

# **A POST-COLONIAL CRITIQUE OF THE REPRESENTATION OF TAIWANESE CULTURE IN CHILDREN'S PICTUREBOOKS**

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## **Background to the Study**

According to W. J. T. Mitchell (1994), there is a pictorial turn in today's society and visual images dominate people's daily lives; these irresistible images usually raise issues regarding visual representations. Today, most learning experiences and information that children acquire heavily depend on visual representation in different formats, such as printing and digital imaging. Traditional stories, including folktales, myths, fables, fairy tales, everyday experiences and the like, which pass down certain folkways, ethnic traditions, heritages, and cultural values from one generation to the next, relied on traditional oral storytelling in the past. However, they have been gradually transformed to various visual formats. Such transformations include products that are popular in the international book market, such as children's picturebooks, novels, CD Roms, E-books, and so forth.

Although the forms of storytelling may change, they maintain the same function to some degree in contemporary societies and still convey meanings in their own particular ways. Both traditional and contemporary stories are being produced in these formats. These visual representations contribute to the process of identity formation and to the construction of social reality for the viewer. In other words, they shape children's perception of who they are and how they see the world. As a result, more and more studies have been conducted to examine the issues regarding visual representation.

There are three studies that critically examine the visual representation of different cultures and ethnicities in children's picturebooks. Bradford (2003) adopts a postcolonial viewpoint to critically analyze the problem of the aboriginal visual representation shown in Australian picturebooks. She asserts that "books for children are inescapably ideological, Australian picturebooks offer the child reader versions of the postcolonial experience...oppositional ones...[and] privileging the imperial centre" (2003, p.110). Cross (1995) adopts multiple voices to critically analyze how the cultural icon of Christopher Columbus was presented in different picturebooks. Her study raises the issue of whose view was presented in any given picturebook and what is missing. Miranda (1994) conducted a cross-cultural comparative study of how India and its culture were presented in picturebooks published in the United States and India. In her study, she discusses the issues regarding stereotypes and authenticity through critically examining character, theme, and point of view in the picturebook.

The studies mentioned above indicate that children's books, as a production within a consumption driven world, convey implicit or explicit ideologies (Stephens, 1992). In other words, "[p]icture books can, of course, exist for fun, but they can never be said to exist without either a socializing or educational intention, or else without a

specific orientation towards the reality constructed by the society that produces them” (ibid, p. 158). Thus, it is important to critically examine what is present or not present in children’s picturebooks.

Children’s picturebooks have rapidly grown in Taiwan’s book market in recent years and they have been broadly adopted in school curriculums, book clubs, library activities and the like (Bradbury and Liu, 2003). However, most picturebooks published in Taiwan are translated from other languages, while only a small portion of them are made by Taiwanese writers and illustrators. In order to distinguish the characteristics of these Taiwanese picturebooks, publishers usually select several books to put in one set and create a special title for this set of books which emphasize Taiwanese culture. This strategy is an attempt to make Taiwanese picturebooks visible to consumers and fulfill a societal demand for learning about traditional Taiwanese folk lives and values.<sup>1</sup> As a result, these types of picturebooks present some possibilities for interpreting Taiwanese culture.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Accompanying new curriculum standards for grades 1 through 12 established during 1998 in Taiwan, a new holistic educational philosophy involving curricula and teaching and learning was also emphasized (Lo, 1999). Because of this, the ideas of curriculum integration and multiple learning abilities have replaced the notions of single discipline-based education and traditional paper and pencil tests. Awareness of the humanities, democracy, Taiwanese culture, and global world are taught to cultivate citizens in contemporary society (Lo, 1999). In addition, reading has been strongly encouraged in schools and communities since the Ministry of Education promoted a national movement of reading in 2000. As a result, children’s books are welcome in schools, especially those created by Taiwanese writers and illustrators and telling stories about life experience in Taiwan from early times to the present.

In order to incorporate children’s books into the curriculum, school teachers usually rely on getting information regarding recommended book lists from libraries, publishers, teacher conferences, and other sources. In nurturing students’ interests in reading, parent volunteers also become involved in school activities, such as storytelling, reading, bookmaking, playing, and the like. Many parents are in favor of the stories reflecting the memory of their childhood, such as traditional Taiwanese folktales.

In order to fulfill the demand of children’s picturebooks regarding Taiwanese culture, publishers create new book titles based on it. According to the book lists

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<sup>1</sup> They oftentimes refer to the Chinese culture brought to Taiwan by the Han people from Mainland China who had immigrated to Taiwan during the Ming and Qing Dynasties; and, in order to adapt the new environment, these immigrants have gradually evolved their particular ways of lives and values which are different from that of their home land. Therefore, the use of the traditional folk lives and values here, in particular, focuses on the Taiwanese culture without any influence by the Japanese colonial culture, the Kuomintang’s promotion of so-called orthodox Chinese culture, and the current American and Japanese popular cultures.

provided by publishers in the past four years, there were three sets of picturebooks named Taiwanese picturebooks<sup>2</sup> published by two of the main children's book publishers. In order to emphasize the characteristics of these picturebooks, the publishers create catalogs with a nostalgic atmosphere (the examples can be seen on the publishers' web pages).<sup>3</sup> These picturebooks are marketed in a way to present a sense of Taiwanese culture mainly based on an agricultural society. These images and stories are articulated through Taiwanese traditional folktales and folk lives in Taiwan. Therefore, these picturebooks provide and reinforce readers with an idea of what Taiwanese culture should be about. This led me to wonder about the questions of what and whose ideas is Taiwanese culture based on. If these picturebooks do convey Taiwanese culture, then how is the culture represented through the picturebooks published in Taiwan?

### Research Question

The research question is “how do Taiwanese writers and illustrators present Taiwanese culture in the three sets of children's picturebooks labeled Taiwanese picturebooks during 2001~2004?” To be more specific, I would like to identify what kinds of stories are retold and what kinds of cultural symbols are frequently represented in the picturebooks. I want to critically analyze the representation of meaning within a basis of intertextuality and a current social context. In order to investigate this question in more depth, the following five specific questions must be discussed.

1. What are the objectives of the three sets of picturebooks and their marketing strategies? What meanings/ideologies are associated with them?
2. What kind of text-picture relationship between verbal and visual narrative patterns is shown in these picturebooks? How do these two narrative patterns complement each other?
3. What verbal and visual narrative patterns are in the picturebooks?
4. How do the elements used in the visual narrative patterns provide cultural clues?
5. How do these narrative patterns and cultural clues together suggest an interpretation of Taiwanese culture? Whose viewpoint is presented? What meanings/ideologies are associated with it?

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<sup>2</sup> They include *Firefly Picturebook Selection* (including six titles of Taiwanese folktales and published in 1989 and reissued in 2001), *Taiwanese Children's Picturebook Selection* (including ten titles and published in 2002), and *Taiwanese Teenagers* (including six titles and published in 2003). The term “firefly” used for the title of the Taiwan traditional folktales is a metaphor, representing agricultural Taiwan because fireflies are oftentimes seen in natural environment without pollution. When Taiwan was an agricultural society, fireflies were a popular type of insect. However, they are less frequently seen in industrial Taiwan today.

<sup>3</sup> The promotion of *Firefly Picturebook selection* is shown at

<http://www.ylib.com/hotsale/firefly/default.htm>

The promotion of *Taiwanese Teenagers* is shown at [http://www.ylib.com/hotsale/taiwan\\_tad/default.htm](http://www.ylib.com/hotsale/taiwan_tad/default.htm)

The promotion of *Taiwanese Children's Picturebook Selection* is shown at

<http://www.012book.com.tw/hot/taian/index.html>

## Definitions of the Terms

In order to clarify the important concepts of this study, the terms used for culture, representation of meaning, ideology, and the picturebook should be defended.

### Culture

The term culture is a complex and complicated concept. According to Stuart Hall (1997a), culture contains at least three different aspects. First, “in more traditional definitions of the term, culture is said to embody the ‘best that has been thought and said’ in a society” (ibid, p. 2). Based on this definition, culture refers to so-called “high culture” including the classic works of literature, painting, sculpture, music, and the like. In contrast, this definition is extended to what is so-called popular culture, which includes popular forms of literature, music, art, design, and things created or practiced by the majority of ordinary people on a day-to-day basis.

Second, from the anthropological perspective, culture refers to “the way of life of a people” (ibid, p.2), which means culture as general patterns that can distinguish among groups of people based on their characteristics. It can be divided into two categories: nonmaterial culture (such as beliefs, values, behavior) and material culture (such as material objects, products) (Macionis, 1994).

Third, from the perspective of cultural studies and the sociology of culture, “culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings—the ‘giving and taking of meaning’—between the members of a society or group” (Hall, 1997a, p.2). Moreover, language which includes linguistic language, visual images, sound and the like is “central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings...” (ibid, p. 1). Based on this view, meaning is what a group of people ascribe to the cultural production through their use of language. In other words, meaning is negotiable.

This study considers all three aspects of culture. Particularly, the first definition reminds me of being aware of possible ideology of power relationships between high and low cultures. The second definition provides my study with a guideline to look at behavior and value systems of a culture through picturebooks. The third definition inspires me to see the picturebook serving as a medium that brings a group of people together, such as writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, and readers, to share their ideas. For this reason, I tend to perceive the picturebook as a cultural production within Taiwan’s cultural context. And, I situate this context within a current cultural discourse regarding the issues of globalization versus localization.

### Representation of Meaning

According to Hall (1997b), “there are broadly speaking three approaches to explaining how representation of meaning through language works” (p. 24). They include

the reflective or mimetic approach, the intentional approach, and the constructionist approach. First, the reflective approach refers to the idea that meaning can be considered “to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world” (ibid, p. 24). Second, the intentional approach emphasizes that “the speaker, the author...impose his or her unique meaning on the world through language” (ibid, p. 25). For this reason, “the author’s intent” is the key to understanding the meaning. Third, the constructionist approach believes that “[t]hings don’t mean: we [as the viewer] construct meaning, using a representational system—concepts and signs” (ibid, p. 25). This approach does not refuse “the existence of the material world”, but denies the idea of “the material world [conveying] meaning” (ibid, p. 25). In my study, I have adopted the constructionist approach to the representation of meaning. In this sense, the representation of Taiwan (the meaning) through the picturebooks (the material) is constructed based on my interpretation (the viewer) by using a semiotic analysis (signs and concepts).

## **Ideology**

The term ideology is often associated with Karl Marx, who emphasized social inequality. He believed that society’s rulers, who are in power to control resources and ideas, make bourgeois believe the false ideal or false consciousness that maintains the social hierarchy in favor of the rulers (Tyson, 1999). Thus, the bourgeois accepts false consciousness as if a social norm. However, Marx’s ideas of class conflict and false consciousness are not able to illustrate today’s circumstances. As a result, his followers revise it. From a Marxist view, ideology can be defined as “cultural beliefs that reflect and support the interests of certain categories of people” (Macionis, 1994, p. 155) and it is “a product of cultural conditioning. For example, capitalism, communism, Marxism, patriotism, religion, ethical systems, humanism, environmentalism, astrology, and karate are all ideologies” (Tyson, 1999, p. 52).

The use of the term ideology in this study refers to Louis Althusser’s main notion of ideology. That is, “...ideology [is] not simply as a body of ideas, but as a material practice [which] is encountered in the practices of everyday life...[It] is the way in which certain rituals and customs have the effect of binding us to the social order” (as cited in Storey, 1993, p. 5). In this sense, “[t]he social norms, or that which is socially acceptable, are of course neither neutral nor objective” (Fiske, 1998, p. 307). However, ideologies “are not necessarily undesirable, and in the sense of a system of beliefs by which we make sense of the world, social life would be impossible without them” (Stephens, 1992, p. 8). These statements indicate that every thought or belief we hold true contains ideology to some extent. For this reason, the messages that are communicated between the picturebook and the reader contain ideologies.

## **The Picturebook**

The term picturebook consists of at least two different definitions. One is specifically to refer to a book with text and pictures which intimately interact in telling a

story (Nodelman, 1988; Shulevitz, 1985). The other one is a broad definition; that is, “[a]ny book with a picture-book format can be included under the umbrella term *picture book*” (Huck, Hepler, Kickman, & Kiefer, 2001, p. 168). They include alphabet books, counting books, first books, and concept books, in which pictures “must be accurate and synchronized with the text” (ibid, p. 168). In addition, the broad definition refers to books with heavy text and fewer illustrations and the pictures may not amplify the text (Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 2002). This is the illustrated book and it is excluded from my study.

In the first definition, Shulevitz (1985) provides an inclusive way to distinguish two different picturebook formats: story book and picturebook. According to him, “A *story book* tells a story with words. Although the pictures amplify it, the story can be understood without them. The pictures have an auxiliary role, because the words themselves contain images” (p. 15). Whereas a *picturebook* tells a story mainly with pictures and the use of words is a supplementary role. Nodelman (1988) provides an explanation of more specific relationships between text and pictures in the picturebook. The text develops narrative time sequences, whereas the pictures depict spatial clues. The most valuable way to appreciate the picturebook is to consider all the designed elements as a whole and perceive them “in a sequence in which the relationships among them—the cover, endpapers, typography, pictures—are crucial to understanding the book” (Marantz, 1994, p.3). In sum, I will tend to use Shulevitz’s idea to categorize the selected picturebooks in this study. In order to emphasize the idea that story book is also a picturebook format, I use the term the *picture story book* to replace it.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to provide a cultural critique of the cultural representations in Taiwanese children’s picturebooks with an emphasis of Taiwanese traditions or experiences. In doing this, the three sets of Taiwanese picturebooks published during 2001~2004 are the primary data. How both visual and verbal narratives in those picturebooks imply cultural codes and meanings/ideologies will be investigated based on semiotic theory. A discussion of how the representation of meaning is presented through the picturebooks in relationship to Taiwan’s cultural context will be also provided.

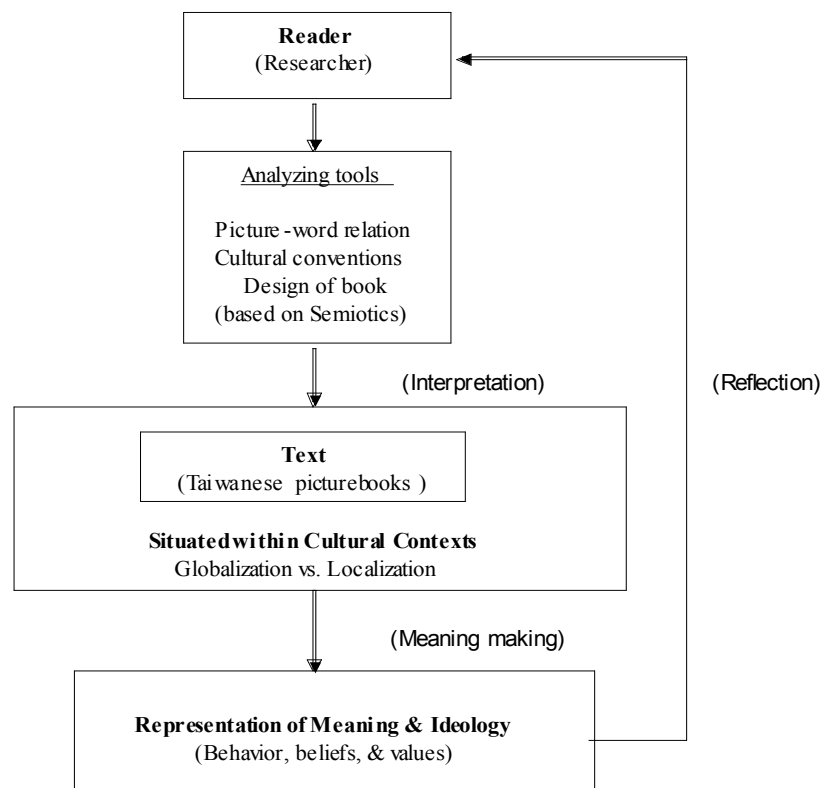
### **Conceptual Framework**

In the book, *The Cultural Analysis of Texts*, Lehtonen (2000) develops “a notion of the *contextual* and *cultural* nature of textual meanings” which is based on a theory of articulation (p. 1). In order to answer the question of where and how meanings are formed, he analyzes “the relationships between texts, contexts and readers in the formation of meanings” (ibid, 2000, p.2). This notion indicates that the formation of meanings can be analyzed from three aspects as a whole: the text, the context, and the reader. In this sense, Lehtonen’s idea of “textual meanings” ignores the author’s intent and places more weight on how meanings are socially constructed by the language we

use within a cultural context. This notion is similar to Hall’s constructionist approach to “representation of meaning through language.”

The purpose of my study is to investigate textual meanings through Taiwanese picturebooks from a cultural aspect. Lehtonen’s notion draws my attention to look at how I read these texts and what cultural context I base my interpretation on. Thus, my understanding of text analysis is based the following three segments: (1) Reading the text: how I read the picturebook, (2) Interpretation of the text: how I decode/construct the meaning, and (3) Situating the text within the cultural context: how I make sense of the text. A conceptual map of this study is accompanied (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Conceptual Map of the Study



### Reading the Text: How I Read the Picturebook

According to Lehtone (2000), “texts and readers never exist independently of each other, but in fact produce one another” (p. 133). For this reason, the reading process

is an interactive one. Reading “is never a mere passive selection of meanings from texts by acknowledging the meanings of words and joining them together according to the rules of grammar” (ibid, p. 133). Rather, it is a process of decision making which includes “choosing what to read, organizing and linking them together in order to form meanings, as well as bringing the reader’s own knowledge into texts” (ibid, p. 133). Therefore, I was aware of what decisions I made and thought about what were included or excluded according to the decisions.

### **Interpretation of the Text: How I Decode/Construct the Meaning**

According to Steven Mailloux (1995), the term “interpretation” has two meanings: “the action of expounding, explaining” and “a translation, a rendering”; moreover, in its etymology, interpretation provokes two concerns: “translation *of* a text and translation *for* an audience” (p. 121). These two etymological senses raise different questions that interpretation is “approximating what? translating how? and acceptable to whom?” (ibid, 1995, p.121-122). His discussion implies that interpretation tends to gain approximate meanings associated with a text based on the theories and perspectives chosen by the interpreters. And, as a result of this, different interpretations based on the same text are accepted by different audiences. Moreover, the question of “acceptable to whom” involves the issue of power relationships. Who holds the power to control interpretation is based on which lens is used. This notion inspired me to carefully select the lens used in this study and be aware of my bias and ideology. As a result, theories of globalization, post-colonial, and semiotics were adopted.

### **Situating the Text within the Cultural Context: How I Make Sense of the Text**

Since my research interest is to investigate how the Taiwanese picturebook presents its culture, I tend to connect the text to a current dominant cultural issue, which is an emphasis on the discourse of globalization versus localization. The debates regarding this discourse have evolved since Taiwan intended to enter the World Trade Organization in 2002. Due to this fact, many scholars and educators have worried that traditional Taiwanese culture may be eliminated by the impact of globalization. In looking into this issue further, a debate regarding a discourse of culture has been frequently presented in the Taiwan’s literary and art world. The issue of Taiwanese consciousness is a major part of this cultural discourse. Thus, a review of the development of Taiwanese consciousness and its implication and influence to publishing industry in Taiwan were explored.

## **Methodology**

### **Design and methods of data collection**

Since this study is intended to examine what ideology is embedded in the cultural representation of the picturebook under the labels regarding Taiwanese culture, qualitative research is the methodology and the methods consist of narrative analysis and

structuralism based on semiotics. The data collection in this study included the three sets of picturebooks created by Taiwanese writers and illustrators and published during the year of 2001~2004. They include *Firefly Picturebook Selection* (including six titles of *Taiwanese Folktales* and published in 1989 and reissued in 2001), *Taiwanese Children's Picturebook Selection* (including ten titles and published in 2002), and *Taiwanese Teenagers* (including six titles and published in 2003). There are twenty-two titles in total and available in the current Taiwanese book market. In order to have an in-depth sense of how these picturebooks are produced and promoted, the interviews with editors from the publishing houses and related commercial catalogs regarding the picturebooks on the publisher's web pages were also collected.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

The data analysis is divided into two major parts. The first stage is to overview the general patterns shown in the twenty-two picturebooks based on the analysis of narrative structure, including setting, characterization, theme, plot, point of view, and style. The picturebooks are analyzed individually. Besides this, cultural clues shown in the pictures are identified and the implied meanings are also discussed. At the second stage, the picturebooks are examined within groups based on Barthes' approach to semiotics (1996), dealing with two systems of signification. And, an interpretive critique is mainly based on the notion of cultural hybridity by Bhabha (1994).

### **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

In the postmodern era, culture has become a major component in academic research across different disciplines. Cultural studies, for example, take a special interest in cultural representation within popular culture, such as cartoons, toys, children's books, films, advertisements, MTV, and so forth. A current trend in art education emphasizes popular visual forms playing a crucial role in shaping personal cultural identity. For this reason, art educators should help students to explore their identity through the variety of visual cultural forms (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001). International literature for children makes its effort to promote the better understanding of different cultures all around the world. Whether a work of literature provides an authentic cultural experience is a primary concern (Freeman & Lehman, 2001). These three disciplines: cultural studies, art education, and international literature for children, strongly emphasize culture and its relationship to individuals, which include the formation of cultural identity and the understanding of cultural difference.

The picturebook is considered as a form of storytelling, a cultural production, a form of art, and an educational tool. All of these roles that the picturebook simultaneously plays are able to shape readers' perception of their own cultures and cultures from other countries. Especially, the picturebook broadly reaches young children and it is also one of the primary sources for them to investigate the concept of self and others, as well as family and society. This study demonstrates a careful analysis of the picturebook and its representation of Taiwanese culture. The results provide an exemplar

case that examines the ideologies embedded in children's picturebooks and discusses the characteristics of Taiwanese picturebooks and their cultural context. This study benefits interdisciplinary fields including cultural studies, art education, and international literature for children.

### **Limitation of the Study**

This study is not intended to generate the one and only interpretation of Taiwanese culture. Rather, it is intended to critique what ideology is embedded in the picturebooks based on semiotics. Moreover, this study does not attempt to extensively discuss aesthetic quality and experience of the picturebooks. The approach used here is to analyze the text and not be concerned about who the implied reader is for the selected picturebooks. For this reason, the perspective of children and whether the reader is able to identify cultural meanings through the visual images in the picturebooks are not discussed in the study.

The criteria of book selection in this study are also restrictive. Some genre of picturebooks, such as illustrated books and wordless picturebooks are not considered, and how pictures in these picturebooks convey cultural meanings is not investigated. In addition, the selection of this study focuses on the picturebooks put into sets based on the themes related to Taiwanese culture and selected by publishers. Thus, those Taiwanese picturebooks in any sets labeled international master children's picturebook selection or won national awards<sup>4</sup> and published in Taiwan's book market are excluded from this study.<sup>5</sup>

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter two is literature review, including three segments: (1) cultural context: a review of theories of globalization and post-colonial and the issue of globalization and localization in Taiwan, (2) historical context: a review of the development of Taiwanese consciousness, and (3) the relevance of these reviews to this study. Chapter three presents methodology, in which an overview of the methodological framework, an explanation of the design of the study, a discussion trustworthiness and limitation of this study, and summary are provided. Chapter four is data analysis, in which data was presented based on two parts: (1) analysis of the picturebooks from the publishing perspective, (2) analysis of the contents of the

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<sup>4</sup> Currently, there are two major national awards for children's picturebooks. They include "Hsin-Yi Children's Literature Award" held yearly by Hsin-Yi Foundation since 1988 and "Reed Pipe Award for Children's Literature" held biennially by Mandarin Daily News since 1995. Each of them has different criteria for selecting the best picturebook for children. The former limits the appropriate reading range for children from age 3 to 8 while the latter is from age 3 to 12.

<sup>5</sup> The reason I did not choose these picturebooks is that there is a variety of difference among them. For example, there are at least two different paths to publish picturebooks in Taiwan. One is from the path of participating a national competition and the other is publishers creating a particular theme and inviting writers and illustrators to create the stories they expect. Due to these different approaches to publish Taiwanese picturebooks, I decided to choose the latter as my study focus.

picturebooks. Chapter five covers an interpretative critique, implications for publication and education, and suggestions for the future study.

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