left their mark here on the island. And I will do everything to ensure it does not fade away» (Chien, 2023, p.186-187). This is, in my opinion, in alignment with viewpoints such as Katakura's (2016), who posits that the accomplishments of the Japanese colonial era have contributed to the subsequent development of Taiwanese society, and that influence continues to resonate in the country.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Through this study, I have explored how comics, traditionally dismissed as non-serious, engage with significant historical themes – a practice they have embraced for some time. Specifically, by focusing on Sinophone comics from Taiwan, I analyzed Jason Chien's *Wind Chaser*, a graphic novel which delves into Taiwan's history from Japanese colonization to its transfer to Chinese control under Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist party. It examines pivotal events such as the 1945 Taipei Air Raid, Japan's withdrawal, railway reconstruction, and the repatriation of ethnic Japanese people.

After close reading, it becomes evident that while it does not overtly depict Japanese occupiers positively or the KMT administration negatively, it humanizes the former through characters like Mr. Miyahara and his son, Ryo. This underscores how Taiwanese graphic novels reflect what Berry (2022) calls the «Japan complex» and echo the nostalgic portrayal of colonial memories observed by Neri (2015) in some Taiwanese films. This humanization of the colonizer – a recurring theme in other recent Taiwanese graphic novels as well – combined with a strong focus on the personal, private lives of the characters, makes these *manhua* particularly engaging and relevant for today's audiences, who largely seek entertainment. As others have pointed out, especially regarding recent Taiwanese films (Berry, 2022), most audiences in contemporary Taiwan have no firsthand experience of the Japanese colonial era or the associated racism and exploitation.

This engagement with the island's recent past and its evolving national identity, however, is not merely incidental; it is often a collateral effect tied to broader cultural objectives promoted, directly or indirectly, by official actors and the government. As previously noted, many of these graphic narratives have received formal backing or emerged through collaboration with state agencies and institutions. As Berry (2022) has observed, cultural products addressing the Japanese colonial period frequently serve not to romanticize or idealize that era, but rather to underscore Taiwan's distinctiveness from China. By doing so, they resist China's efforts to assimilate and reassert control over the island. The case of *Wind Chaser* is particularly instructive, presenting the postwar island as profoundly shaped by fifty years of Japanese colonial rule. At the same time, it highlights the struggles many faced in adapting to the new order imposed by the Chinese KMT regime, thereby framing Taiwan as a historically, culturally, and socially distinct entity from mainland China.

Through this close reading of *Wind Chaser*, I have sought to demonstrate how contemporary graphic narratives from Taiwan not only tackle sensitive historical themes but also actively contribute to broader debates about the island's past, present, and future. These discussions hold urgency in a time when Taiwan's relationship with its cross-strait neighbor remains fraught with tension. While the focus on a single graphic novel necessarily limits the scope of my findings, the study highlights the potential of *manhua* to serve as a medium for examining and reshaping historical memory in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences. This preliminary analysis invites further research into a wider range of graphic narratives, particularly those that engage with Taiwan's colonial and postwar histories, offering insights into how these *manhua* articulate a cultural identity distinct from the Chinese mainland. Additionally, the interplay between state-sponsored initiatives and creative expression in shaping these stories offers fertile ground for exploring how official narratives intersect with individual and collective memories in the ongoing construction of Taiwanese identity.

By extending this inquiry, we, as scholars, can deepen our understanding of how Taiwan's recent past is represented in comics and its significance not only for local audiences seeking to engage with their own history but also for global readers. For those of us observing from abroad, these narratives provide a

vital window into a region often mistakenly regarded as peripheral, yet undeniably central to critical conversations about identity, memory, and geopolitics in today's world.

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