

THE WORLD IN BOOKS

A Workshop in the Yüli Township – Project report 2018

Baobab Books promotes diversity in children and youth literature. We transmit knowledge and also encourage local book production in regions and among communities where books are not available at large. In our work we focus especially on minorities and on the situation of indigenous peoples, for in many places these groups have to fight for their recognition and continued vibrancy of their culture, a field in which literature plays an extremely important role. It is a great honour for Baobab Books to cooperate with Taitung National Living Art Centre under its Director Lee Chi-Chung. This most fruitful cooperation began in 2013 and was continued in spring 2018 with another workshop in Yüli.



The Yüli township lies in the south of the province of Hualien. The broad plain is characterised by paddy fields, the sides of the valley are forested and inhabited in places, especially by the indigenous Amis people. Tea farmers produce the country's typical Oolong tea on many fields in the terraced hills.

The fifth workshop that Baobab Books has staged, in partnership with the National Living Art Center Taitung, took place in May 2018, in the compound of the primary school in Yüli. Just a few years ago the small house, which serves as a communal hall, was derelict. An initiative launched by a few members of the community restored it and made it habitable again. Everyone who was able to brought something along to furnish the place or actively helped in the renovation. Mr. Ming Chien, who is simultaneously the secretary of the local primary school, was the driving force behind the initiative. The space that has been created there is more than just a social meeting place for villagers. In the section facing the road there is a small shop for local products, as well as a kitchen. The pupils learn how to prepare traditional dishes there. Once a week there is a communal lunch, with the parents of each pupil contributing something to eat.

Do not wait



Many Amis live in the area around Yüli. The Amis are one of Taiwan's largest indigenous ethnicities. It is very important to Ya-Chi, an energetic teacher at the village school, to advance diversity in the school. All of the village's children – whether they belong to an indigenous ethnicity or not – learn songs and vocabulary – of a respectable size – in the language of the Amis, together with various cultural customs. There is no feeling of 'us and them'; the aim is to have everyone feel that they belong and are equal, irrespective of cultural background.

In his opening speech, Ming Chien underlines that "there are two central messages for the children in our school. Do not wait until you're given something in life; and everyone must know who she or he is and where he or she comes from." This hit the nail square on the head for the spirit in which we all wanted to work during this week.

Changing the perspective

This time the programme is geared at advanced illustrators and artists. The National Living Arts Center selected nine participants for this workshop. Applicants had to put in for a place with a motivational essay and present a concept for a concrete illustrated book project. Some of them attended Baobab Books' basics course a few



years ago, others have acquired their illustrational and/or story-telling skills elsewhere or studied design or art. The workshop is launched by each participant presenting his or her project and formulating the questions they want to address in this workshop, the issues they want to work on and the field in which they want to receive methodological assistance. The range of subjects includes the storyteller's perspective, the narrative arc, the relationship between text and image, as well as practical aspects concerning

format, length or typography; and finally, of course, the key question of how (indigenous) identity can be depicted in a children's book.

After a rather playful introductory round, which includes each person creating a self-portrait, I ask all of them to put their started projects aside for a moment, and then to re-tell their story anew, from a different perspective and in just five text/image sequences. In the subsequent open discussion the artists recount their insights. Some of them are rather radical. Some of them have realised what they would like to change in their stories, others have concluded that they would like to start again completely from the beginning. One artist reports that "it became clear to me that my story wouldn't function like this. I have to approach the linking of the text and the images in a completely different way." Someone else reports that she became aware of which elements require far more precise research to be able to transmit the correct content. There are many more important insights, and many participants found answers to their questions themselves. All of them learnt something from all of the others on this rich first day of the workshop.

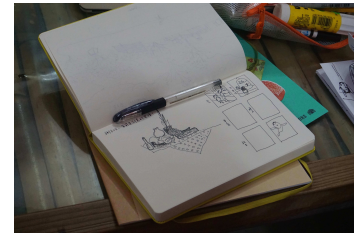
Feeling rooted...

On the second day, we address questions concerning literary and creative quality, and engage in writing exercises, and on the third day we look into the question of identity. My introductory question, namely to what extent people actively discuss cultural identity in Taiwan, triggers a lively debate that lasts all morning. The increasing politicisation of the term identity is a big issue for many people and the subject is complex. What is considered a Taiwanese identity is rather difficult to grasp. Many consider society's diversity to be a positive trait, but there are also unresolved conflicts over resources. Someone points out that indigenous people may have been oppressed for a long time and still have problems today, but at least they know where they are welcome.

...yet nevertheless also free



Precisely these questions are becoming ever more difficult for people of Chinese origin; for more and more there is talk of a 'Taiwanese identity'. The quintessence have much to do with the state, but has a lot to do with a person's cultural make-up, and that Taiwanese society continues to allow the possibility that everyone can decide themselves where they would like to belong. We hope that this will continue to be the case, despite increasing politicisation of identity issues, for cultural belonging means that on the one hand one can feel connected and rooted – and yet on the other hand one can also be free to develop and move independently as an individual.



A universal story

It makes a nice change, after such intense discussions, to receive a visit from the pupils that afternoon. They are told the story of "Uncle Flores". This picture book was written and created by the Brazilian artist Eymard Toledo. It is the story of a tailor and his nephew, whose joint good idea brings hope and colour back into a village community. People in Taiwan immediately understand the story. The book's detailed collages impress the children and it does not take them long to create their own works with collected materials.

In the evening, the participants also have an opportunity to read their stories to the children. This is also a good occasion to hear some very direct and unmistakable feedback! The test audience does not hesitate to express itself critically too, for example if the story does not have a clearly thought-out storyline, or the end is not very convincing.

So back to work we go! The next day is full up with very practical concerns. Besides our own writing and drawing, we look at various books and illustrational styles together, practice conscious awareness, and seek to apply it to the question of how messages are transmitted. What do we perceive to represent quality in a children's book?

The participants repeatedly return to their own project. The aspects that require discussion are repeatedly re-woven anew, the works change, and the artists create new aspects. Suddenly there does not seem to be enough time anymore, the works are due to be exhibited on Friday morning. Before the children and teachers come for the viewing, we look back at the intense week. The mood is simultaneously cheerful and serious. What next? Is there any possibility of publishing the projects? The National Living Art Center and Baobab Books take the opportunity presented by the last evening to discuss possible next steps. Director Lee and his wonderful project team want to make sure that the works created can be used and that the participants' high motivational energy is not dissipated.

I kindly thank Taitung National Living Art Centre for all their efforts to make this workshop possible, and for the perfect organisation by Chia-Chi and Hsin-Yu.

Baobab Books, Sonja Matheson,
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