

Development of Chinese and Foreign Picture Books from the Perspective of Publishing History

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Abstract

As a special publication integrating text and images, narration and art, picture books have developed throughout the history of Chinese and foreign publishing, reflecting cultural trends, educational concepts and technological changes of the times. From the perspective of publishing history, this paper sorts out the complete development of picture books from embryonic image narration, morphological expansion in the evolution stage to global integration and digital innovation in the development stage. It compares the development paths of ancient Chinese illustrated books, modern comic strips, medieval Western manuscripts and modern picture books after the Industrial Revolution, analyzes the influences of religious communication, educational demands and technological innovations, and reveals the similarities and differences in cultural genes and functional positioning between Chinese and foreign picture books. The study finds that the development of picture books has always centered on three propositions: balance of text and images, audience adaptation, and integration of art and technology. Contemporary picture books show a parallel trend of localization and globalization, providing historical reference and theoretical support for the development of original picture books.

Keywords

Picture Books; Publishing History; Sino-foreign Comparison; Image Narration

1. Introduction

In the long history of publishing, picture books, with the unique form of “symbiosis of text and images”, have become an important carrier of cultural inheritance and cognitive enlightenment. From the illustrated *The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars* in the Ming and Qing dynasties and the “xiaorensu” (small picture books) in the Republic of China, to medieval European *Book of Beasts* manuscripts and the modern picture book wave led by the Caldecott Medal in the United States in the 20th century, their forms and functions have evolved with the times, always adhering to the core trait of “conveying emotions through images and narrating stories through text”.

For a long time, academic research on picture books has mostly focused on children's literature and art design, lacking a systematic review of their development from the perspective of publishing history, especially in-depth Sino-foreign comparative analysis. In fact, every morphological breakthrough of picture books is closely bound up with publishing technology innovation (woodblock printing, movable type, digital printing) and social demand transformation (religious preaching, children's education, public entertainment). Woodblock printing in the Song Dynasty of China gave birth to a large number of illustrated story books, laying the foundation for comic strips; the popularization of lithography in Europe in the 19th century made picture books accessible to the public instead of being exclusive to the nobility.

Taking time as the main line and Chinese and foreign publishing history as the spatial dimension, this paper combines specific picture book cases to analyze the publishing characteristics, content themes and communication paths of picture books in different historical stages, explores the shaping effect of cultural traditions and educational concepts on picture book development, and finally provides historical reference for the localized innovation and international communication of contemporary picture book publishing.

2. Review of Relevant Research

2.1. Current Research on Picture Books in China

Domestic research on picture books began in the 1990s, with early studies focusing on the "history of comic strips" and regarding picture books as a modern extension of comic strips. Wang Jiaju sorted out the development from Ming and Qing illustrated books to Republican comic strips in *A History of Chinese Comic Strips*, pointing out that *Dianshizhai Pictorial* and *illustrated Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are early forms of Chinese picture books, and emphasizing the role of woodblock printing in image communication. With the introduction of modern Western picture books in the 21st century, research has shifted to the educational value and artistic analysis of children's picture books. For example, Peng Yi systematically introduced the creative concepts and aesthetic standards of Western picture books in *World Picture Books: Reading and Classics*, proposing that "text-image ensemble" is the core feature of picture books.

In recent years, research from the publishing history perspective has increased. Cao Wenxuan emphasized the literary and aesthetic education value of picture books; Fan Lina compared the publishing ecology of Republican children's pictorials and contemporary original picture books, arguing that social education demand drives morphological evolution; Zhu Ziqiang incorporated picture books into the framework of China's children's publishing history, analyzing content selection and audience positioning. However, existing research has two shortcomings: first, the definition of the embryonic stage of ancient Chinese picture books is vague, mostly

starting from Ming and Qing illustrated books and ignoring the value of Han and Tang image narrative works; second, Sino-foreign comparisons stay at the morphological level, lacking in-depth analysis of cultural roots and publishing mechanisms.

2.2. Current Research on Picture Books Abroad

Western research on picture books started earlier and is closely integrated with publishing history and children's literature history. Leonard S. Marcus traced the transformation of Western picture books from moral preaching to emotional expression in the 20th century in *Why Picture Books Matter*, noting the promoting effect of the Caldecott Medal and Kate Greenaway Medal. From the Japanese publishing history perspective, Mitsumasa Anno analyzed the integration of localization and internationalization of post-war Japanese picture books in *My Theory of Picture Books*, emphasizing their emotional transmission function.

Elizabeth Kennedy detailed the impact of lithography and color printing on picture books in *Children's Picture Books: From the Victorian Era to the Present*, stating that the 19th-century Industrial Revolution was a turning point for modern picture books to enter the mass market. Western scholars also pay attention to the cultural communication value of picture books, but foreign research pays little attention to Chinese picture books, often regarding them as a branch of East Asian picture books.

2.3. Deficiencies and Innovations

Existing research has three limitations: incomplete tracing of the embryonic stage; lack of analysis on publishing mechanisms in Sino-foreign comparisons; and insufficient integration of picture book development with core propositions of publishing history.

The innovations of this paper are: expanding the research scope of the embryonic stage to include Han-Tang stone reliefs, Dunhuang murals and medieval Western manuscripts; comparing the dynamic mechanisms of Chinese and foreign picture book evolution from technology, policy and market; and analyzing contemporary trends against the background of digital publishing to form a complete research chain.

3. The Germination: Pre-Modern Text-Image Narrative Tradition

Before the concept of "picture book" emerged, humans had long used images for narration, education and communication. This origin shows parallel features in Chinese and foreign publishing history: text-image combination initially served religious enlightenment, knowledge transmission and adult entertainment, with no awareness of creating for children.

3.1. The Embryonic Form of Ancient Chinese Picture Books

The tradition of ancient Chinese picture books has a long history. The Classic of

Mountains and Seas in the Warring States Period may have had early illustrations. Han Dynasty stone reliefs and Dunhuang Jataka murals presented continuous image narration, an early practice of image storytelling.

The invention of woodblock printing in the Tang Dynasty laid a technical foundation for text-image books. The earliest surviving printed illustrated book is the frontispiece of the Diamond Sutra (868 AD). In the Song and Yuan dynasties, illustrated books with “images above and text below” became popular, initially showing the text-image correspondence of picture books.

The Ming Dynasty was a peak of ancient Chinese picture books. Color overprinting technology gave birth to Ten Bamboo Studio Painting Manual and other artistic works. Illustrated novels and operas emerged widely, with the prototype of comic strips. However, most ancient Chinese picture books were attached to other books, and independent children's picture books appeared only in the late Qing and early Republican period under Western influence.

3.2. The Origin of Western Picture Books

Western picture books originated from illustrated manuscript traditions. Medieval illuminated manuscripts such as Book of Kells combined exquisite illustrations with scriptures, providing a visual model for later picture books.

The invention of Gutenberg's printing press in the mid-15th century enabled large-scale book production. The real germination of children's picture books came with John Amos Comenius's *Orbis Pictus* (1658), the first Western picture book for children embodying intuitive teaching. In the 18th century, John Newbery's children's books marked the professionalization of children's publishing, and Western picture books gradually separated from religious and adult readings.

4. Technological Promotion: Industrial Revolution and Modern Picture Book Formation

In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution brought printing technology breakthroughs, providing material support for picture books to become an independent publishing category. This process was first completed in the West and influenced the East through cultural exchanges.

4.1. Innovation of Printing and Plate-Making Technologies

Lithography allowed artists to create freely, and *Struwwelpeter* (1845) became an early classic children's picture book. Mid-19th century photolithography and color separation technology made image reproduction accurate and low-cost. Works by Walter Crane, Randolph Caldecott and Kate Greenaway were printed on a large scale. Randolph Caldecott's creative handling of text-image relations earned him the honor of the Caldecott Medal. During this period, picture books were officially established as an independent publishing category in the West.

4.2. Technology Introduction and Localization in Modern China

The development of modern Chinese picture books was closely linked to Western learning and printing technology introduction. Dianshizhai Pictorial cultivated the public's reading habit of text-image publications. Illustrated textbooks appeared in the late Qing educational reform. Modern picture books flourished in the Republican period, with Children's World and Feng Zikai's works pioneering the local style. However, wars and social unrest restricted their full development.

5. Artistic Self-Consciousness: Diversified Development in the 20th Century

In the 20th century, picture books entered a professional and artistic stage worldwide. Western picture books achieved artistic self-consciousness, while Chinese picture books took a unique path from comic strip popularization to original exploration.

5.1. The Golden Age of Western Picture Books

The early 20th century saw modern art styles introduced into picture books, breaking the pure realism tradition. After World War II, the US became the creation center, and the Caldecott Medal encouraged innovation. Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* broke the traditional concept of picture books. European illustrators expanded the artistic boundaries with personal styles. Picture books shifted to exploring children's psychology, absorbing modern art genres and trying innovative forms.

5.2. Development Path of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Picture Books

After 1949, Chinese picture books developed as comic strips, with large-circulation works becoming visual enlightenment for generations. After reform and opening-up, foreign picture books brought new inspiration. In the 1990s, artists began to explore original picture books with Chinese aesthetics. In the 21st century, supported by national policies and professional publishing institutions, Chinese original picture books developed rapidly. Works like *The Story of the Peach Blossom Spring* and *Reunion* gained international recognition, marking the maturity of Chinese picture book art.

6. Global Integration and Digital Turn: Contemporary Trends

In the 21st century, picture book development is under the dual context of globalization and digitalization, becoming a cross-cultural communication medium while being reshaped by digital technology.

6.1. Cross-Cultural Communication and Local Expression

Global platforms promote worldwide picture book exchanges. Japanese, South Korean and Iranian picture books have gained international attention with national

characteristics. Chinese original picture books draw on Western narrative skills while focusing on local cultural expression, using traditional art forms to form cultural self-consciousness.

6.2. Changes Brought by Digital Technology

Digital technology reshapes picture book creation, publishing and reading. Electronic picture books provide immersive experience, and AR technology combines paper and digital content. Self-publishing platforms diversify themes and styles.

The development history provides enlightenment for contemporary publishing: adhere to technological innovation; deeply cultivate local cultural resources; improve the industrial ecosystem; strengthen international exchanges; expand audience groups to promote the popularization of picture books.

7. Conclusion

From the publishing history perspective, this paper systematically studies the historical context and evolution logic of Chinese and foreign picture books. Driven by printing technology innovation, educational demand upgrading and cultural trend changes, picture books develop around text-image balance, audience adaptation and art-technology integration. Chinese picture books have formed a unique narrative paradigm based on ancient illustrated books and modern comic strips; Western picture books took the lead in modern transformation and artistic self-consciousness. Both confirm the core value of picture books as cross-cultural carriers and educational media.

In the era of globalization and digitalization, picture books show a trend of parallel local cultivation and international dialogue, and integration of paper and digital publishing. This study enriches the historical dimension and comparative vision of picture book research, providing reference for the creation, innovation and communication of Chinese original picture books.

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