

From Words to Balloons: Translating Taiwanese Literature into Graphic Narratives

Une nouvelle représentation de la littérature taïwanaise : Traduire, transformer, interpréter
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The “Taiwan Story” through frames and balloons

- **Taiwan Comic Base** 台灣漫畫基地: Established in 2019 as a government-backed platform for showcasing and supporting local comics.
- Key Initiatives:
- **Taiwan Comic City (TCC)**, online platform to showcase works.
- **Books from Taiwan (BFT)**, supports international publication of Taiwanese comics.
- **Grant for the Publication of Taiwanese Works in Translation**, encourages foreign translations.
- **Impact of official backing**: Strengthened the comic industry and increased international visibility.



Historical challenges and industry revival

- **Censorship (1966-1987):** The “Comic Censorship System” imposed severe restrictions, leading to stifled creativity, with many artists abandoning their craft.
- **Japanese Manga Influence:** Due to censorship, publishers turned to importing and illegally reprinting Japanese manga, shaping local tastes.
- **Post-Martial Law Revival:** After 1987, TW comics began regaining momentum with new policies supporting local creators.
- **Government Initiatives in the 21st Century:**
 - Increased funding and global promotion efforts.
 - Collaboration with museums and archives to develop historical and cultural narratives in comics.

International recognition and soft power

- **Global Achievements:**

- ***Wind Chaser Under the Blue Sky*** (青空下的追風少年 2023), by Jason Chien's (簡嘉誠), won the Gold Award at the Japan International Manga Award.

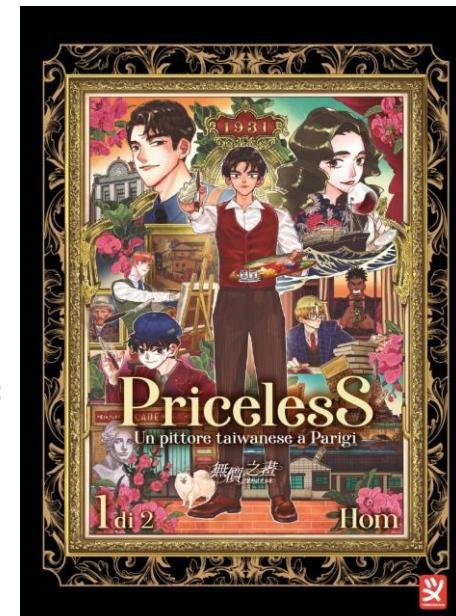


- ***Priceless: A Taiwanese Painter in Paris*** (無價之畫：巴黎的追光少年 2021 & 2022), by HOM, won the Golden Comic Award and secured translations into multiple languages.

- **Taiwan Pavilion at Angoulême (since 2011)**

- **Cultural Diplomacy Through Comics:**

- Promotes TW as a beacon of artistic freedom in the Sinophone world.
- TCC and TAICCA highlight TW's democratic values and diversity.
- Former president Tsai Ing-wen emphasized democracy as the core of TW identity.



TW Comics as Cultural Diplomacy

- **Beyond Cultural Products:** TW manhua represent both artistic expression and a statement of TW's commitment to freedom and inclusivity.
- **Government-Supported Soft Power:** The comic industry is actively used to highlight TWn's democratic values, distinguishing it from its cross-strait counterpart.
- **Cultural Diplomacy Over Political Channels:** In the face of declining official diplomatic allies, TW uses cultural diplomacy to maintain its global presence.
- **Taiwan's Soft Power Narrative:** Enables TW to shape its own narrative on the global stage.
- **Diversity in the “Taiwan Story” through Comics:**
 - Representation of TW's small-town life and historical periods.
 - Stories set during Japanese rule (1895-1945) and the pre-democratic era (1947-1987).
 - LGBTQ+ themes, environmental concerns, and modern explorations of sexuality.

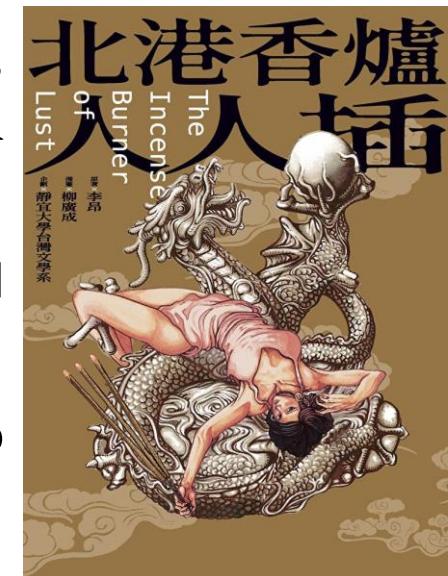
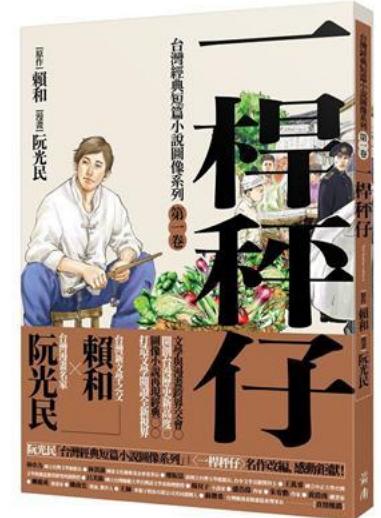
Graphically Re/telling the Taiwan Story

- TW comics adapt stories from other mediums, enhancing TW's cultural narrative.
- Cinema, literature, and theater are primary sources for adaptation.
- These adaptations promote TW's story to new audiences and amplify its global visibility.

• Examples of Literary Adaptations:

- ✓ Ruan Guang-min (阮光民): Adaptations from the Japanese colonial period (e.g., *The Steelyard* 一桿秤仔 and *A Small Town Planted with Papaya Trees* 植有木瓜樹的小鎮).
- ✓ Wu Ming-yi (吳明益): *The Illusionist on the Skywalk* (天橋上的魔術師) adapted into a two-part graphic novel.
- ✓ Li Ang (李昂): *The Incense Burner of Lust* (北港香爐人人插) adapted into manhua by Lau Kwong Shing (柳廣成).

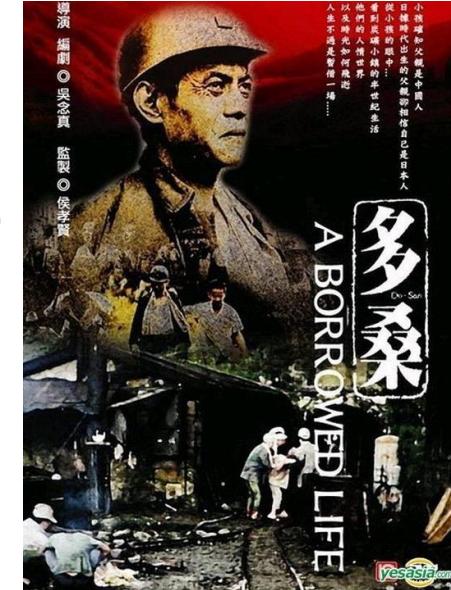
- **Themes:** colonialism, urban nostalgia, sexuality, gender roles.



Graphically Re/telling the Taiwan Story

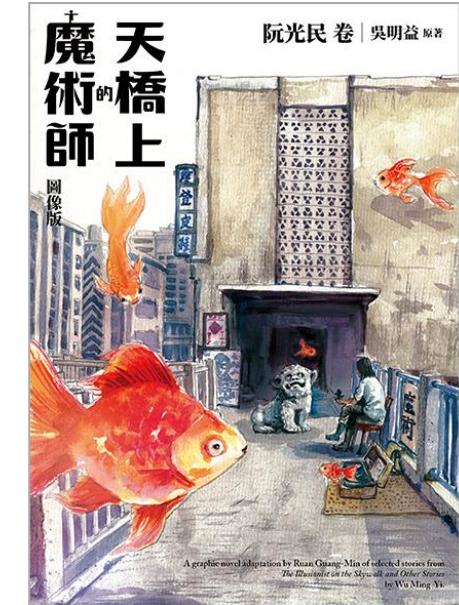
- Cinema to Comics:

- Wu Nien-jen's (吳念真) film *A Borrowed Life* (多桑) adapted → *Dosan* (多桑) by Akimma Lee (李鴻欽).
- Tribute to the original film, aimed at a niche audience.



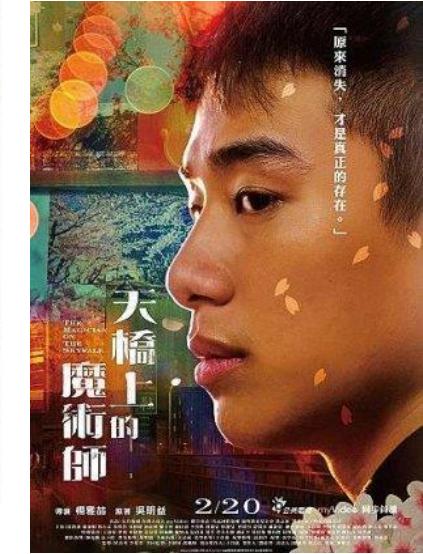
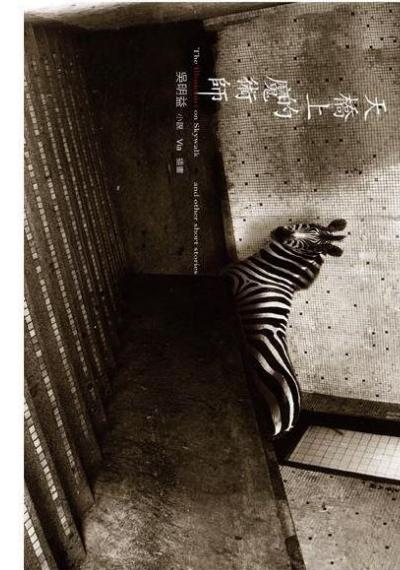
“Translating” Taiwan’s Cultural Narratives

- Adaptations re/present the “Taiwan story,” making it more prominent.
- Graphic narratives emphasize Taiwanese elements for a broader audience.
- Adaptations, often translated, boost Taiwan’s global visibility.
- Promote Taiwan’s cultural representation across various media.
- Two “Taiwan Stories”: between adaptation and global circulation: *The Illusionist on the Skywalk* and *Tender is the Night*.



The Illusionist on the Skywalk

- Original work (夏日出版, 2011): a collection of 10 short stories by Wu Ming-yi. **Translations → FR, KR, JP, and VN.**
- Themes: Nostalgia, martial law, and societal changes.
- Transmedia adaptations: TV series and manhua.
- Graphic Adaptations:
 - ✓ **Two volumes** by Ruan Guang-min (阮光民) & Sean Chuang (小莊).
 - ✓ Focus: **Chunghwa Market** (中華商場), symbolizing 1980s TW society.



The Graphic Adaptation of *The Illusionist*

- Two separate volumes, each comprising four stories.
- Authored by two award-winning artists with distinct drawing and narrative styles
- Neither artist is originally from Taipei:
 - Sean Chuang retained some memories of Chunghwa Market before its demolition in 1992.
 - Ruan Guang-min had never visited it.
- Faithful recreation of the setting relied on old photographs and internet resources.
- The market is depicted as a microcosm of TW society in the 1980s.
- “Light Flows Like Water” (流光似水) → former resident obsessed with reconstructing a scale model of the market.



我拿著放大鏡，從「忠」瀏覽到「愛」棟，裡頭
每一間小店鋪的位置，漸漸地和我的記憶疊合起來。

Visual Storytelling and the “Taiwan Story”

- The adaptation presents the market with remarkable detail linking the stories into a cohesive narrative.
- The original work leaves much to the imagination, the manhua guides the reader's perspective.
- Sensitive topics like violence and sexuality are depicted through metaphorical images and narrative ellipses.
- The “Taiwan story” reflects change and progress but also nostalgia for vanished places and communal interactions.
- Blend of TW-specific elements and universal themes enhances its int'l appeal.
- The graphic adaptation endorsed by the BFT initiative and Ministry of Culture.
- Rights sold for the Anglophone and Italian markets.
- This supports Li Ang's (2024) assertion that int'l circulation of TW literature → beyond interlingual translation to adaptation into other media.



Tender is the Night: From an Imaginary Stage to the World?

- Collection of nine graphic short stories created by Chien Li-ying in collaboration with comic artist Huihui.
- Based on a stage play from *Mirror of the Enchantress: Collection of Scripts by Chien Li-ying*, vol. 2 (服妖之鑑：簡莉穎劇本集2, 2018).
- The “Taiwan story” in *Tender* differs from *The Illusionist*, focusing on sex, sexuality, and nonconforming bodies and practices.
- Intimate encounters → stem from loneliness, sadness, and anxiety.
- Nameless characters universalize emotions and make the reader see themselves in them.
- TW’s commitment to freedom of expression is underscored, contrasting with censorship in mainland China.



Queerness, Soft Power, and Cultural Diplomacy

- *Tender* contains **explicit sexual content** that was already present in the original script, including themes beyond conventional narratives on sexuality.
- Despite its boldness, the stories **avoid sensationalism**, instead revealing the depths of characters' inner worlds.
- The graphic novel aligns with TW's positioning as a **Sinophone alternative to mainland China, emphasizing democratic values and LGBTQ rights**.
- The **Ministry of Culture supported its publication**, reinforcing Taiwan's image as a land of tolerance, diversity, and queerness.
- *Tender* functions as a **tool of “internal” cultural diplomacy**, demonstrating support for freedom of expression and human rights.
- The queerness in *Tender* mirrors TW's status as a “queer state” (Chen and Fell 2021) with contested international recognition.
- Although translation rights have not yet been sold, the graphic novel could play a significant role in TW's geopolitical awareness and soft power strategy.



Concluding remarks

- Graphic novel adaptations revitalize TW literature by expanding its reach and engaging new audiences.
- *The Illusionist* has already introduced Wu Ming-yi's stories to readers beyond traditional literary translation.
- *Tender* has the potential to do the same internationally while serving as an internal reminder of TW's values.
- Through diverse sexualities, bodies, and queerness, *Tender* strengthens TW's image as a model for inclusion and human rights.

Cited works

- Chen, Nai-chia, and Dafydd Fell. 2021. "Tongzhi Diplomacy and the Queer Case of Taiwan." In *Taiwan's Economic and Diplomatic Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Mariah Thornton, Bob Ash, and Dafydd Fell. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091639-12>.
- Li Ang. 2024. "How Taiwan Literature Can Make Its Breakout: Writer Li Ang Discusses 40 Years of Experience." Translated by Gregory Laslo. *National Museum of Taiwan Literature*, January 24. https://www.nmtl.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=3931&s=199425.