

THE WORLD IN BOOKS: INSPIRATIONAL BOOKS TO SHAPE LIVES

Project report Taiwan 2017

Baobab Books has been collaborating with the National Living Art Center of Taiwan since 2013. Together we've been implementing the project *The 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 early 2017 Baobab Books carried out its fourth workshop.



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.

The government recognised indigenous minorities around ten years ago, which represented an important step in the slowing down of an irrevocable loss of their language and cultural traditions. Together with the National Taitung Living Art Center, Baobab Books is trying to strengthen indigenous communities in a special way. On the basis of the multifaceted indigenous story-telling and artistic traditions the two organisations encourage the local production of children's books and share their experience of reading promotion, through a training programme for artists and authors as well as for project staff and teachers.

In the middle of rice fields

Nine women and three men registered to take part in this year's workshop. The one-week intensive seminar took place on a small farm in southeastern Taiwan. The landscape around the village Luo-Shan is characterised by traditional terraced rice fields, which were just being planted with seedlings when the course took place in February. The village community recently decided to cultivate all of its fields in accordance with certified standards of organic farming. Some farms have even restructured their activities and are now model farms offering guided tours. At the beginning of the event the head of the village welcomed us by presenting each of us with a traditional bamboo hat, which is worn when working in the fields. Then our work started. The participants have exceedingly diverse biographies. There are teachers, artists, students, illustrators. Some of them live in the village, others in the surrounding mountains, and yet others have travelled here from



further afield especially for this week's meeting. As varied as their personal histories are – some live in a traditional indigenous community, some have moved, or moved back, from the city to the country – their interest in story-telling and in creative work has unified them here in this small local council hall with a corrugated iron roof.

Lines produce insights

Feng Xin-Xian was a professional captain on a ship. Now he has retired and settled in Luo-Shan. He does volunteer work in the village and would especially like to create attractive offers for children. In the introductory round of the workshop he tells us that children are often left to fend for themselves when they come home



Feng Xin-Xian

from school in the afternoon, because both parents may work in the fields or in distant cities. As a result quite a few of these children lose their way in their youth.

Many indigenous communities live in the mountains around Luo-Shan: Bunun, Amis, Paiwan. Mr Feng is convinced that «it's important to nurture these cultures and to keep their languages alive.» Indigenous cultures and languages are hardly addressed in school. This is why he has registered for the workshop. He would like to create a book together with children.

As the rice fields outside grow greener every day, so the participants' ideas grow into mature concepts.

There are lots of analyses and discussions and things are tried out. As is the case in many other Asian countries, the Taiwanese education system also focuses heavily on results. The learning process and pupils' personal development are hardly heeded. The younger members of the group would like to go down other paths, want to experiment and risk trying out something new. For others the free approach is initially irritating, however. Draw a line on a sheet of paper? How? What for? The task – express a mood through a collage – leaves many a participant puzzled at first. But every one of them sets out on the path in his or her own way. This is followed by moving insights, figures, faces, colourful patterns and sophisticated concepts.

On the way to the source

One afternoon we were invited to Jilamitai, an Amis village in the surrounding mountains. We were led to a hidden waterfall, which is the source of numerous stories that have been handed down by the village's inhabitants.



Tsu Dju-Je

To pay our respects we subsequently walked up the narrow path to the river's holy spring. In the evening, gathered around a fire, the village elders told us the story of the community, told us about the traditions of the Amis, whose society is structured in a matrilinear way. One of these stories tells of the marriage of a young couple.

This couple is the fabric for our stories. On this basis twelve interpretations which could not be more different were created on the morrow. Tsu Dju-Je is a member of the Paiwan, whose traditions are very basically different in many ways. Women and men are equal in Paiwan society, for example. Dju-Je set out to look for a way of telling the story that expresses equality between the sexes.

Wei Ling-Zan, in turn, has always struggled with traditional gender-defined roles, and in her own life she herself always went her own way. Now the young woman in her draught does so too. The young

illustrator Fan Chien-Hong broke the complex material down and designed a cardboard book for small children.

On the last day we had together we heard that many of the participants worked on their books until late in the night. The range of projects was impressive, with conceptional books, documentary works, childhood memories...Feng Xin-Xian, the



former Captain, surprised himself with his own work. On the first day he had said that he couldn't draw. With his book Fan Chien-Hong showed how a sophisticated concept for a book can be created from a simple insight and without technical aids.



Lin Zhu-Wei

In her draught the young Lin Zhu-Wei addressed an entirely personal experience with unaccustomed openness. Her courage triggered great appreciation from the group. At the end she said that «this seminar was characterised by mutual interest and openness; we not only learnt from the people giving the workshop, but also from our exchange amongst each other. I was inspired by the works of the other participants. I also realised, how little I really know about the cultural diversity of our country. I want to work more with people with differing backgrounds, to reduce prejudices.»

The groundwork has been laid

Children's literature always addresses the central questions facing a society, such as its ethical values, the relationship between the individual and the community, aesthetics, or relations between children and parents, to name just a few. This became apparent in this five-day workshop in Luo-Shan too. In the closing round one participant said: «I hope that we can transform the experiences we've gathered this week into books for children, so that they feel as inspired by these books to fashion their lives as we've been inspired to create books this week.»

Project plans were set down and presented to the group in a plenary session. The publication of a book with a crowd-funding campaign, reading and writing workshops for children in Luo-Shan, a book competition in Fu-Li's primary school... The ideas were multifaceted – and realistic. The staff of the Living Art Center are ready to help out with the implementation of the projects.



Baobab Books thanks the National Living Art Center in Taitung for its kind cooperation.

Sonja Matheson, July 2017