

The role of comic books in literacy education in Taiwan

Manga (comic books originating in Japan) are among those texts that children in Taiwan actively seek out to enjoy the pleasure of reading. However, the social stigma of manga as inferior literature has resulted in fear of its potential harm to child development and an insufficient understanding of its complexity and literary values. While the global popularity of manga has had some positive impact on its social status and the recognition of its cultural and entertainment values, the role of manga and comics in general continues to be ambiguous and awkward in literacy education in Taiwan. In this chapter, the author reflects on this guilty pleasure in her childhood and traces its historical influence in Taiwanese society from the creation of comic arts to the formation of a reading culture. Drawing on an example of the texts recommended by a governmental reading campaign, the author provides a critical analysis and practical suggestions for the use of comic books in the classroom.

Books that teach and children that rebel

An English proverb says, ‘all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy’, while a counter proverb in Chinese says ‘no study for three days makes one’s face ugly and words vapid’ (三日不讀書, 語言無味, 面目可憎). The contrast in values is clear here, where one approves of occasional playtime, while the other highlights the value of studying. The latter is a value that not only drives a culture of prioritising textbooks over extracurricular titles in reading choices at home, but is also pervasive in my childhood texts, which were dominated by didactic messages that teach children appropriate behaviour and morality. Before I could read, I was taught to recite *San Zi Jing* (三字經) which is written in triplets of characters to teach children Confucian thoughts and basic knowledge about the world, including history, geography, astronomy, number, time, and colour. The oral tradition of reciting *San Zi Jing* is meant to promote literacy in children before formal schooling, even though the classical Chinese used in the text can be difficult for children to understand. When I was old enough to read on my own, I was given story books

about filial piety, which is considered the roots of basic virtues in the doctrine of Confucianism. The anthology, *The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* (二十四孝), was particularly popular among parents and educators in my time. These short stories recounted the feats of filial people (mostly children) and each story was followed by a poem praising the protagonist's love, respect, and self-sacrificial deeds shown in their care of parents.

In addition to filial piety stories, I was given *Tang Shi* (唐詩) (poems composed in the Tang dynasty, a golden age of poetry in China) to read and recite. It is believed that *Tang Shi* cultivates a child's appreciation of Chinese history, literature, and culture, even though the old form of the language often requires additional commentary to understand. *Tang Shi* is widely used as chanting material to educate children and is often promoted at schools through reciting competitions. However, neither the language nor the content relates to the experience of children. The topics of Tang poems cover a broad set of areas, ranging from the unhappiness of an adult's life in the court to the happiness of seclusive life, from the yearning for home to the concern for country, from the beauty of nature to the transience of time. Tang poets wrote poems to express their emotions as well as for worldly fame. The narrator is adult; so is the intended reader. However, my early exposure to reading was not entirely dominated by high Chinese literature. In the 80's, the publishing market in Taiwan was already full of translated works of foreign literature. I remember enjoying reading Aesop's Fables and fairy tales by Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. Despite the embedded didacticism in these stories, the talking animals and magic fairies set my imagination free. Looking back at the texts that were approved by my parents and teachers, it is clear that childhood in my generation was predominantly conceived as a period of time when children are 'apprentices' to be educated and prepared for society (Mills, 2000).

What about reading for pleasure? Playfulness is an essential quality of childhood activities and the enjoyment of play is believed to contribute strongly to childhood learning and development (McInnes, 2019). Even when made to recite *Tang Shi*, we naughty children would wittily replace a few words in a poem with funny rhyming words to amuse ourselves. At play time, we also

exchanged books that were not approved of by teachers and parents. These were usually comic books obtained cheaply with our pocket money from rental bookstores. The rebellion was partly a way to exert our agency as children and partly to seek fun. For both historical and geographical reasons, Japanese culture has had significant influence on everyday life in Taiwan, including over child and youth popular culture. I started reading manga (comic books originating in Japan) at the age of seven when my brother started to bring copies of *Doraemon* (ドラえもん) home.

Doraemon, under the pen of Fujiko Fujio, is a robot cat that travels back in time from the twenty-second century to the twentieth century to aid the underdog primary schoolboy, Nobita. I used to daydream about having a robot like *Doraemon* who could use magic gadgets to make my life easy and fun. I often spent consecutive evenings or weekends diving into a pile of manga and blocked out everything happening outside the world of the book. My mother used to frown at me when she realised that the silence in the house was not a result of my diligent work on school tasks or preparation for exams. Her view of manga as a distraction from my study and house chores induced a sense of guilt when I was caught reading manga. Sometimes, I would hide manga in my school bag or under my coat to smuggle them home, and read them secretly in my room. At school, my friends and I would swap manga, and introduce each other to new titles. We collected and exchanged spin-off products of manga, such as stickers, playing cards, key chains, models, and stationery. Some of us also practised drawing manga. This hobby lasted for some time until the stress of the high-stake college entry exam took priority in my life, and I had to cut off all the possible ‘distractions’.

[FIGURE 9.1 HERE] Caption: Manga reading was disapproved at home, so there is no photographic evidence of this guilty pleasure. By contrast, studying schoolwork and winning competitions were well documented. The photo is the 10-year-old me showing off the certificates displayed above the desk which has clearly just been tidied up.]

The Japanese influenced childhood reading

The long-lasting influence of the Japanese culture in Taiwan can be traced back to the 50 years of colonisation during 1895 and 1945. Scholars have marked 1912 as the beginning of children's literature in Taiwan when a children's book 《むかしはなし 第二埔里社鏡》 describing local life was published and co-edited by a Taiwanese editor (Lin & Chiou, 2018). Following World War II, the continuous cultural influence of Japan mixed with the influx of American culture led to a number of publications that aimed to improve Chinese literacy and develop an appreciation of Chinese cultures and national identity under the governance of the Republic of China (ROC). The most notable event in the history of children's literature in Taiwan is the launch of an educational newspaper, the *Mandarin Daily News*, in 1948. This newspaper included a children's section, and a youth section in the following year, to educate child readers in the Chinese language and literature using Zhuyin (Mandarin Phonetic Symbols). Due to the tension with the Communist Party of China, martial law was enforced from 1949 to 1987. During this period, publications were strictly controlled and censored by the government, resulting in the domination of the market by the *Mandarin Daily News*. After the martial law was lifted, four children's newspapers sprouted in a year. The first was the *Mandarin Times*, which emphasised the use of comic strips to attract children and provide a 'quick' and engaging pathway to Chinese education. This is the main and perhaps the only record of comics in the discussion of children's literature in Taiwan (*ibid.*). The separation of the historical development of comics in Taiwan and children's literature in research gives a clue to the societal view towards comics, even though they have traditionally targeted children as a main readership.

Comics as a general term for comic strips, comic books, and cartoon is written in traditional Chinese as 漫畫. Both its pronunciation (manhua) and writing are similar to the equivalent term in Japanese—漫画 (also rendered in two other written systems in Japanese as まんが (hiragana) and マンガ (katakana)), pronounced as 'manga' (hereafter referred to comics originating in Japan), meaning 'picture unbound' (Rousmaniere, 2019). Although there is a lack of consensus, most scholars believed that the Chinese term was introduced by the artist Zikai Feng in 1925 after his return from studies in Japan (Chen, 2014). During the 50 years of Japanese colonisation,

Taiwanese artists received Japanese education that included the art of making comics. As a result, Japanese elements continued to exist and to some extent became indigenised in the development of local comics after World War II. Although there were times when the market of comics produced by local artists thrived, a regulation of comics publication issued by the government in 1966 to ensure that the content of comics provides the 'right' teaching to children instead of 'poisoning' them was believed to have a detrimental effect on the development of local comics (Hong, 2003). The policy details regulations specifying acceptable themes, content, the choice of words and phrases, the narrative style and structure, and the composition of images (including the use of lines, patterns, space, icons, shadow, and facial expressions). The censorship resulted in several comics artists abandoning their pens for a different profession. It was at this time when pirate manga rose. Due to the lack of clear regulations on translated works and intellectual property at the time, publishers survived on publishing unauthorised manga until the enforcement of copyright law in 1992. However, the dominance of manga in the local market continued in a legal way. According to a local study, manga represented 90.7% of comics publications in Taiwan between 1992 and 1997 (Chen, 2014). Despite the rising awareness of the need to support local artists (Ding, 2002), various attempts by the government have failed to build up the local market. In 2012, a global habit survey of consumers' lifestyles and media preferences in 36 major cities around the world found that 65.4% of comics and animation consumed in Taipei were from Japan (Hakuhodo, 2013). More recently, the Ministry of Culture in Taiwan published a report on an investigation of the 2017 publishing industry (Lu, 2019). The report indicates that among the publications of comic books, 74.4% were translated, and the copyright obtained from overseas predominantly came from Japan. The report also points out that Taiwanese readers' familiarity with manga and hence a preference of this over local comic books has affected the marketing strategy of publishers, resulting in a bleak environment for local artists. Another national report based on the check-out records among all the public libraries in the same year indicates that 19 out of the 20 most popular titles of comic books are manga (Chen & Hong, 2019). It is fair to say that generations of Taiwanese people grow up with manga and this phenomenon appears to continue. However, despite the popularity, manga has received polarised views and the negative ones mainly concern the 'unsuitable' content for children.

Manga and its controversial status

Like other forms of sequential art, such as Western comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels, manga tells stories in sequential panels where words, images, speech/thought balloons, and sound effects all take part in constructing the narrative. Manga is generally known to the West by its 'reverse' page flipping and the visual features of characters, e.g., big eyes, small mouths, slim figures, and striking hairstyles. Graphically, manga is monochromatic and visually symbolic. It is drawn and published in black and white, except for book covers and some colourful pages that may be inserted as a bonus for readers. As a result, manga artists focus on the use of lines, shades, and visual symbols to depict the subtleness of emotions and mood. For example, a character's momentum may be emphasised by dissolving the setting to a streaked background, and an overwhelming emotion may be depicted by turning a character into a child-like or animal-like figure as a form of visual slapstick. The symbolic drawing of manga is well described by the 'God of Manga' (Ito, 2008), Osamu Tezuka, when discussing his own comics, "I don't consider them pictures – I think of them as a type of hieroglyphics... In reality I'm not drawing. I'm writing a story with a unique type of symbol" (Schodt, 1983, p. 25). This emphasis on visual storytelling is evident in the ratio between words and pictures as well as the lavish uses of panels and pages to capture characters' movements and facial expressions through varying angles, distance, and perspectives (Tsai, 2018). Although manga is meant to be scanned, readers are required to actively seek out clues contained in pictures and coordinate these with the verbal narrative (Schodt, 1983).

In order to serve the interests of readers of different gender and age, the manga industry has been divided into several demographic categories, such as *kodomo* (manga for children), *shōnen* (manga for teenage boys), *shōjo* (manga for teenage girls), *seinen* (manga for mature male readers), *josei* (manga for mature female readers), *yuri* (girls' love), and *yaoi* (boys' love). Whilst manga generally deals with a broad range of themes, including adventure, science fiction, historical drama, sports stories, fantasy adventures, romance, everyday drama (school life, office work, and family life) and detective investigation, manga in different demographic categories have distinct styles of artwork and narrative structure. Without an understanding of the

demographic divides, unselective introduction of manga to children can lead to an outcry and the stigma that manga is filled with violence and sex. For example, the introduction of manga to UK schools in 2004 by the Reading Agency to promote reading for leisure was hit with criticism in a news article titled, ‘Child murder, incest and rape... is this really how our schools should be encouraging boys to read?’ (Curzon, 2004). A similar outcry was seen in Taiwan when pirate manga dominated the local markets resulting in a so-called ‘Sanitisation Movement of Manga’ initiated by the local comics artists (Chen, 2014). In fact, manga was once also criticised as ‘evil books’ for children in Japan (Chen & Chen, 2009). The debate over the ‘appropriateness’ of manga for children, however, can be highly dependent on contexts due to different social standards and concepts of childhood (Lo et al., 2019).

Despite the controversy over manga, its global popularity has had some positive impact on its social status. In its country of origin, manga has been recognised as a form of national treasure and cultural ambassador (Suter, 2016). Outside Japan, manga is not only a form of soft power, but has also been used frequently to cultivate appreciation of reading especially among reluctant readers, in addition to the development of social and gender identities (Bitz, 2009; Gibson, 2007; Lo et al., 2019; Madeley, 2010; Martin, 2012; Rousmaniere, 2019; Tsai, 2016). More broadly speaking, studies have pointed out the value of comic books in developing visual literacy among children and the need to broaden our definitions of texts by engaging readers in the conversation (Chen, 2014; Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006; Tsai, 2018; Versaci, 2001). In the next sections, I discuss a government-initiated effort to promote reading by including comic books as a category of recommended books for school children in Taiwan. I revisit some of the topics discussed earlier, including the societal views of comic books as a reading option for children, the challenge of local comics in competing against manga, and how we can use comic books in literacy education.

Comic books as extracurricular material in Taiwan

In order to promote reading and enhance the quality of children's publications in Taiwan, the Government Information Office started an annual campaign in 1982 (Lin, 2011) to identify quality extracurricular reading materials for primary and middle school students (aged between 7 and 15). The titles submitted by publishers were roughly categorised into two groups—books and magazines. In 1995, the categories increased to seven, and in 1996 the 'education' and 'other' categories were replaced by 'social sciences' and 'comics'. In the same year, the Little Sun Award was established to recognise outstanding local publishers and individuals. Currently, there are eight categories in total, including social sciences, reference books, illustrated books, translated literature, literature, comics, general science, and magazines. The campaign was held biannually between 2004 and 2007. Since 2013, the campaign was taken over by the Ministry of Culture and senior high school students (ages between 16 and 18) were included as one of the targeted age groups.

From the historic reports of this reading campaign (accessible at <http://book.moc.gov.tw/book/>), two prominent struggles of local comics are visible: 1) the threat of foreign comics in market share and 2) the legitimacy of comics' status as educational material. Although the addition of comics as one of the categories for recommendation in 1996 shows the authority's recognition of comics' value in cultivating reading appreciation among children, the 1998 report (the 16th campaign) mentions the poor quality of local comics and hence the absence of winners of the Little Sun Award. The judges observed that existing works were either created by senior comic artists or full of 'Japanese-ness'. They concluded, 'After six years of struggle, we must admit that our comics cannot compete with foreign works.' Later reports continue to mention the same problem of foreign works overtaking local publications. In the 2004 report (the 22th campaign), it was indicated that only 28.6% of submissions were local works, and as a result the selection criteria were more lenient to the local works. However, the report of the 24th campaign in the following year suggests that the selection criteria for local comics have been tightened due to the reason that 'over protection causes damage'. The cycle of tightening and lowering standards continued over the years for the same purpose of promoting and increasing the quality of local comics. In 2016, the campaign report indicates prioritising recommendations of all local works 'as long as there is no excessive violence or contentious images'.

In general, the submitted comic books were evaluated across elements of entertainment, education, aesthetics, and ideology. The theme needs to be ‘correct’ (considered as suitable for children), the story needs to be inspirational, the drawing needs to be skillful, and the font needs to be clear. Importantly, the selection focuses on educational values so as to change the ‘negative stigma’ about comics, as indicated in the 2004 report. Interestingly, in the 2017 report, the judges argued that book recommendations need to engage children with social issues to develop critical skills from reading rather than avoiding certain issues for the sake of ‘protecting’ children or appeasing parents and teachers. In the following year, the translations of Scott McCloud’s two seminal pieces of work, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (McCloud, 2001) and *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (McCloud, 2006), were recommended to develop critical appreciation of comics and to address the concerns of parents worried about ‘vulgar’ content in comic books according to the 2018 report. Although the struggle of comics for a legitimate status in children's reading material is visible in the reports over the past decades, the importance of the ‘relatability’ between a text and the child reader (readers are able to make personal meanings of texts based on their socio-cultural experiences) (Fiske, 2010; Iser, 1974) has been highlighted twice by judges in the pursuit of educational messages from recommended comic books.

These reports reveal a recurring issue of the struggle for social recognition among local comics: recognition by publishers (in terms of returns in investment), recognition by the authority (in terms of educational values), and recognition by children (in terms of entertainment values). Local artists are expected to explore new ways to present comics that are not only aesthetic, interesting, and educational, but also different from manga. The tension is visible between legitimising comics as appropriate reading material by the enhancement of didactic messages, and retaining an essential quality of a popular text; that is, reflecting the intended reader’s social experience and providing a platform for the negotiation of social power (Fiske, 1989). The desire to remove Japanese influence on local comics is also hard to meet given the fact that manga much defines the reading habits and creation experience of comics in Taiwan. The traces of manga elements are visible in *Blossom* (D.S., 2019), a comic book recommended in the

government reading campaign in 2019. However, the relevance of the topic to society has made it deem ‘educational’, though arguably lacking humour. In the next section, I discuss the social ideology embedded in the text, the interplay between words and pictures, and potential uses in reading education.

***Blossom* (百花百色)**

Blossom (百花百色) (D.S., 2019) deals with topics of gender identity and equality. The story builds on tensions between the protagonist, Yu-Fan, and the social expectations of how girls should behave—wearing skirts, pink clothing and accessories, learning music, hanging out with girls, and marrying the opposite sex. Yu-Fan was born intersexual with immature development of the male reproductive organ. Following medical advice, a surgery was performed and Yu-Fan was brought up as a girl, despite the fact that both her parents and paternal grandmother had desperately wished for a boy. The story centers on Yu-Fan's internal struggle with her gender identity, the suppression of her emotions, and lasting tension with her mother. After Yu-Fan's cousin, who exemplifies all the lady-like qualities in the eyes of Yu-Fan's mother, introduces her same-sex partner to the family and receives support from parents, both Yu-Fan and her mother gradually find a way to face her sexual inclination and resolve the family conflicts. The story ends with Yu-Fan's mother expressing her support of same-sex marriage in the 2019 referendum in Taiwan.

Blossom (D.S., 2019), along with a manga series, *Brother's Husband* (弟の夫) (Tagame, 2016), were recommended by the judges because they explore important social issues around same-sex relationships and ‘may inspire readers to reflect on their own attitudes towards these issues and concerns for others’. The latter was recommended for senior high school students (aged 16-18), and the former was recommended for students above grade 5 (aged 11-12) in the primary school and up to high school. The influence of manga on the artistic style of this book is visible—from the depiction of characters to the techniques adopted to present panels. As discussed previously,

Taiwanese comics artists learnt to draw comics as apprentices of manga artists during the Japanese colonisation and manga has dominated the local comics industry since the 70's (Chen, 2014). Both manga and anime are omnipresent for people growing up in Taiwan. While the ideologies expressed in stories might be particular to a society, the artistic techniques have been indigenised to an extent that distinguishing between manga and Taiwanese comic books by the drawing styles can be hard.

[FIGURE 9.2 HERE] Caption: Yu-Fan's refusal of her school uniform (read from right to left) [Blossom © 2019 D.S. /GAEABOOKS.CO.LTD.] The speech bubbles on the **right-hand page** are as follows: 'The semester has started a while ago and you still rush every morning. Your sister has left long ago' (Mother). 'The uniform skirt is pretty. It's a good decision to let Ah-Fan [nickname of Yu-Fan] study in the same school as her sister' (Father). 'Have you packed tissues? How about a water bottle? Don't forget your lucky charm. Come back home right after school. Don't fool around.' (Mother/ Father).]

Comics comprise a deliberate sequence of panels that contain both verbal and visual information. The relationship between words and pictures are interdependent and the boundaries between the two modes are not always clear. Readers are expected to bridge the **gaps between the two modes** in accordance with the different roles **these gaps** play in the narrative. While the artist makes the choice of what instants to capture and present within frames, the reader completes what is left out using their imagination to fill in the gutter between panels (Wallner, 2019). According to the content of each panel, the reader identifies the relationships between panels, which enables them to piece multiple panels into a meaningful picture or a continuous event in their mind. Figure 2 shows a double spread of a morning scene where Yu-Fan hurried to the school. Her mother showed disapproval of her disorganised manner by making a comparison to her older sister, whereas her father praised her for the girly school uniform. However, once leaving the house, Yu-Fan started to take off feminine items – lucky charm, bow, female waistcoat, and skirt. In this double spread, Yu-Fan has not spoken a word. The speech bubbles from the parents are meant to respond to Yu-Fan's action (the beginning of the **right-hand page**) and explain her facial expression (the end of the **left-hand page**), which however is left for the reader to interpret. This

is a style commonly seen in manga where ‘less is more’ and facial expressions assume a key role in conveying a character’s feelings (Ryōko, 2019).

Panel transition is essential to the narrative structure of comics. The close-ups in the beginning of the recto (the right-hand page of a two-page spread) and throughout the verso (the left-hand page of a two-page spread) combine two types of techniques used for panel-to-panel transitions: action-to-action and aspect-to-aspect (McCloud, 2001). The former features the progress of a character’s actions, and the latter frames different angles of a place, idea or mood and is not restricted to time. The first two panels in the recto zoom in to Yu-Fan's arms and feet as she put on the uniform in a hurry. Rather than focusing on moving from one action to another, the transition between panels here emphasises a hasty moment when multiple actions take place almost at the same time. However, the meaning needs to be inferred together with the annotations in the background which say ‘urgent-urgent’ (急急) and ‘busy-busy’ (忙忙). The annotations are integrated into the background like onomatopoeia and pictorised in such a way that the fluid font style enhances the mood. Moreover, the second panel depicts the instant where the character moved from wearing slippers to putting on socks. Instead of using two panels to contain separate action and time, the artist uses one panel to heighten the haste depicted with streaked lines and smoke. The verso uses multiple angles and distance to depict key actions in consecutive panels each focusing on one: taking off the waistcoat, taking off a lucky charm, putting both items into the school bag, and taking off the skirt. The silence in this page brings the reader’s attention to the individual action framed using a technique similar to slow cinematic movements to set a mood. This is another feature commonly observed in manga – a consecutive series of extreme close-ups to prolong and heighten a moment (Clarke, 2004).

The relevance of the topics to society and the complex techniques applied to construct the multimodal narrative make this comic book ideal material for dialogue with young readers. Table 1 shows some example questions that may be used to prompt critical reflections on the book and allow adults to get a better understanding of children’s cognitive, affective, and critical engagement with the text.

Table 1. Example questions for using *Blossom* in literacy education

Example questions	Rationale
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is this book about? 2. Did you enjoy reading this book? What did you enjoy about it? What did you not enjoy? 	Reading appreciation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How have societal views of genders changed from the depiction of the three generations in this book? 2. Are these views particular to the Taiwanese context or universal? 3. What are the conflicts that Yu-Fan has with her family, friends, and herself? What might have contributed to these conflicts? 4. Do you agree or disagree with any views held by the characters? 	Social development
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How might Yu-Fan's mother feel when her mother-in-law teased her for not being able to produce a son? 2. How might Yu-Fan feel when her male friends refused to play dodgeball with her? 3. Why did Yu-Fan get into a fight with her classmates after being teased about wearing a skirt? 4. Do you have similar experiences to what happened to any of the characters? How did it make you feel? 	Empathy development
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What does the arrangement of the panels tell us about time and space? What has been left out of the panels? 2. What information do you get from the words, the images, and both of them together? 3. Why do you think the artist presented the panels/ speech bubbles/ background/ ambient sounds this way? 	Visual literacy

<p>4. What is the artist's purpose for this particular use of lines/ shade/ symbols?</p> <p>5. How are cinematic editing techniques adopted here? What are the purposes of this?</p>	
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The role of comic books in literacy education in Taiwan

Compared to the time when I had to smuggle comic books home from rental bookstores, societal impressions of comic books are substantially more positive now, and manga have also made their way to public and school libraries. However, from the censorship in the 1960's to the government reading campaign, it is clear that there is persistent fear of comic books leading children astray (e.g., by imitating the violence therein and losing interest in studies). Although comics have received increasing recognition in terms of their cultural values all over the world (Rousmaniere, 2019), for these to gain a place in the Taiwanese educational contexts, it appears to be essential to communicate educational messages explicitly. While comic books can be both informative and entertaining as seen in several classic manga (Chen & Chen, 2009), the priority of didacticism in comics competitions held by authorities can compromise the entertainment value that is one of the main attractions to child readers. Take *Blossom* (D.S., 2019) for an example. While the text provides rich material for discussion about social values and narrative structure, it lacks many of the lighthearted moments that are crucial to the release of tensions in comic book stories and which often make manga so engaging.

This emphasis on learning over playing also reflects a perception that has not changed from the time when I was taught to recite *San Zi Jing*; that is, children are vulnerable and need the guidance of adults to prepare them for society. Despite growing acceptance of comic books as material to motivate reading, the introduction of these to school libraries is often met with resistance by teachers. This phenomenon is particularly notable among societies that build upon a Confucian education model which is strongly exam-oriented (Lo et al., 2019). A librarian in Taiwan observed the low interest among children in pursuing extracurricular texts for entertainment or knowledge of the wider world, and attributed this to the prevailing view in

Taiwanese society that reading serves the function of achieving academic success (Chang, 2009). Another study has also shown a strong support from Taiwanese parents on textbook-related recommendations of story books (Jhang, 2017). On the other hand, the perception of comic books as a 'bait' to lure students to enter the school library (Lo et al., 2019) or as a springboard for struggling readers to find interest in books that require a higher level of verbal literacy arguably positions comic books as secondary literature that only plays an assisting role in terms of shaping children's reading lives and skills. However, like all literary works, comic book stories express the author's reflections on society, human relationships, and desires. The narrative is carefully constructed to invite readers into a dialogue around the issues that characters face and the emotions that they experience. More importantly, comics allow readers to laugh off issues that they may find difficult in real life and empower themselves in an imagined realm. Unfortunately, the perception of children being immature and vulnerable has led to a fear of comics and lasting debates about what children's comics should be like without directly consulting children regarding what they have enjoyed about reading comics and what they have learnt from the experience (Chen, 2014).

Reading is a dynamic process of recreation and negotiation of meanings (Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978; Selden et al., 2005). Scholars have argued the importance of talking to children about the texts that they choose for themselves (Meek, 1988; Styles, 1994; Tsai, 2016) so as to understand the personal meanings of these texts to the readers and their development of literacy skills when reading these texts. Comic books, as demonstrated in the previous section, provide a platform where adults (authors/artists, educators, and parents) and children meet to exchange their views of the world in which they live and share their emotional experiences (Chen & Chen, 2009; Hogan, 2011; Lewkowich, 2019). Research has also found that the visual narrative of comics provides stimuli that draw readers to the psychological development of characters and help them recall the memories of personal experience and increasing self-awareness of personal skills, values and personality (Piróg & Rachwał, 2019). The same study also supported the value of reading and drawing comics in the development of storytelling competency among children. Moreover, by talking about comics with children, adults can scaffold and assess the development of visual literacy. For example, Wallner (2019) demonstrates that comics can be used in the

classroom to develop children's narrative competence by guiding them to use panels and the gutter space to create the temporal and spatial logic of stories. Cook and Kirchoff (2017) point out that comic books require that readers make meaning of a variety of modes of communication including text, image, and panelling. This meaning-making process helps children develop a better sense of audience (knowing that visual design and arrangement communicate particular messages) as well as the skills to utilise a variety of ways to communicate. When using comic books in the classroom, educators may evaluate children's competency of visual literacy by observing their engagement at affective (enjoyment of reading), compositional (the use of metalanguage to interpret artistic decisions), and critical (critiques of choices made in the creation) levels (Callow, 2008).

Despite the research evidence that comic books support the development of sophisticated social, cultural, and literacy skills, comics have mostly been introduced as optional reading in the library rather than being introduced to the classroom (Lo et al., 2019). This points out a need to include comic books in the development of literacy pedagogies as part of the professional development for teachers to raise the awareness and appreciation of comics as a unique narrative form (Marlatt & Dallacqua, 2019). Importantly, comics should not be treated as merely a medium to convey educational messages. They should be seen as a valuable social product that communicates human cultures, feelings, thoughts, and imagination. The inclusion of Scott McCloud's works as recommended reference books in the 2019 government reading campaign in Taiwan shows an awareness of the importance of providing students with opportunities to read comic books critically. However, without recognising the social, cultural, aesthetic, literary and entertainment value of comics, the emphasis on didacticism not only confines creativity, but also overlooks the most enjoyable and valuable reading experience – when readers can read themselves in the text and the text in them.

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