



STORYTELLING, AN OLD SKILL – ALSO IN TAIWAN

“The World in Books” – Project report 2015

Baobab Books has been collaborating with the National Living Art Center of Taiwan since 2013. Together we’ve been implementing the project “World in Books” in three different indigenous communities so far. The original inhabitants of the small country are in the process of rejuvenating their (almost) lost culture. Children's books can play an important role therein. In December 2015 Baobab Books carried out its third basics workshop. At the same time our project partner, the National Living Art Center in Taitung, opened a second exhibition of books draughted by indigenous artists.

Most of Taiwan's indigenous peoples live in the two eastern provinces of Hualien and Taitung. Today the indigenous population only accounts for between 2 and 3 per cent of a total population of 25 million people. This low figure is accounted for by centuries of oppression on the one hand, as well as the fact that many indigenous people were forced to renounce their identity, especially in the past century – or preferred to deny it. Getting back to their own roots is a newer phenomenon, but the voices clamouring for this awareness are getting louder. Ever more people are talking about their ancestors' social affiliation with the indigenous population and are seeking to get in touch with their ethnic origins. In contrast to the policies of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan explicitly recognises its minorities, even supporting them with certain promotional measures.



Land rights are one such measure. A journey from the coastal city of Taitung to the hill village of Wulu takes a good two hours by car. The village is part of the Haiduan Township, which unites six villages. 95 per cent of the inhabitants are members of the Bunun ethnic group, and outsiders are not allowed to buy land or real estate. The Bunun people live in the hills, are considered good hunters, and are also well-known for their songs. Apart from sparse income from tourism, agriculture is the only source of income worth mentioning in Haiduan. 17 farmers' cooperatives have been established in the township in the past few years, with the aim of improving the marketing of agricultural produce such as fruit, vegetables, millet and rice.

Discussions in the hill fog

Wulu lies around 800 metres above sea level, some distance from a pass, on a terrace in the middle of abundantly wooded hill scenery. There are no public institutions apart from the school; the houses are simple, single-storey buildings along the road. The only attraction is a small lookout pavilion on a small rise, which provides people with a magnificent view across the valley.

It is winter, dense hill fog is drawing in on the evening I arrive there. A drizzle spreads damp coldness. The village school is empty on Saturday when we start our five-day workshop on *The World in Books* in the small school library. 12 participants have arrived, some of them from Haiduan Township, others from Taitung, or from even further afield. I look around at the multifaceted group; the youngest is 20 years old, the oldest 50, indigenous people as well as non-





indigenous Taiwanese who want to look into the issue of identity in children's books. A few of them have studied illustration, others have just completed their teacher training. For many of them children's books are an unknown world, but they are enthusiastic storytellers or practice a traditional craft. The first two days were full of precise examination, extensive contemplation and discussion. Participative learning and freely forming your own opinion are still unusual in the Taiwanese education system, but an initial hesitation soon gives way to dynamism. This was the case in a discussion concerning the term minority. Interestingly enough, only one person in the group said she was a member of a minority. When I asked the group, one participant said she did not feel as if she was in a minority – it is just that she is perceived that way.

Facets of children's literature

The practical work starts on the third day. The concentration and silence in the converted classroom is impressive. The narrow desks are soon covered with working materials and draughts.

In the meantime it is Monday, and the village school's regular classes are going on. I take some time to stroll around the school yard, watch the children



on the sports ground and talk to teachers. In the slightly chaotic library I find a Taiwanese edition of *Pitschi*, a Swiss picture book by Hans Fischer that appeared more than 60 years ago and also accompanied me in my childhood. The book made its way across the whole world – even to this isolated village of Taiwanese aborigines. Fischer gave the book the subtitle *The kitten that always wants to be something else*. Today an author might write about a kitten who always wants to be someone else. Either way, the book has become a classic. And in the meantime the subject of seeking your identity, as addressed in the book, has moved from the periphery into the centre – and has been expressed in many

different ways in contemporary children's literature.

The Taiwanese illustrator Chen Chih-Yuan did not know *Pitschi* when he created *Guji-Guji* a few years ago. I discovered the latter book a short while later in another classroom in Wulu. The picture book, which was published under the title *Gui-Gui* in German, tells the story of a crocodile egg that erroneously rolls into a duck's nest and is then unknowingly hatched by the mother duck. Everybody is surprised when a crocodile emerges from the egg, and the newborn of course has to ask itself the essential question concerning where it belongs... Here too the story has a happy ending, as does *Pitschi's* story.

Two worlds, two epochs – and two examples of how a children's book can focus on a complex issue in a unique way, whilst simultaneously transcending language and cultural barriers.

I take my discoveries to the workshop with me, and another spontaneous discussion emerges, about quality in children's literature. But then it is time for the presentations of the works and the closing round. Everyone agrees: these were five rather intense days. And yet it is only the beginning!



Storytelling as a skill

This was the third basics workshop that Baobab Books has put on since 2013 at the invitation of the *National Living Art Center Taitung*. Participants were members of the Rukai, the Paiwan, the Ami and now the Bunun peoples. The aim is to sensitise the public to the matter of identity in children's books, and to impart basic knowledge concerning how a book is created, how oral literature can be recorded and how the promotion of reading skills can be managed in a long-term way. Some projects are currently being established on this basis that could help indigenous peoples find an identity, and that could also open the world of the aborigines to a non-indigenous population in a new way. The director of the Living Art Center, Lee Chi-Chung, is fully committed to this issue.

On top of this around three dozen book draughts have been created, and two exhibitions have already been held in Taitung, showing the working process and the efforts of the workshop's participants. The last such show was held under the title "Makuta'ay" in the Living Art Center Taitung in December 2015. There is no lack of interest from the public at large, and publishers have been paying attention too. The in-depth confrontation with the complex question concerning identity may be less visible, but it is nevertheless equally important, as is a network that has been created, and project work in indigenous communities.



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