

From Text To Frame: The Graphic Adaptation of “The Steelyard”, A Modern Classic of Taiwanese Literature

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ABSTRACT

Adaptation studies have often been centered on the transposition of literary works into plays and movies. More specifically, filmic adaptations of novels have been explored extensively, as proven, among other things, by the existence of well-established scholarly journals such as *The Journal of Adaptation Studies* published by the Association of Adaptation Studies or the long-standing *Literature/Film Quarterly*. However, comparatively little research has been carried out in the field of graphic adaptations of literary texts. The studies focusing on how works of literature – mostly classics – have “migrated” to the ninth art deal, for the most part, with either Western comics or Japanese manga. By focusing on the graphic adaptation of a Sinophone short story, this contribution aims at filling this research gap. It centers on Ruan Guang-min’s recent *manhua* version (2023) of 《一桿「秤仔」》(Tsit kuáinn tshìn-á, “The Steelyard”), a seminal short story by Lōa Hō, hailed the father of modern Taiwanese literature, first published almost a century ago (1926). By presenting the two versions of the story and through a close textual reading of the graphic novel, I seek to understand what has been reworked from text to drawing and if such an adaptation has been successful in making the original work relevant one hundred years after its original release.

Keywords: *Graphic adaptation, Taiwanese literature, Ruan Guang-min, Lōa Hō, The Steelyard*

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Metinden Kareye: Tayvan Edebiyatının Modern Klasikleri Arasında Yer Alan “The Steelyard”ın Grafik Uyarlaması

ÖZ

Uyarlama çalışmaları sıklıkla edebi eserlerin oyunlara ve filmlere aktarılması üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır. Daha spesifik olarak, romanların sinematik uyarlamaları, diğer şeylerin yanı sıra, Uyarlama Çalışmaları Derneği tarafından yayınlanan *The Journal of Adaptation Studies* gibi köklü akademik dergilerin veya uzun süredir yayınlanan *Literature/Film Quarterly*'nin varlığıyla kanıtlandığı üzere, geniş çapta incelenmiştir. Ancak, edebi metinlerin grafik uyarlamaları alanında nispeten az araştırma yapılmıştır. Edebiyat eserlerinin – çoğunlukla klasiklerin – dokuzuncu sanata nasıl “göç ettiği” üzerine odaklanan çalışmalar, çoğunlukla Batı çizgi romanları veya Japon mangalarıyla ilgilidir. Bu katkı, bir Sinophone kısa hikayesinin grafik uyarlamasına odaklanarak bu araştırma boşluğunu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Modern Tayvan edebiyatının babası olarak kabul edilen Lōa Hō'nun neredeyse bir asır önce (1926) ilk kez yayınlanan öncü kısa hikayesi olan《一桿「秤仔」》(Tsit kuáinn tshin-á, “Terazi”)'nın Ruan Guang-min'in (2023) son *manhua* versiyonuna odaklanmaktadır. Hikâyenin iki versiyonunu sunarak ve grafik romanın yakın metinsel okuması yoluyla, metinden çizime neyin yeniden işlendiğini ve böyle bir uyarlamanın orijinal eseri ilk yayınlanışından yüz yıl sonra ilgili kılmada başarılı olup olmadığını anlamayı amaçlıyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Grafik uyarlama, Tayvan edebiyatı, Ruan Guang-min, Lōa Hō, The Steelyard*

INTRODUCTION

While adaptation studies that examine how literary works transcend the written page and come to life on screen or – to a lesser extent – on stage have flourished, how literary texts have been adapted graphically has received comparatively less scholarly attention. However, it is undeniable that since the late 1990s, adaptation studies have undergone significant growth, evolution, and diversification, shifting their focus away from concerns about fidelity to the original work and from a comparative approach primarily centered on the text-to-film format (Blin-Rolland, Lecomte, and Marc Ripley, 2017, p.2). As recently acknowledged by Giannakopoulou (2019), “[i]n Adaptation Studies, scholars have been voicing the need for the field to expand beyond its literature-to-film roots” (p.200). Nevertheless, this is still not the case when literature to comics adaptations² involves non-Western traditions, with the notable exception of Japanese manga.

While existing scholarship has often focused on either Western graphic narratives or on their Japanese counterpart, this paper dives into the under-researched realm of Sinophone³ literary texts and their adaptation to a graphic format. Taking Ruan

² For this study, “comics adaptation” refers specifically to a literary work being turned into a comic book or graphic novel. Additionally, I use the term “comics” to encompass the entire medium, including graphic novels.

³ Here, we use the term “Sinophone” and its study the way Shih (2011) does, i.e. “the study of Sinitic-language

Guang-min's (阮光民, 1971-) 2023 *manhua* (comic or graphic novel in Sinitic languages)⁴ adaptation of Lōa Hō's (賴和, 1894-1943)⁵ seminal short story "The Steelyard" (《一桿「秤仔」》) as a case study, this article delves into the transmutation of a nearly century-old literary oeuvre into a modern graphic narrative. Analyzing both the original text and its graphic counterpart, this study explores some of the elements that make this graphic adaptation unique and independent from the original short story; thus, proving that, although remaining rooted in it, it also emerges as a distinct creative endeavor, with Ruan Guang-min rightfully regarded as the primary author. Additionally, I seek to assess the success of this adaptation in revitalizing a classic for a contemporary audience and enrich our understanding of Sinophone literary heritage through the lens of comics.

This article's contribution is threefold. Firstly, by focusing on Sinophone literature and comics, it broadens the scope beyond Western-centric analyses, thus enhancing our comprehension of adaptation across diverse cultural contexts. Secondly, it fills a gap in comic adaptation research by delving into a specific case study from a peripheral literary system, shedding light on the distinct strategies and challenges inherent in the graphical adaptation of literature. Lastly, by considering the temporal dimension, the study examines how the graphic adaptation has recontextualized a modern classic for contemporary readers with a different type of sensibility and consciousness. Through this exploration, the aim is to deepen our understanding of Lōa Hō's specific narrative and Ruan Guang-min's graphic rendition, as well as to underscore the value of comics adaptation in engaging with and reinterpreting literary works, with the firm belief that "an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary" (Hutcheon, 2013, p.9).

cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic production" (p.710). This is especially relevant, since traditional Chinese studies have often focused on mainland China, leaving Sinitic-language communities elsewhere, such as those in Taiwan, pre-handover Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, largely unexamined. The concept of the Sinophone, therefore, emerged as a valuable alternative framework, since it provides a powerful lens to analyze and give prominence to cultural expressions and figures outside the dominant Han Chinese sphere.

⁴ While in this context the Chinese term is used interchangeably with "Sinophone graphic narrative", I recognize the unique and specific characteristics of *manhua* that challenge the binary – and often simplistic – distinction between Western comics/graphic novels and Japanese manga. Similar to the latter, it also possesses a distinct identity apart from Western traditions and derives its uniqueness from a rich heritage of Chinese folk art, woodblock printing, calligraphy, and the subversive humor of local political satire.

⁵ I chose to transliterate the author's name according to the Taiwanese Hokkien pronunciation of the sinographs, rather than using the *pinyin* transcription (Lai He) based on Mandarin Chinese. It is, in my opinion, a small act of respect and faithfulness to the ideals of an intellectual who fought all his life to promote literature in the Taiwanese Hokkien language. As for Ruan Guang-min, I followed the author's preferred transliteration, thus using a hyphen between the two syllables of his first name. Additionally, I refer to Lōa Hō and Ruan Guang-min's native tongue as "Taiwanese Hokkien", rather than simply "Taiwanese" (台灣閩南語 in lieu of 台語) as many studies do, because to use the latter to denote only one of the several languages of the island (such as Taiwanese Hakka or the Austronesian tongues) would mean silencing them. Taiwanese Hokkien, a variant of Hokkien, belongs to the Southern Min language group. It has its roots in the Minnan region located in the province of Fujian in southeastern China. For an insightful overview of the language issue in Taiwanese society, see Klöter and Wasserfall (2022).

To enhance our comprehension of the transition from Lōa Hō’s literary text to Ruan Guang-min’s graphic novel, a preliminary examination of adaptation is necessary, establishing a robust methodological framework for this inquiry. Subsequently, a review of existing research on comics adaptation, with particular attention to works involving Chinese-language literary texts, will be conducted. Finally, the focal point of this article will be introduced through an analysis of Lōa Hō’s short story alongside Ruan Guang-min’s *manhua*, delineating their shared characteristics and disparities. The sections of this study should be viewed as a series of interconnected rings, where understanding the first is essential for comprehending the second, which subsequently informs the third.

ON ADAPTATION

Literary adaptation can take many forms as literary texts travel to different media, adapting to new linguistic, semiotic, and cultural conventions, as well as to new environments, times, and audiences. Hence, novels or short stories – but also poems and songs – become films, video games and comics. As Hutcheon (2013) put it, “[a]daptations are everywhere today: on the television and movie screen, on the musical and dramatic stage, on the Internet, in novels and comic books, in your nearest theme park and video arcade” (p.2). On occasions, adaptation can occur within the confines of the same medium, but with a change of genre, for example when a narrative poem is transformed into a text of prose, such as in the case of the many prose adaptations of the epic *Beowulf*, probably the most important surviving literary text in Old English.⁶ Sometimes, even the genre remains unaltered: this process encompasses the rewriting of a literary text, either in the same language or another, tailored to a distinct demographic group, an example of which would be the children’s versions of many works of fiction initially aimed at an adult audience.⁷

Despite the many shapes that literary texts can take, until fairly recently, adaptation studies have largely been concerned with literature’s filmic reincarnations (Hutcheon, 2013, p.xii). In the new millennium alone, there’s a plethora of studies devoted to the theorization of how a written text becomes a motion picture or a TV series, with scholars using a wide array of approaches to tackle the issue. As suggested by Pinar (2019), “it is necessary to analyse the intertextual relation between text and film and also to describe the historical and cultural context in which literary works and adaptations are produced and consumed” (p.95); however, some of the older perspectives, such as those focusing on the fidelity of the adapted work to the original, are not suitable for the task. Already at the

⁶ For instance, renowned epic-fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien translated *Beowulf* into modern English prose between 1920 and 1926. Tolkien’s version of the Anglo-Saxon epic was published posthumously in 2014. For a detailed and interesting look at Tolkien’s relationship with the text and the challenges of adapting an ancient poem for a modern audience, see Acocella (2014).

⁷ Occasionally, non-fiction books as well have been adapted for younger readers, such as in the case of Michelle Obama’s autobiography *Becoming*. More on this type of adaptation can be found in a very informative article by Jensen (2021). Moreover, within the Chinese-language context, one could reference adaptations tailored for young readers of renowned premodern Chinese novels, as well as abridged versions of classical works like *A Dream of Red Mansions* (紅樓夢) designed for foreign students of Chinese.

beginning of this century, Stam (2000) moved “beyond [the] moralistic approach” (p.54) entailed by the notion of fidelity and criticized it for failing to answer the very basic question of “fidelity to what?” (p.57). At the same time, he suggests interpreting adaptation as the act of transforming a literary text through “a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization, and reculturalization [...] according to the protocols of a distinct medium” (Stam, 2020, p.68).

Other scholars, such as Hutcheon, shy away from simplistic approaches based on the fidelity of the result of adaptation, as they implicitly assume the superiority of the adapted work, i.e. the original. Centering on fidelity is, according to her, not always appropriate, and often theoretically flimsy, since “from the adapter’s perspective, adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new” (Hutcheon, 2013, p.20). The academician proposes to look at adaptation as “an ongoing dialogical process [...] in which we compare the work we already know with the one we are experiencing” (Hutcheon, 2013, p.21), thus considering it as a type of intertextuality, a concept devised by Kristeva (1980), which sees all texts as dynamic sites of dialogue. Similarly, Aragay (2005) proposes that the original texts should be continually reinterpreted and reappropriated according to the various settings and should not be seen as a fixed entity with an eternal, never changing soul that adapters must strive to replicate faithfully (p.22). Leitch (2003), too, rejects the idea of fidelity to the source text and considers it “a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense” (p.161). However, as Meneghelli (2012) cleverly points out, despite the numerous critiques to the restrictive nature of the fidelity paradigm in relation to adaptation, the concept is still pivotal and unavoidable, even in recent research (p.6).

Gutiérrez García-Huidobro (2015) posits that a more pertinent and fruitful approach to adaptation within scholarly discourse should revolve around the notion that adaptation constitutes a form of rewriting, influenced by the inherent characteristics of the medium in which it is executed. Thus, he argues that the concept of fidelity necessitates a reframing within the context of its interaction with the medium, rather than with the original text, and should take into consideration its limitations and unique properties (Gutiérrez García-Huidobro, 2015, p.7).

De Giusti (2015) suggests focusing on adaptation as a complex process influenced by various factors, a journey that must be observed in its stages, if we want to understand and critically assess the changes and variations that arise along the way (p.30). He calls, in sum, for an assessment of the outcomes of adaptation that considers the historical dimension of the process. Bruhn (2013), too, insists on the fact that adaptation, as a process rather than a product, is a somewhat undervalued issue, and therefore suggests “that adaptation studies should avoid an exaggerated goal-orientedness (focusing on the end result) and instead try to describe, analyse and interpret the inherent meaning in the process of adapting” (p.73).

Since the original text and its new version may be borne out of significantly different contexts, the latter can also “provide material for possible new meanings that might be embedded in it” (Tabachnick and Bendit Saltzman, 2015, p.9), and that might resonate with the historical circumstances in which it saw the light. It is for this reason that Geraghty (2009), for instance, calls for “both textual and contextual analysis” when dealing with adaptations (p.4).

Regardless of one’s take on adaptation as a subject of study, it is indisputable that it needs to address two adaptable categories, as articulated by McFarlane (1996). In his seminal work on novel-to-film adaptation, the scholar identifies “(i) those elements of the original novel which are transferable because not tied to one or other semiotic system – that is, essentially, *narrative*, and (ii) those which involve intricate processes of adaptation because their effects are closely tied to the semiotic system in which they are manifested – that is, *enunciation*” (McFarlane 1996, p.20, italics in the original).

FROM LITERATURE TO COMICS

While mainstream adaptation studies have often focused on the relationship between literature and film, thus overlooking the migration of works of literature into graphic novels, within the relatively niche domain of comics studies, there have been numerous endeavors to scrutinize the issue (Beineke, 2011, p.8).⁸ For instance,

In the last two decade or so, literary studies, too, have dealt with the topic of how poems, works of fiction and non-fiction have been transferred to the ninth art,⁹ hence proving that “literary culture has been changing to become more receptive and open to graphic narratives and visual culture” (Baetens and Frey, 2014, p.192). There have been, however, some concerns regarding the adaptability of text-only literature, especially novels, to comics. Pratt (2017), for instance, argues that, unlike graphic novels, traditional written texts can span hundreds or thousands of pages and this expansive format enables the portrayal of intricately woven narratives that may be challenging to convey effectively within the constrained textual and visual confines of comics (p.232). From my perspective, this apprehension lacks justification, as the graphic novel serves as a medium which adapts particularly well to complex narratives that extend beyond linguistic elements alone, as exemplified by Ruan Guang-min’s adaptation.

When dealing with the topic of literature transformed into a graphic format, it is imperative to consider some factors that might guide us through the

⁸ The field of comics studies has seen a notable increase in research on comics-to-film adaptations in recent years. Works by scholars like Burke (2015) have established a substantial body of scholarship examining the challenges of translating a visual, sequential narrative form into a time-based cinematic medium. As suggested by Pratt (2017), “[m]uch of the interest in comics and adaption so far has focused on comic-to-film adaptations, where comics are the sources and films are the targets” (230). This area of inquiry presents a compelling line of investigation, yet it falls outside the purview of the present study.

⁹ Since 1964, comic books have been acknowledged – more or less officially – as the ninth art (*neuvième art*, in French), thanks to an article by film critic and historian Claude Beylie (1964) titled “La bande dessinée est-elle un art?” (Is the comic strip an art?).

comparative analysis between the source text and its adaptation. Primarily, there is the hierarchical consideration. Although, in the context of literature-to-comics adaptation, the graphic novel emerges chronologically after the literary work, it is crucial to acknowledge that different versions of a single text can “exist laterally, not vertically” (Hutcheon, 2013, p.xv). Since they “are not simply operations of ‘retelling’ the same story” (Dusi, 2014, p.123), they should be considered independent cultural products, through which the adapters/authors reinterpret the original work in unique ways that are relevant to their audience. Jenkins (2011) contends that these versions possess varying degrees of innovation and, as interpretations of the adapted work, they contribute, to some extent, to the spectrum of meanings associated with the narrative. In this sense, it is perhaps useful to introduce Berthou’s theory on comics adaptation, which mainly focuses on the aim of the adapter. According to the French academician, when a non-graphic work of literature is turned into comics, it undergoes a sort of “*médiation*” between the original text, often a classic, and new audiences (Berthou, 2015, p.65). Additionally, he proposes considering comics as a form of visual “*représentation*”, in which the adapter aims to explore the visual potential of a literary work beyond its written form (Berthou, 2015, p.67). Lastly, Berthou (2015) discusses the idea of adaptation as a sort of “*traduction*” where comic creators constantly negotiate between different modes of communication to bring a text to life visually (p.71).

Berthou’s perspective on adaptation connects directly to the second issue, which is that of authorship or the question of whether adapters might be considered ‘just’ that or if they are indeed authors. In an article exploring the graphic adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Labarre (2015) discusses the concept of autonomy and exploration within graphic novels. He suggests that even in scholarly adaptations, there’s always a creative process at work that involves investigating different ways of presenting text, images, and layout (Labarre, 2015, p.23). Mitchell (2017) proposes that in mediums like comics, where visuals are a substantial part of the content, the conventional understanding which equates writer with author may not necessarily apply. The scholar suggests a reassessment of the automatic assignment of authorship solely to the writer and a reconsideration of whether the creation of visual art holds as much authorial significance as the generation of written content (Mitchell, 2017, p.244). In my opinion, this is especially true and relevant in the case of comics adaptations of literary works, in which the artist creates, through their own interpretation and reformulation of a non-graphic text, a new work of which they should be considered authors at least as much as the writer of the source text.

The last factor that I want to bring into the discussion is the fact that non-graphic literature and graphic narratives produce different reading experiences due to the uniqueness of mediums and the differences in their literariness. In fact, while the first relies exclusively on the linguistic code, the latter combine words and images, verbal as well as non-verbal elements. It must, therefore, be considered multimodal. A text-only work of literature is read – few exceptions aside – in

a linear fashion and reading time is spread evenly throughout it. On the other hand, "comics text reading is [...] slowed and quickened by the characteristics of text itself: a normal dimension panel describing an expected event without using words is surely faster to read than a very big and complex one, describing a wholly unpredictable event accompanied by dialogues and verbal observations" (Barbieri, 2001, p.2).¹⁰

And yet, although many scholars in comics studies have tended to sideline the importance of the verbal message within the medium, it is indeed important and must be scrutinized seriously when analyzing visual narratives. As Miodrag (2012) rightfully points out, although the artistic merit of a comic does not hinge on how well-written it is, when deeming certain comics as literary, it is indeed essential to consider the writing's attributes, not merely the general artistic values of creativity and coherence, or narrative elements like character and theme development (p.267). Therefore, when analyzing a graphic adaptation, it is important to consider not only how the verbal text was transformed into non-verbal – mainly visual – elements, but also to pay attention to the linguistic message that can appear in the form of narrative text as well as dialogue or thoughts within balloons, a feature which is unique to comics.

As mentioned earlier in this section, there is indeed a significant number of articles dealing with case studies of literature to comics adaptation. Whilst a bibliographical review of them falls largely outside of the scope of this contribution, it might be useful to briefly point out at some of the most relevant in the context of the Sinosphere.¹¹ In a recent study on Tsai Chih-chung's (蔡志忠, 1948-) graphic adaptation of *Journey to the West* (西遊記), a Chinese novel published in the 16th century, during the Ming dynasty, and attributed to Wu Cheng'en (吳承恩, 1500?-1582?), Yu (2019) examines the interplay between the comic strip and the verbal message, determining that they frequently diverge, resulting in the presentation of two distinct narratives within the same page (p.18). Zhong, Chen, and Xuan (2021) concentrate on Tsai Chih-chung's adaptation of Chinese literary classics, emphasizing how comics can infuse modernity into these classics by incorporating contemporary elements. They determine that Tsai's adaptation of *Journey to the West* has not just converted a literary classic into a captivating and accessible modern narrative, encouraging readers to evaluate the contemporary context; it has also integrated modern elements with values that resonate with the audience (Zhong, Chen, and Xuan, 2021, p.12).

In a more general article on literature-to-comics adaptations, Song (2018) deals

¹⁰ Pratt (2017) exemplifies the uniqueness of the reading pace of comics through a very pertinent example: "A sophisticated comic such as *Watchmen* succeeds by exploiting the reader's ability to go slowly, paying close attention to detail. Readers must constantly revisit previous pages, since particular aesthetic effects and layers of meaning are revealed only by comparing pages to their predecessors" (p.234).

¹¹ While Shih (2011) envisions the Sinophone as excluding mainland Han China, my concept of the Sinosphere includes all regions and communities that use Sinitic languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese Hokkien, and others.

with another less common, rather unique type of adaptation, which involves breaking down the original work and making significant changes to it. This could mean completely altering the narrative structure of the original work, introducing entirely new protagonists, and adopting alternative viewpoints to explore narratives that were previously overlooked or never addressed in the original piece. According to the scholar, a notable example of such adaptation is evident in the work of Hong Kong comic artist Chan Mou (陳某, 1970-), who adapted *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義), a historical novel attributed to Luo Guanzhong (羅貫中, 14th century), into the *manhua* series *The Ravages of Time* (火鳳燎原). While still grounded in the historical backdrop of the original novel, the *manhua* revolutionizes its narrative, deconstructing the plot of the source work and narrating it in a drastically different manner, thus representing a highly transformative reinterpretation of the original literary material (Song, 2018, p.81). Recently, Liu (2022) analyzed the graphic adaptation of famous Taiwanese writer Wu Ming-yi's (吳明益, 1971-) short story collection *The Illusionist on the Skywalk* (天橋上的魔術師, 2011) by two *manhua* artists, Sean Chuang (小莊, 1968-) and Ruan Guang-min. Borrowing from Linda Costanzo Cahir's (2006) discussion on three modes of literature-to-film adaptation, namely "literal translation", "traditional translation", and "radical translation", the author contends that Sean Chuang chose the first method, essentially replicating the characters and plot of the short stories in his *manhua*, following the narrative techniques without much innovation or experimentation. On the other hand, Ruan Guang-min chose the second mode, since his versions of the stories use the original characters and narratives as a sort of blueprint, but perhaps considering the characteristics of the comic medium, he introduces changes that may not faithfully adhere to the original work (Liu, 2022, p.56-57). Liu's contribution is useful to better contextualize Ruan's take on graphically adapting works of literature and while my study takes this previous research into account, it also departs from the issue of faithfulness.

LŌA HŌ AND THE SHORT STORY

Lōa Hō is a significant figure in the study of modern Sinophone literature and is widely hailed as the father of New Taiwanese literature. To understand his role and impact on the island's intellectual and literary development, many have often compared him to Lu Xun (魯迅, 1881-1936), canonized in China as the father of modern Chinese literature. Both writers lived during similar times, had medical backgrounds, and focused on writing in vernacular Chinese, albeit of two different varieties. Most importantly, in their writings, they both addressed issues pertaining to national identity and showed a special preoccupation for the struggles of ordinary people.

Lōa Hō was born in Changhua County in 1894, one year before the Qing empire was defeated in the Sino-Japanese War and subsequently forced to sign the unequal Treaty of Shimonoseki, which obliged the Chinese to cede the island of Taiwan to Japan. Hence, his life unfolded against the backdrop of Japanese rule. Medicine, seen as an instrument of modernization by the colonial administration, became his calling. After a few years as a physician in Taipei and Chia-yi, in

1898, Lōa Hō crossed the Taiwan Straits over to Amoy (today known as Xiamen), a treaty port in China, to work as a doctor (Lin, 2018, ch.1). His literary output can be categorized into three distinct phases. In the initial stage of his career, he focused predominantly on composing classical Chinese poetry. During his stay in China, he encountered the works of prominent May Fourth writers, such as Lu Xun. Despite facing what appears to have been a disheartening experience in Amoy, Lōa returned to Taiwan with a renewed commitment to enriching the cultural landscape of his home island, where he penned fiction (short stories, for the most part) with a realist approach and in his vernacular language, namely Taiwanese Hokkien. These stories, which can be considered representative of Taiwan’s Nativist Literature (鄉土文學 in Chinese),¹² centered on the plight of the Taiwanese people and “The Steelyard” is perhaps one of the finest examples of this second artistic phase. Lastly, as Lin (2018) also rightfully points out, perhaps considering that his vernacular fiction had not been as successful as he had idealistically anticipated, “he stopped writing stories in the vernacular around the end of 1935 or the beginning of 1936 [and] returned to the composition of traditional Chinese poetry” (ch.1).

“The Steelyard”¹³, first published on *Taiwan Min Bao* (臺灣民報) in February 1926, is a poignant depiction of life on the island under the oppressive colonial system. It follows the life of Chîn Tit-chham (秦得參, the name being homonym with the expression 真的慘, which could be rendered as “truly unfortunate” or “really miserable”),¹⁴ the son of landless peasants, who struggles to make ends meet after his father passes away and he and his mother must return the rented plot of land to the owner. Despite working as a hired hand, Tit-chham faces hardship due to the Japanese sugar company’s control over available plots, leaving him unable to afford farming. Married with children, Chîn Tit-chham turns to selling vegetables in the village, but he encounters trouble when a Japanese policeman accuses him of violating regulations concerning weights and measures. Refusing to give in to extortion, Chîn Tit-chham chooses to spend three nights in jail over the payment a fine, only to be bailed out by his wife. Frustrated and hopeless, he decides to commit a desperate act and kills the policeman on night patrol.

As Duzan (2017) points out, although the story is concise, running approximately six thousand Chinese characters in its revised edition, its characters are vividly portrayed, and the detailed depiction of local customs and social interactions add

¹² Emerging from the New Literature Movement during the Japanese occupation of the 1920s, Taiwan’s nativist literature experienced a revival in the 1970s following a decline in the late 1930s due to Japan’s reinforced colonial policies. Employing literary realism, it portrayed the lives of the islanders as well as local events and issues, aiming to capture the uniqueness of local society. Nativist fiction often explored the existential challenges and identity crises faced by locals, infused with a humanistic ethos. Often drawing from the authors’ personal experiences, these works served as mirrors reflecting their take on life and society.

¹³ The original title of the story has been alternatively rendered as “A Lever Scale” by Darryl Sterk, who has translated the author’s complete vernacular fiction in 2018.

¹⁴ The name of the protagonist is transliterated according to its Taiwanese Hokkien pronunciation, rather than following that of Mandarin Chinese (Qin Decan). As for the reasons behind this choice, please refer to footnote 1. Besides, the characters of the protagonist’s name are homonym with the phrase only when read in Taiwanese Hokkien.

depth to the narrative. Analyzing the story, prominent intellectual and historian of Taiwanese literature Yeh Shih-t'ao contends that, through its plain and straightforward language, Lōa Hō skillfully highlights the struggles of Taiwanese people while condemning Japanese and local landlords' exploitation of the poor (Yeh, 2007, p.152). "The Steelyard" can be best described as a narrative of resistance. Its ending, however, reveals the impossibility of obtaining justice and fair treatment in a colonized land. Although the short story is anchored in a particular time and space, its underlying message resonates universally. This is underscored by the author's concluding explanatory note, revealing that the inspiration for this tragic tale arose from having witnessed similar acts of injustice which are universal, a realization further reinforced by reading Anatole France's *Crainquebille*.¹⁵

Despite the story's universality, Lōa Hō demonstrates significant concern for the here (Taiwan), the now (the period of Japanese colonization) and the disadvantaged, particularly for those Taiwanese individuals at the bottom of the economic and social ladder of society. Given such circumstances, language also emerges as a form of resistance, and it is imperative to consider the linguistic decisions made by Lōa Hō, if one expects to thoroughly comprehend the significance of this and other literary works by the author. Lee and Hsu (2010) contend that since Taiwanese Hokkien, Lōa's native tongue, was not codified in its written form, and speaking for the colonized through the language of the colonizer (Japanese) was not an ethically viable option for him, he was left with only one choice: to resort to the Chinese script – at the time mainly used for Mandarin Chinese and Classical Chinese – to transcribe Taiwanese Hokkien. This process of transcription also became "a process of translation, resulting in a hybrid combination of various linguistic elements that include Mandarin, Japanese, and Taiwanese" (Lee and Hsu, 2010, p.64).

It is safe to assume that "The Steelyard" emerges from a deep phase of contemplation concerning language, local identity, and anticolonial struggle, during which Lōa Hō fearlessly explored the possibilities to use the Taiwanese variety of the Hokkien language to serve the cause of the underprivileged and, as Tsai (2017) suggests, "to enlighten [his] target audience, the working classes" (p.162). In this context, the title serves as a definitive assertion, not only because the steelyard (or lever scale) symbolizes justice – or the lack of it under Japanese rule –,¹⁶ but also because such a key element of the story is presented using the local vernacular in the Chinese script (一桿秤仔) which, in Ruan Guang-min's adaptation, is further transliterated as "Tsit kuáinn tshin-á",

¹⁵ The *nouvelle* by France was first published on *Le Figaro* in three weekly installments, between 21 November and 5 December 1900 under the title *L'Affaire Crainquebille* (Inárea Las Heras, 1998, p.285). The plot shares many commonalities with "The Steelyard" as it deals with the injustice suffered by Crainquebille, a greengrocer who is sentenced to prison for allegedly insulting a police officer who ordered him to move along while he was serving a customer.

¹⁶ Michelle Yeh (2022) contends that while "the image of steelyard symbolizes fairness and law, the breaking of the steelyard by the Japanese policeman gives it a satiric twist" (p.292).

i.e. in the Latin alphabet. This example shows that, most often than not, Lōa Hō “used Chinese scripts to transcribe topolectal sounds, giving his stories their unique Taiwanese-ness” (Tsai, 2017, p.189). Similarly, the significance of the protagonist’s name fully reveals itself only when read aloud in Taiwanese Hokkien (refer to note 7), underscoring once more the crucial role of Lōa’s native language in shaping the narrative and in speaking for the disadvantaged. Hence, Chîn Tit-chham emerges as the quintessential embodiment of the “truly downtrodden” colonized subject, especially the impoverished Taiwanese farmer. From a formal narratological perspective, the story unfolds in chronological order, adhering to a linear timeline, which delineates the progression of events in Tit-chham’s life. The reader accompanies the protagonist from childhood to adulthood, with the author emphasizing the several challenges and events the man encounters throughout. The narrative evolves from Tit-chham’s initial struggles with poverty and mistreatment to his endeavors in sustaining his family, while coping with injustice as he matures. The story concludes with rumors of the policeman’s assassination, which feels like the inevitable result of a narrative marked by injustice, class struggle, and colonial strife. Michelle Yeh (2022) extends beyond Lōa’s conclusion (“Around the same time a rumor spread through town that a night patrolman had been killed in the street”, in Parish Yang’s translation) and contends that, after murdering the policeman, Tit-chham takes his own life (p.292), although such double tragedy is only hinted at in the story. Parish Yang, in a translator’s note, argues that the short story concludes with a sense of cryptic ambiguity. The translator posits that this ambiguity may be a deliberate choice by the author, given the inherent nature of the narrative (Lai, 1983, n.5).

RUAN GUANG-MIN AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Hailing from Douliu, a mid-sized city in Yunlin County, western Taiwan, Ruan Guang-min has emerged as a leading figure in the world of contemporary *manhua*. After studying advertising and interior design, and a brief career within the military, he became an assistant to comic book artist Lai Yu-Hsien (賴有賢, 1967). His remarkable talent has garnered numerous accolades – both domestically and internationally – throughout his career of more than two decades, including multiple Golden Comic Awards (Comic of the Year in 2012, 2017, and 2020, and Best Cross-Media Application in 2020) and the Silver Prize at the 14th Japan International Manga Award (2020). Besides, his works circulate globally, having been translated into a wide array of languages such as Arabic, French, German, Italian and Japanese. Moreover, he has been invited to prestigious international events such as the Angoulême International Comics Festival (2012 and 2018).¹⁷ Additionally, two of his *manhua*, namely *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* (東華春理髮廳, 2010-2023) and *The Grocery Store* (用九柑仔店, 2016-2019), have also become successful TV series in 2012 and 2019 respectively. He is one of the co-

¹⁷As already suggested elsewhere, Ruan Guang-min’s captivating works have garnered international recognition beyond their intrinsic appeal, partly due to government-led initiatives. His graphic narratives have been featured in the BFT catalogue, facilitating their international distribution and promotion (Paoliello, 2023, p.203).

authors of the already mentioned two-volume comic adaptation of *The Illusionist on the Skywalk* by Wu Ming-yi. As an adapter, he has also authored the graphic novel version of *The Hunters* (獵人們), a series of essays by Taiwanese writer Chu T'ien-hsin (朱天心, 1958) that paint a vivid picture of her life intertwined with her family and her beloved cats. Ruan Guang-min has recently released a new *manhua* based on the novella *A Small Town Planted with Papaya Tree* (植有木瓜樹的小鎮)¹⁸ by Lung Ying-tsung (龍瑛宗, 1911-1999),¹⁹ a Taiwanese fiction writer of Hakka descent. This graphic retelling of Lung's novella is part of a larger project – which started with his version of “The Steelyard” – aiming to adapt ten recent literary masterpieces by writers from the Japanese colonial era and the immediate post-war period (台灣經典短篇小說圖像系列, Graphic Adaptations of Taiwan Classic Fiction series).

Unlike Lōa Hō's original story, which arose from the injustices of colonialism, Ruan's adaptation emerges in a completely different context: published in 2023, it fits squarely within a contemporary movement – fueled by collaborations between comics creators, the government, and academia – which aims to breathe new life into local stories, to reflect on the island's recent past and to celebrate Taiwanese culture. Moreover, in my opinion, Ruan Guang-min takes Lōa Hō's source material and injects a fresh perspective tailored for modern readers. As Professor Chen Wan-yi (陳萬益), a Taiwanese literature expert, suggests in an interview, traditional reading habits are changing: technology and new forms of expression have emerged, and people are consuming information in new ways; hence reading isn't just about text anymore; it can include videos, images, and music. To stay relevant, classic works need to find ways to connect with today's readers (Avanguard, 2023). He reimagines the story, placing a new emphasis on the romantic bond between the protagonist and his wife, Chhun-lian (春蓮).²⁰ This love story acts as a beacon of sweetness amidst the backdrop of a harsh and unjust world.

Furthermore, Chhun-lian serves as a foil to her husband's impulsiveness. As Ruan himself noted in an interview, his adaptation sought a more nuanced perspective, one that balanced the themes of oppression and revenge with a sense of gentleness. This is reflected in his characterization of Tit-chham's wife, who is depicted as gentle and optimistic, contrasting with his relentless pursuit of justice and his inevitable clashes with the system (Avanguard, 2023). Additionally, Ruan Guang-min's deliberate shift in focus and resolution, aiming to infuse the story

¹⁸ The original Japanese title of the story is パパイヤのある街.

¹⁹ Released in 1937, *A Small Town Planted with Papaya Trees* was originally written in Japanese, the language of the colonizer, and garnered recognition with an Honorable Mention Award in a literary competition hosted by the Japanese magazine *Kaizō* (改造). The novella chronicles the journey of a local intellectual striving to carve out a dignified existence within colonial society. Plunged into a pit of despair, he seeks solace in alcohol to blot out his unfortunate circumstances. This narrative signifies a pivotal shift in locally produced literature, steering away from narratives solely centered on the struggles of impoverished islanders to spotlighting the ominous future looming over the intellectual class.

²⁰ To maintain consistency with the transliteration used elsewhere in this work, the wife's name is rendered according to its Hokkien pronunciation. For reference, the pinyin romanization would be “Chunlian”.

with poetic elements despite its grim context, becomes apparent through the utilization of pastel colors in some of the illustrations, such as those depicting the kindness of Tit-chham’s wife and the joy that their children bring to their lives (see fig. 1). In essence, through the attenuation of the harshness inherent in the original narrative, which was situated within a context of colonial repression, Ruan undertakes a process of “mediation” as proposed by Berthou. This process aims to diminish the temporal gap between Lōa Hō’s text and the readers of the *manhua*. In my opinion, although the brutality of colonialism remains evident in Ruan’s graphic novel, the original story has been retold with a gentler approach to resonate with contemporary readers. This revision not only engages young readers in critical discussions about national identity and a shared past of colonialism and resistance but also serves as a tool for reconciliation, especially in a country that today has deep and strong ties with Japan, a regional ally in a complex geopolitical landscape.



Fig. 1 *The Steelyard*, pp. 86-87

The sixth and final chapter of the graphic novel, 相思 (*xiangsi*, or “longing” in English) significantly amplifies the romantic dimension of Tit-chham and Chhun-lian’s love story. Here, the widowed Chhun-lian reflects on her late husband, stating: “Tit-chham, it wasn’t until you left that it hit me: you’d planted the seed of longing in my heart that day. After all, it’s only in the goodbyes that one truly feels the pang of absence. And this yearning, well, it seems to have no end” (Ruan, 2023, pp.200-201).²¹ This passage, beyond infusing Ruan’s adaptation with a romantic sentiment uncharacteristic of Lōa Hō’s original narrative, also expands upon the family’s life after the protagonist’s death. The complete absence of this

²¹ “得參，你走了之後我才發現，那天你已經把相思種在我心裡。因為相思是每次分開才會察覺。而且，相思，沒有期限。” in the Chinese-language original. All translations from Chinese are my own unless otherwise attributed.

element in the source text underscores Ruan’s audacious and creative expansion of the narrative, a move that extends beyond a straightforward interpretation or adaptation.

As previously established, on a formal level *Lōa Hō* employs a linear narrative structure, guiding the reader through the protagonist’s development and the story’s progression at a pace dictated by the author. In contrast, Ruan Guang-min adopts a non-chronological approach. The graphic novel opens with a striking image of the slain policeman on the street (see fig. 2), accompanied by text that, while being similar to the last sentence of the original story, also enhances it. *Lōa Hō*’s ending reads: “Around the same time [i.e. on New Year’s Day] a rumor spread through town that a night patrolman had been killed in the street” (Parish Yang’s translation).²² However, Ruan engages in an act of “*répresentation*” (using Berthou’s terminology) by not only visually portraying what *Lōa Hō*’s final sentence implies (namely, the gruesome crime scene) but also complementing his graphic depiction with a subtly revised text: “It was New Year’s Eve, before dawn. A night patrol officer was killed on the street. The dragged bloodstains resembled a steelyard” (Ruan, 2023, p.9).²³ Both the illustration and the accompanying text carry symbolic weight, cleverly intertwining the cruelty and injustice of the policeman with the steelyard, a traditional emblem of justice.



Fig. 2 *The Steelyard*, pp. 8-9

²² “同時，市上亦盛傳著，一個夜巡的警吏，被殺在道上。” in the Chinese-language original.

²³ “除夕夜天未光。一名夜巡的警吏，被殺在道上。拖行的血跡，宛如一桿秤仔。” in the Chinese-language original.

This impactful opening is followed by scenes depicting adult Tit-chham and the beginning of his relationship with Chhun-lian. Tit-chham’s early years are unveiled through intermittent flashbacks, delineated by Ruan’s use of the sepia effect. Hence, the reading experience of the *manhua* differs significantly from Lōa Hō’s story. The contrast is heightened by the inherent characteristics of the medium: full-page frames devoid of text are followed by multi-frame pages featuring diverse types of linguistic messages. The first are naturally scanned more quickly, sometimes even skimmed entirely; moreover, sequential reading becomes non-linear in Ruan’s graphic novel, as the reader must navigate the page to determine the proper order in which to read the speech and thought bubbles as well as any other written information. This demonstrates Baroni and Aydemir’s (2022) argument, which highlights how graphic narratives stand out from other printed texts by organizing the narrative within the physical space of the medium (par. 9). Consequently, readers must interact with the layout and structure of the comic to grasp its message.

While Ruan Guang-min’s graphic novel largely adheres to the story’s original realism, it strategically deviates at key moments. In the depiction of Tit-chham’s unjust trial, for example, nightmarish imagery replaces Lōa Hō’s realistic portrayal of the event, thus effectively conveying a heightened sense of oppression. Ruan himself explains that he chose to blur the figures to reproduce an effect similar to someone nearsighted taking off their glasses. Everything becomes hazy except for the protagonist, who remains sharply in focus. This technique emphasizes Tit-chham’s perspective and the absurdity of the trial, which is merely a tool for the authorities to eliminate the protagonist and potentially enrich themselves (Jiang, 2023). The narrative’s departure from realism, further emphasized by Ruan’s use of black frames and black balloons containing the official’s pronouncements, serves to underscore the inherent unfairness Tit-chham faces and heighten the emotional impact of the story (see fig. 3).

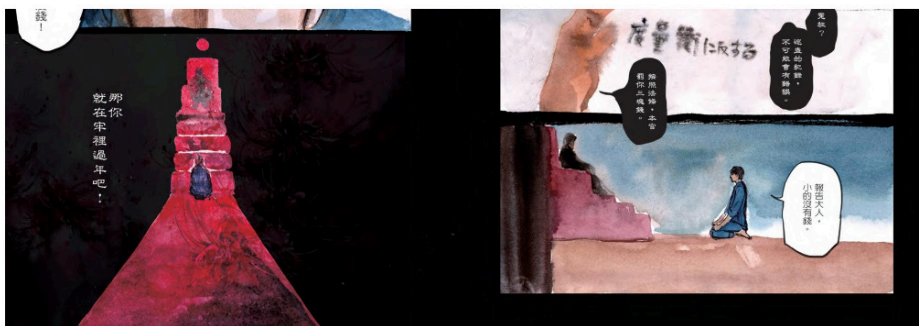


Fig. 3 *The Steelyard*, pp. 160-161

The use of color assumes particular significance within Ruan’s narrative, as previously highlighted. Instances of black and white imagery depicting sorrow – notably exemplified in scenes such as the second chapter where the protagonist’s illness hinders his ability to work, consequently exerting economic strain on the family – stand in stark contrast to vivid and chromatic portrayals evoking transient instances of joy. Importantly, the medium facilitates the conveyance of these scenes through non-linguistic elements, rendering verbal articulation unnecessary for the communication of those atmospheres and emotions.

On a linguistic level, while primarily using standard Chinese in the graphic novel, thus making it accessible to a contemporary audience that might not have the necessary reading competence in Hokkien, Ruan Guang-min intentionally incorporates words and expressions in the Taiwanese variety of that Sinitic language (e.g. 注文 *tsú-bûn* in lieu of 預定 *yuding*, for “to pre-order”; 尾衙 *bué-gê* in lieu of 尾牙 *weiya*, indicating the end-of-year feast, honoring the local God of the Earth, which takes place two weeks before New Year’s). This choice reflects his respect for Lōa Hô’s linguistic preferences and ideals while also aligning with a recurring practice in some of his other works. For instance, in *The Grocery Store*, characters often engage in conversations using a heavily Hokkien-influenced Standard Chinese, sometimes using Taiwanese Hokkien altogether. Chen Wan-yi praises Ruan Guang Min’s decision to retain the original terms, as they not only capture the unique essence of the original short story, but also act as a learning resource (Avanguard, 2023). Indeed, when younger readers encounter terms they don’t recognize, they are motivated to seek understanding from teachers or family members, thus fostering a connection with older generations.

Therefore, in numerous respects, Ruan Guang-min’s graphic novel can and must be considered an autonomous creative pursuit. Nevertheless, it also serves as an homage to the original author of the narrative. Ruan Guang-min employs a clever intertextual strategy to bridge his rendition of “The Steelyard” to the original short story, fostering a dialogue with the source material. This manifests in the introduction of Lōa Hô himself within the *manhua*. Here, the father of modern Taiwanese literature becomes a character disguised as a country doctor seeking vegetables from Tit-chham. While this cameo might simply appear as a subtle nod to the original author, a deeper analysis reveals its multifaceted nature. Firstly, Lōa Hô’s appearance hinges on the reader’s familiarity with the author and his biography, as his identity within the graphic novel itself remains undisclosed. Secondly, it recontextualizes the events experienced by Tit-chham, likely witnessed firsthand by Lōa Hô, as subtly suggested in the original text’s closing remarks. Thirdly, the portrayal of the author, characterized by a benevolent smile and gentle features (see fig. 4), aligns with Ruan Guang-min’s stated intention to imbue the narrative with a greater sense of tenderness. Lastly, Lōa Hô’s reference to Anatole France contextualizes his narrative within a wider global literary discourse, while Ruan Guang-min draws inspiration from Stan Lee for the introduction of Lōa Hô as a secondary character within the *manhua*, thereby

linking his graphic novel to the broader international comics landscape. As Ruan himself explains in an interview, the concept of incorporating the creator of “The Steelyard” into his graphic novel stemmed partly from the American comic book writer’s frequent cameo appearances in the Marvel universe (Avanguard, 2023). In fact, Stan Lee would often be depicted mingling amongst the crowds at various superhero gatherings and events.



Fig. 4 *The Steelyard*, p. 97

CONCLUSION

In this article, my aim has been to explore the adaptation of a modern classic within the Taiwanese literary canon into a different medium – the graphic novel – and for a contemporary audience with distinct sensibilities and reading habits compared to the original intended readership. Through this analysis, I sought to demonstrate that while rooted in Lōa Hō’s original short story, Ruan Guang-min’s *manhua* represents a largely new narrative, in which the focus on resistance has been softened, while the romantic relationship between the protagonist and his wife has gained centerstage. It emerges as a fresh story taking advantage of the unique affordances of the graphic novel medium, such as the incorporation of graphic elements, notably color, to evoke emotions and atmosphere, rather than relying solely on linguistic devices. It has been also suggested that while Ruan’s *manhua* maintains the brutal realities of colonialism to fosters critical discussions among contemporary readers about national identity and resistance to colonialism, at the same time, it has been reimagined with a gentler approach, perhaps to serve as a tool for reconciliation in a nation with significant ties to Japan.

While acknowledging the limitations of this study, which primarily focuses on a single literature-to-comics adaptation, it is important to note the potential for similar analyses across a broader range of Sinophone texts. Future investigations could delve into literary works adapted by Ruan Guang-min himself, aiming to observe whether a discernible philosophy or methodology of adaptation guides his efforts. Additionally, exploring adaptations by other artists would contribute to a more extensive corpus of derivative graphic novels, thus facilitating the development of a theory of literature-to-comic adaptation that transcends a Western-centric viewpoint and holds relevance for the Sinophone context.

Finally, should Ruan Guang-min's adaptation be translated into other languages, a fruitful avenue for further research would be to investigate the cross-linguistic reception of such translations. Examining how audiences both within and outside the Sinosphere engage with translated graphic novel adaptations of Sinophone works would provide valuable insights, revealing how the former influence readers' understanding of the latter.

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