Blessing

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Blessing is a black-and-white graphic novel which explores fate and bravery through a love story. The story is divided into five chapters, beginning with a bank robbery and ending with an escape facing failure. After a note from the artist, the “post-credits scene” shows the final ending. The work Blessing can be seen as a comic, but in fact it should be positioned to stand at the intersection of comics, novels and movies. This work is a novel told by film language and constructed by images. It uses a cinematic method, and builds on the rich history of comics in an East Asian context of telling a story and displaying an exploration of functionality of the image narrative from various angles.

Comics use images to convey narrative, usually combined with text. Artistic forms combined with text have a long history in Chinese culture. “...In some ancient rock paintings, stone carvings, stone engravings, murals and literati paintings, elements similar to the language of ‘comic’ have appeared very early,” writes Chinese comic scholar Chen Weidong, “in the bronze patterns of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States period, the Buddhist grotto murals in the Wei and Jin periods, and the custom paintings of palaces and folks in the Tang and Song Dynasties, there have been vivid narrative pictures with serial plots.” It can be seen that the art form that uses a combination of image and text as the narrative carrier has permeated the entire history of ancient Chinese cultural development.

Chen Weidong continues, "Between the end of Qing Dynasty and the beginning of The Republic of China, Chinese ‘Comic’ started move from chaos to conscious creation...The introduction of lithography technology has promoted the prosperity of my country’s printing industry.” It becomes clear how the introduction of new technologies impacted popular art in China.

“Ernest Major launched a daily paper, Shenbao, in 1872. The newspaper, written and printed by Chinese, thrived. Major’s firm next developed a successful lithographic printing venture in the 1870s. They applied the same expertise to the development of an illustrated pictorial, Dianshizai Huabao, in 1884.”

As the western world introduced lithography technology to China, the competition in the printing and publishing industries also led to the development of comics—newspapers provided a suitable vehicle for this art form that is easy for the public to read and enjoy its humor. The Dianshizai Pictorial mentioned above was produced as a bonus issue of Shenbao. Once published, it quickly became popular throughout China due to its attractiveness and combined with pictures and texts. This was foundation of Chinese comic.

Different artists combined images and art in their own ways. Below are examples which show the range of image-text relationships in the emergence of Chinese comics. From 1925 to 1929, the World Book Company in Shanghai published five works titled “lianhuan tuhua (comic strips/the little book)”. The following is one of them, Journey to the West. The story of Journey to the West is a well-known Chinese traditional serial story, written by Wu Chengen during the Ming Dynasty.

Here, the text appears in a box above the picture. The reading order of the text is from top to bottom and left to right. The typography is neat and clean. Obviously, this is a

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1 Chen Weidong, Chinese Comic History (中国漫画史), December, 2015, 12


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Scene from Journey to the West, published by World Book Company, 1925–1929.
subject matter either focused on praising the Gang of Four, or became a tool to vilify the “capitalist group”. The tense social atmosphere prevented comic artists from having free creation space until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

After the implementation of the reform and opening policy in 1978, Chinese comic strips prospered. Yet they did not grow to become China’s mainstream style. Instead, Japanese comics (manga) gained influence. In 1980, Osamu Tezuka’s *Astro Boy* was introduced to mainland China. This was the first time that Japanese animation entered the Chinese market. Compared with the presentation of traditional Chinese comic strips, mange looks more dramatic since it uses movie language. Once introduced, it became very popular. This expressive technique influenced many comic makers’ styles in that era, and has remains influential.

I would like to elaborate on Osamu Tezuka’s manga (comics) and anime (animation) more specifically, since *Blessing* is also influenced by manga language. Japanese comic artwork before and after the appearance of Tezuka is like comparing a stage play and a movie. He added the lens language from movies to the Japanese comic world, which also influenced all of Asia. Before him, the information in each section of a comic was determined by the “stage”. Because the “shooting distance” was fixed, it was difficult to adjust the proportion of the screen content to convey the weight of emotion or information. All image information can only be delivered by the combination of text and the character’s action. This restriction meant that the content of comic artwork is mostly simple. In that time, the main audience of comics were children, not adults. However, Tezuka’s *New Treasure Island* (1947) imitates film. He liberates the “lens” and enhances the image’s ability to tell more complex and deeper stories.

This is shown in the opening chapter of Osamu Tezuka’s *New Treasure Island*. The four panels are arranged vertically to form a group, and “the lens distance” of each zooms out gradually, which emphasizes the car’s movement. In the world of manga, time is presented in the image space. It is worth noting that Osamu Tezuka himself admitted that other artists had added cinematic lens techniques into comic works before him. He said, “Many cartoonists before me used cinematic techniques […] I made a big impact because I was so conscious of it.”

The article “Where is Tezuka? A Theory of Manga Expression” written by Natsume Fusnosuke mentions that, “…Tezuka considered it his achievement to have introduced ‘tragedy’ into manga… if we look back over Tezuka Osamu’s career, changes in how he draws eyes, such as the introduction of highlights, seem to parallel transformations
Above
Color illustration for The Melanin Tribe, part 2, in August 1966 issue of Shonen.

Right
Scene from comic New Treasure Land, by Osamu Tezuka, 1947
in his art as he sought to convey subtle emotional and psychological states through facial expressions. Moreover, attention to eyes focuses our attention both on the images reflected upon eyes and at the same time on the window into ‘interiority’ possessed by characters.”

Tezuka expanded the depth of the themes that can be displayed in comic work, and illuminated self-awareness of comic characters through the portrayal of facial expressions, especially with the eyes. Manga, liberated the narrative ability of images and transformed comics from humorous entertainments for children to artistic products capable of catering to all ages. Osamu Tezuka did not create all this from scratch, but the huge response to his works and his unremitting exploration of this style made manga completely mainstream.

Just as comics developed from the introduction of lithography, today’s comics are influenced a lot by the internet. Most of the works mentioned above are produced on paper. With the development of internet, more and more people, especially young people, are accustomed to reading without paper, and the social platforms make it easy to distribute one’s work. More and more creators have entered the field of comics—which they have drawing skills or not. This trend has lowered the threshold for comic creation, while also enriching the themes and styles of comics. Under such circumstances, web comics developed.

As the name suggests, a web-comic is read on the web, using mobile phones or computers. Unlike paper-based double-spread compositions, web comics are usually elongated, with the content trailing off the screen. The audience scrolls on a mobile phone screen to read the story. Less information that can be conveyed in “one page”, and, compared with traditional comic works, these vertical comics have less space for considering composition and has a simpler way of displaying panels. The main ways to control the narrative rhythm are by creating transitional smaller divisions and making blank spaces.

In addition to the different presentation forms, new technologies also have a huge impact on their creation. The emergence of digital painting software such as Photoshop, Sai, Procreate, etc., has improved the efficiency of many art creators due to their convenience.

In this work, the story is told using a combination of images and text; in a movie language similar to manga. The final product is a printed and bound comic book. It is influenced by the past, and after this work is completed, it will become a part of history, contributing its own uniqueness to the field of comics.

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The original plan for this project was a love story around 40 pages, with a tragic ending. The core of that story was that a couple finds that life is the opposite of love and decide to commit suicide together. As a creator, my focus was on “life and death”. This plan was overturned by subsequent thinking and exploration.

I began to watch films and read literature. To record and consolidate my inspiration, I began to write a diary. In the early days, the most common sentence in the diary was “Why do they choose death? What does death mean?” I reflected on life and death continuously, and scaled the weight of life and death unconsciously. During this step, I found my muse—Hong Kong director Johnnie To’s work. His films are often filled with discussions about destiny. In his work, whether the protagonist’s ending may be failure or success, it doesn’t matter. The meaning of the effort and struggle produced in the process can never be destroyed. The result is not important——perhaps everything a person has experienced in his or her life has been predestined. However, this does not mean that the person can do nothing. On the contrary, the process of doing it is more important after putting aside the obsession with the result. Then I realized that the charm of Romeo and Juliet is not that it is the tragedy which makes people impressive, but the courage to give their lives for love. Most of the time, the discussion about death is actually about life.
Two words capture the primary themes of this comic: They are fate and bravery. Love is only the carrier of the instructions given to the protagonists by uncontrollable fate, and it inspires their enthusiasm for life and makes them become braver. This was used to develop the comic’s main concept.

All artworks in the world are variants of “voice”. What the creator wants to express is the content. The structure of the artwork is the expression, and the artwork itself is the presentation. Then the “voice” is complete, entering a new stage of acceptance and interpretation by the audience. The work process is divided into three phases; the first part belongs to the artist (finding what he/she wants to express), the second phase is the interaction between self and others (in this moment, the order for communication is generated in the work) and the third stage belongs to the audience (the author surrenders control of the work, and audience take control by their own interpretation).

As articulated above, introspection is the first stage. The second stage must emphasize how to realize the narrative without breaking the order of communication. There are three unique points worth to be mentioned here: the special time sequence, camera narrative ability and the use of symbols.

Blessing has 5 chapters and two post scenes. The first chapter shows the male protagonist participating in a robbery. He takes a woman and stolen goods away. They escape the apartment of an old lady with dementia. Chapter 2 happens before the robbery. It depicts how a woman is trapped in a boring life and finds that there is a man is silently casting his eyes to her. The end of chapter 2 returns to the timeline of chapter 1, and the escape from the crime scene. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 explore the two protagonists’ relationship quickly developing. Chapter 5 is the end of the story—— the couple tries to escape but fails, and the man is shot. In the first epilogue, we see how the man fell in love at first sight with the woman in four short pages. Then the artist talk splits the main content and the second post scene. Following that is another ending——the man survived, he and the woman remain full of hope for their future. I call it “after the end”. This story is not told in accordance with conventional linear narratives. The timeline is interrupted according to different chapters. This story relies on the form of Q&A to drive the plot.

Creating a tolerable level of doubt for an audience is a difficult task in the beginning of a script. Before the beginning, there is zero. All stories must begin from a first scene, but sometimes the sequence may rearrange, as I have done in Blessing. Other examples may be found in film, and especially in the work of Christopher Nolan. His films Tenet (2020) and Memento (2000) famously scramble the order of scenes, requiring viewers to puzzle out the sequence to follow the plot of the film.

The scenes of Blessing are narrated from different perspectives. The first and third chapters are narrated objectively. The second, fourth and fifth are told from the perspective of the heroine. This approach can show the advantages of both the third-person perspective and the first-person perspective. Without heroine’s eyewave, the audience lacks an understanding of the character’s inner world; with it, they are equipped to understand the story more intimately.

Regarding the camera’s narrative ability, it should be divided into two parts. One being the language of composition and another being the narrative information conveyed by the sequential footage.

I was deeply influenced by director Johnnie To. I learned a lot from his film language to improve my compositional abilities. I am not only referring to the content of the lens, but also to the size of the composition. The basic unit of my composition is “one spread”, unlike most comics which reflect the characteristics of a wide screen movie.
Below:
Outside scene vs Indoor scene of Blessing, by Weike Liu
In his works, he uses strong contrast between light and shadow to convey the information that exists beyond the dialogue. He said in an interview with *Art & Piece*, "Before, the lights were not very bright, but it has strong contrast. I like things with a higher contrast. Personally speaking, I believe people will have more space for imagination in strong contrast. Seeing clearer will reduce people’s association." This inspired me to make *Blessing* a pure black and white comic without grey scale. Black color blocks are used in many places to convey shadows, especially for the depiction of outdoor scenes. Meanwhile, I deliberately eliminated the shadows to make the indoor environments look bright. That creates different moods and feelings. When the plot happens outside, it is often more urgent. When the plot occurs indoors, the lack of shadows creates a relaxing mood.

The scene in the picture below is a tribute to Johnnie To’s movie *Throw Down*.
Below:
1. Blessing, by Weike Liu
2. Screenshot of movie Throw Down, directed by Johnnie To Kei-Fung, 2004
In the documentary *Boundless*, film critic Shu Qi mentioned that “I think his (Johnnie To)’s first consideration is space, especially the placement of the characters in the space. Because the placement represents the dramatic relationship.” Johnnie To himself said, “I need to know what the language of each lens is... I always look at the layout. The layout of how to make the scene fit my characters... After arranging the composition of each person’s position, the most painful thing is to think about what the next one is...

Similarly, this is also the question that I keep thinking about and exploring in my work. For example, how to control the mood with the “camera” movement by following the relationship between the characters and the background. While creating the following images, I considered these questions. Images in next pages are few spreads of Chapter 5. The “stage” doesn’t change, but the angle of “camera” constantly moves downward.

5  *Boundless: Johnnie To’s film world* (无涯：杜琪峰的电影世界) 2013
As in custumary, we take hale away as our commission. The bills aren't consecutive, don't worry.

I know you are gouging me, but I don't really care. Give me the passport.

Just a second, it will be done soon.

Then your passport...

...well, for you, it's easy to make a fake one. But she's another matter. She had an official job before, she's in the system. We have to cancel her account first. That takes a while, but you are in a hurry. That's gonna triple the price.

Here is the remaining 5.4 million, take a look.

I'm surprised you risked this much. You can make a lot of buck in an underground box, but now I see, it's her. She's the reason.

You talk too much.

Fine, fine, I'll shut up. I'll hurry them up. Go chat with your girlfriend.

Boxing? Underground boxing? What's that?

Same as it sounds, underground boxing.

You are a boxer? Do you always win the fight?

Does it bother you to lose?

I don't care. I can lose convincingly when I need to. But for things I really care about?

...ah, yes, I win every time.

I can win if I want to, but it's more like 'how to win' and 'how to lose'. In fact, it depends on what the horse says. Plans change based on the odds of the day.

Really?

Giving my life to a fight I know I couldn’t win... I know it sounds fancy, but the truth is that, at the time, I just felt that dying in battle has a certain romantic appeal.

What were you thinking about? I mean that fight, that was insane. You could have died...

Yeah. I know. But humans are a ridiculous species. Sometimes we don’t know what is right and what is wrong. Other times we keep doing wrong things even though we know that’s not correct. At that moment, I didn’t think a lot. I just knew I would take it seriously for me. For my honor...

Unbelievable...

Just one week, my world has been turned upside down.

Then do you regret it?

No. It may seem crazy, but I’m happier than I’ve ever been.

Well, remember you asked me why I like you? I actually spent some time thinking about this question... but I couldn’t find the answer. Then I realized that this may be the answer.

What do you mean...

Them! They betrayed us!

Let’s go!!!
I always pay more attention to the use of symbols when making comics. Blessing is one example that demonstrates the power of symbolism from multiple angles.

The first way I demonstrated the power of symbolism was through the naming of each chapter’s title page. These title pages are different from the main body’s black and white. For example, in the first image below shows the use of color and grey scale and alerts the audience of a change and a new chapter. The butterflies point to the choices the characters make in the upcoming chapter. These symbols are straightforward and obvious.

**Right & Below**
First three title pages of Blessing, by Weike Liu

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Butterflies wave their wings. The dealer shuffles our fates.

**Chapter 1**

**Chapter 2**

Fly, fly, fly.
Chapter 3

Heavy Rain

The world is melting in this heavy rain
The second type of symbol follows Barthes’s analysis of Sarrasine in S/Z, which is more concealed. “... it will be solidly constructed along the most familiar rhetorical lines, in a series of antitheses...” Below is an example from the second chapter: indoor scene and outdoor scene, the rainy outside and cozy space... all reflecting a contrasting relationship.

The third type of symbol is the story itself. The two protagonists in this story did not reveal their names. The injured policeman (Ah-zhong) or man’s dead buddy (Ming) have their own name, which establishes the scope of the symbol is as “absence of name”.

This implies that the plot of this story, or the discussion of the theme, do not belong to any specific person. Anyone can share the similar emotions conveyed by this work. Ambiguity gives space for imagination.
Listen, it’s regrettable that the press found out this case so quick, otherwise… if we can sacrifice her, we won’t let him go, but now, we can do nothing.

…wait, what are you saying?
Nothing? You mean we will not consider her safety at all?

What do we do?? Let these jackals devour each other! That girl was pretty calm; she might work with that guy. If we got time, we would save her… if not, they are one who killed her anyway, none of our business!

Anyway! We will save her if we have chance, but if not… Seriously, I never expect you have a such tender heart… the special service to pretty girl, eh?

Aha, no kidding, please. I just think that girl is innocent.

Stop that, come on, let’s go get a drink.
There are two versions of this comic, a Chinese version and an English version. When I conceived the script, I composed the work in Chinese. In the process of translating into English, I had assistance from many people including my friend Zifan Pu, John Hendrix and Doug Dowd. For the Chinese text, I chose the handwritten traditional Chinese form. This is because I have more confidence in my Chinese writing abilities. The final product of the work is exhibited at High Low gallery. Blessing’s final form is a handmade hard-covered book. I will place a digital version on my personal website in the near future for more viewers to see.

When reading Blessing on the mobile phone, it is best read horizontally to fit the two-pages composition. This is the first long graphic novel I have created. I will continue to improve my skills in script writing and rhythmic expression while also exploring the relationship between graphic novels and film.

Above:
1. Chinese version of Blessing, by Weike Liu
2. English version of Blessing, by Weike Liu
**Bibliography:**

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December, 2015, 12


*Boundless: Johnnie To’s film world* (无涯: 杜琪峰的电影世界) 2013, directed by Ferris Lin (林泽秋), accessed April 8, 2021