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ABSTRACT

Researchers have found a strong relationship between children's graphic imagery and the visual sources surrounding them. Children's imagination is not simply a personal, subjective mind state, but is strongly attached to visual and cultural traditions. Based on this concept, a study explored how children's imagination is related to their socio-cultural environment. Data came from a pool of thousands of drawings collected in three U.S. midwestern suburban school communities and several suburban and rural school communities in Taiwan. The collection of drawings was based on "Clark's Drawing Abilities Test," that includes four items: (1) draw a house; (2) draw a person running very fast; (3) draw a group of friends playing on a playground, and (4) draw a fantasy world of your imagination. A sample of 200 drawings was drawn from each cultural group. Only drawings of a fantasy world by sixth and eighth grade students were used in this study. Children's depictions of a fantasy world revealed discernable patterns in subject matter selection and thematic manipulation and were classified into 20 subject areas. Among U.S. students "fairy lands," or "fairy tales" was the most popular subject, followed by "place" and "people." Among Taiwanese students, "people" was the most favored subject, while "space" was the second, and "plants, food, objects" the third. Both U.S. and Taiwanese children adopted themes, stories, and characters from fairy tales and myths of their own cultures. Both groups were inspired by the process of anthropomorphism, for instance, talking animals and smiling plants. The repertoire of children's graphic expression changes at a pace that matches the pace of changes in the modern world. What is popular in the United States becomes well-known in Taiwan as well. Contains a figure, a table of data, and 6 references. (BT)

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by Li-Tsu Chen

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Culturally Accommodated Imagination: Discovering Children's Fantasy Worlds in Drawings

Dr. Li-Tsu Chen

Introduction

According to Belo's (1955) study of Balinese children's drawings, children's fantastic imagination should not be seen as a dream-like state, or a completely make-believe activity. Fantasy contains a substance that is embedded in previous knowledge, and confined to a cultural context. So a fantasy world can never be alienated from cultural life, nor can the concept of fantasy entirely shake off traditional connotations. Often, its contents are derived from the past, other people's imagination, and what is currently in the culture. As Belo stated, Balinese children took from their culture the conventionalization of mythological and fairy characters to be part of their fantasy worlds.

In a similar vein, Munro (1956) found a strong relationship between children's graphic imagery and the visual sources surrounding them. In a visit to Cizek's classes, where the stimulus of children's pure unfettered creativity was emphasized, Munro (1956) was surprised to find in students' pictures many graphic features and decorative patterns seen in Austrian handicrafts, expressionist grotesqueries, street posters, and other types of prints. He decided that students imitated and adopted a variety of artistic forms, techniques, and symbols into their expressive repertoires. Munro concluded, "the ideal of keeping a child's imagination in a state of absolute

purity and freedom is from the start impossible” (p.239). This phenomenon was true at the beginning of this century, and remains the same today. Wilson and Wilson (1979) noted that in our society, however, creative sources for children’s drawing techniques and contents have shifted to illustration, mass media, and comic books.

From the above discussion, it seems that children’s imagination is not simply a personal, subjective mind state, but strongly attached to their visual and cultural traditions. Based on this concept, how children’s imagination is related to their socio-cultural environment will be discussed in the present study.

Sampling

Data for this study came from a pool of thousands of drawings collected in the schools of three Mid-western suburban communities in the United States and of several suburban and rural locations in Taiwan. These suburban cities and rural areas were selected because they would yield a wide range of schools in the United States and Taiwan. An attempt was made to select subjects from relatively similar locations, economic conditions, and living standards in order to decrease sampling bias.

The collection of this pool of drawings was grounded by Clark’s-Drawing-Abilities-Test, which includes four items: (1) draw a house, (2) draw a person running very fast, (3) draw a group of friends playing on a playground, and (4) draw a fantasy world of your imagination. However, only drawings of a fantasy world by the sixth and eighth grade students were used in this study. A sample of 200 drawings in total were drawn from each cultural group.

The CDAT was designed to measure children's artistic abilities. In this study, however, it is used only as an instrument for gathering children's drawings. It is believed that comparative methods of analysis can be facilitated, while all subjects drew the same subject matters in the same media. The scoring scales of children's drawing abilities are not intended.

The test was given in regular classrooms, and all books and pictures were removed from the desktop before the test was given. Students were expected to draw without any instructional intervention or pictorial references.

Data Analysis

From the drawings collected for this study, children's depictions of a fantasy world was found to reveal discernable patterns in subject matter selection and thematic manipulation. I classified them into twenty subject areas as listed in the following:

Figure 1: Subject Matters

1. Plants, Fruits, Foods, and Objects
2. People
3. Animals, Birds, Poultry, and Insects
4. Place: Schools, Parks, and Neighborhood, Pleasant Resorts, Landscape, and Seascape
5. Sea World
6. Future World
7. Space Adventure, Aliens, and Multi-dimensional Space
8. Transportation Vehicles

9. Money, Gold, and Wealth
10. Buildings and Homes
11. Fighting, Wars, Weapons, and Military
12. Superheros, Robot-like Figures, and Cartoon Characters
13. Fairy Tale, Fairy Land, and Mythology
14. Religion-related Images
15. Ghosts, Demons, and Graveyards
16. Monsters, Metamorphosed Creatures
17. Crazy and Chaotic World, World of Up-side-down
18. Non-representational Forms, or Abstract Patterns
19. Symbols, Signs, and Marks
20. Indefinite

Table 1: Subject Matter

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
TS	T=200	%	10	14	9	9	3	6	11	2	1	1	2	5	7	1	7	2	5	2	2	1
AS	T=200	%	3	8	4	11	2	4	7	4	2	5	6	4	18	1	4	5	2	3	4	2

According to Table 1, Fairy Lands or Fairy Tales was the most popular subject among American students, followed in order by Place, and People. Among Taiwanese students, People was the most favored subject, while Space was the second, Plants, Food, Objects the third .

A similarity across cultures was that some subjects, such as Subjects 9 and 14 were rarely mentioned. No matter which culture the children were in, they showed little interest in portraying religious idols, rituals, or

cultural festivals. Many subjects, such as Subjects 7, 12, 13, 16, and 17 do not exist in our real world; however, they have lived for generations in comics, movies, cartoons, illustrations, fictions, and books which were favored by children. Children derived information from what they had read and watched, and some images they depicted were adopted from those materials.

Some subject matter, such as Subjects 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 10, referred to familiar environments and daily life, and still retained their place in children's graphic realms. This was apparent especially in Taiwanese children's drawings. When children recruited their daily experiences, familiar people, and objects as subject matter, there was a tendency to transform them into unfamiliar, alien, strange images of another world. Children of both cultures were familiar with the tricks of animation and anthropomorphism. Many of the Taiwanese students gave human characteristics to fruits, stationary, and trees, making them able to talk, smile, and communicate. In comparison, American children used the same devices, but not as frequently as Taiwanese children.

While children of different cultures might focus on similar subject matter, the images represented were devised from different sources. In the case of Superheros, Cartoon Characters were favored by children in both cultures, however, each cultural group selected different cartoon characters as role models. Similarly, children in both cultures derived inspiration from Fairy Tales, Fairy Lands, and Mythology, but the images and stories portrayed were different. Taiwanese students did not portray Unicorns, Witches, Fairies with magic wands, or King and Queen. Taiwanese children depicted

their traditional styles of fairies. However, Castles, Candy Houses, and Princes and Princesses, were found in both American and Taiwanese children's drawings. Story books of western fairy tales are common in Taiwanese book markets.

Discussion

Cultural Transmision

The tendency, which Belo saw in her study of Balinese children's drawings, is manifest in both Taiwanese and American children's fantasy drawings as well. Both American and Taiwanese children adopted themes, stories, and characters from fairy tales and myths of their own cultures. Around 18% of American children and 7% of Taiwanese children presented this subject matter in their expressions of fantasy worlds. Since each culture develops particular folktale and myths, one could assume that the contents of drawings by children from various cultures would differ.

It is noteworthy that, within the 15% of American children's drawings incorporating themes and characters from fairy tales and myths, the images are similar and consistent, almost to the degree of stereotype. The featured characteristics are as follows:

1. Flying unicorn, unicorns and rainbow, unicorn and castles, and unicorn and golden valleys.
2. Castles and wonderful lands.
3. Beautiful princesses and flying unicorn.
4. Queen, king, and their castles.
5. Dragons, knights, and castles.

6. Fairies with magic wands, fairies, a toy and candy world.
7. Witches and candy houses.

Taiwanese children's drawings of folktales revealed similar regularities, however, two systems of fairy tales and myths could be distinguished in their drawings; one was traditionally Chinese and the other was Western. The featured themes are summarized as follows:

1. Chinese deities (with ancient styles of clothes).
2. Chinese myths.
3. Castles or palaces.
4. Princesses and princes.
5. Candy houses and magic worlds.
6. Castles.
7. Mermaids

Upon inspection, I found that, while Chinese folktales appeared in Taiwanese children's depictions of fantasy worlds, they were not as common as Western fairy tales in Taiwanese children's drawings. Although this sounds surprising, it reiterates facts of tradition-fading, cultural transition, and cross-cultural influence. Even the term, *fantasy*, has been coated with western colors. The mention of a fantasy world is usually accompanied with illustrations of western fairy tales and fantastic fictions in children's books and animation. Thus, it is not surprising to see Taiwanese children making such a direct association between a fantasy world and western fairy tales instead of Chinese folktale.

In American children's drawings I found three-headed dragons,

flaming dragons, fire-breathing serpents, giants, and all kinds of beasts that may be traced to images of horrid monsters and dragons in Western folktales. Obviously, this traditional theme still fascinates American children. Taiwanese children also drew monsters and dreadful creatures, but the numerical distribution illustrated in Table 1 proved that they were not as enthusiastic about this subject as American children. Additionally, most Taiwanese children's depictions of monsters were in the form of dinosaurs, and none were entitled "dragons". Dragons in Chinese folktales are neither evil nor horrid creatures; on the contrary, they are considered to be auspicious or good omen symbols.

In Chinese culture, the dragon and phoenix are both legendary creatures, favorable and well-known to most Taiwanese children. However, why not one Taiwanese child drew a Chinese dragon or phoenix remained a puzzle. Maybe they are too difficult for Taiwanese children to draw, or perhaps they were not recognized as fantastic creatures.

Every now and then young people draw on their historical traditions, and translate them into something suitable to the spirit of their own age and environment. Traditional knowledge is imprinted deeply upon the patterns of children's imaginations. In other words, childhood imagination is ancient, so is the wish for magic and wonderful lands. How children described their fantasy worlds depended on the fantasy traditions in their cultures. Once the components of the fantastic realm change, the contents of children's imagination are altered as well. For instance, that featured characters and themes of Western fairytales and myths appear in Taiwanese children's visual interpretation of a fantasy world is because Western fairytales have

been imported into their culture.

Old Tricks, New Formula

In addition to those familiar folktale characters and themes, both American and Taiwanese children also are inspired by the process of anthropomorphism, for instance, talking animals and smiling plants, that are often found in fairytales. Taiwanese children, especially, were fond of applying this means to achieve a magical and comical effect. From the numerical distribution on Subject 1, Table 1, one is able to see that the frequency of anthropomorphism in Taiwanese children's drawings outnumbered that in American children's drawings. While examining the contents of this fantasy genre, I also discovered a profound difference between these two cultural groups in selection of objects for anthropomorphism. The one dominant scene in drawings by Taiwanese children was of various fruits and vegetables with eyes, mouths, hands, legs. Some of them were also portrayed in actions of fighting, conversing, singing, or playing. These scenes were often entitled, Kingdom of Fruits, Kingdom of Vegetables, or Kingdom of Mushroom. In comparison, American children were attracted to a wider variety of things such as books, stationary, socks, flowers, birds, and pets.

When exposed to images or graphic schemas applied in comics, children might borrow only some minor motifs and integrate them with their own schemas. This tendency could be identified in children's delineations of facial features. Some motifs were characterized by simplified, symbolic, facial elements, while some were very elaborated and dramatized.

I compared them with the styles of facial depictions in comic strips, and found that these motifs were very similar to the facial conventions applied to various types of cartoon characters. Many funny characters or cute animals have human faces, while pretty girls are always portrayed with big eyes and long eyelashes. One could also find children's adoption of conventional schemas for angry and sad faces.

New Graphic Languages: Image Adoption and Imitation

Our modern world has become saturated with an abundance of things that our ancestors never could have imagined, for instance, effective transportation equipment, electric appliances, television, telephone, computers, and more. Our vocabulary continues growing by day, and the contents of our conversation are filled with by-products of this century's technologies. New products come and go, while we seldom notice how closely our habitual patterns and concerns are tied to technological advancement. In studying children's drawings, I found that children were part of this stream, adding sorts of new information and resources to their databases. The repertoire of children's graphic expression is changing and moving at a pace that matches the pace of changes in the modern world.

It is noteworthy that children adopted or imitated other people's graphic inventions and expressive formulas in their visual expression. Based on the children's drawings collected for the present study, copying and imitating images from various sources seems to be the nature of children, which will be discussed in the following section.

Cartoons, superheros, and comics

In 1979, the Comic Reader reported that the superhero theme appeared in the top six best selling books. Lopate (1976) found that the superhero theme ranked first in popularity of comics among American children aged from six to thirteen (Smith, 1985). Many researchers have noted that children borrow images, styles, and techniques from both illustrations and pictures, especially comics (Wilson, 1974, 1978, 1985; Hoff, 1982; Wilson and Wilson, 1982; Robertson, 1985). This phenomenon also was found in children's drawings collected for the present study; however, the superhero theme was not the most popular among either American or Taiwanese children.

As shown in Table 1, superheros, robot-like figures, and cartoon characters were found in quite a few drawings by both American and Taiwanese children. However, except *Superman* and *Robot-like Figure*, the models used by these two cultural groups were quite distinct from each other. Most Taiwanese children drew characters modelled on Japanese comic books and cartoons such as Zen-Ja Turtles, Little Din-Don, and others. American students, however, based their characters on American comics and cartoons, such as Simpsons, cute animals, and strong, muscular heros. Some of these children focused on portraying these characters without adding any other backgrounds or plots.

Fighting, Wars, Weapons

Although these children never experienced real battles with real weapons, they seemed to be fond of depicting them, according to Table 1. Two American students in particular drew pictures of various weapons which looked extremely advanced. These children may have been influenced

by comics and video games in which scenes of battling and fighting with various advanced weapons, tanks, and fighter planes appear frequently. Wilson and Wilson (1983) demonstrated the relationship between children's portrayal of violent fighting scenes and the influence of video games and comics. The fighting scenes and images I saw in children's drawings were likewise similar to those in comics or video games.

Space adventure and aliens

Outer space still remains little known and mysterious. No one has ever travelled to any other planets or any other solar systems. However, as shown in Table 1, the subject of space adventure and aliens appeared quite frequently in both American and Taiwanese children's drawings. One drawing portrayed a cute alien that looked similar to ET, and many others depicted space ships that were often seen in movies and comics. Hundreds of movies, science fiction stories, and comics have invented many vivid, realistic pictures of space, alien civilizations on other planets, and creatures from outer space, arousing people's curiosity and interest. Movies such as Star Wars, Star Trek, ET, Aliens, and others were popular in both America and Taiwan. Thus, it is not surprising that children depicted their influence.

Besides movies, science fiction, and comics, there are other influential sources. Two Taiwanese students depicted themselves conquering the universe by drawing a diagram of ten planets around the sun similar to the illustration of our solar system in science textbooks. Three students drew astronauts walking on a planet with space ships nearby. This scene reminded me of a picture of Neil Armstrong landing on the moon that was broadcast on TV news around the world. It is certainly true that the world is

saturated with sufficient visual information daily and children borrow these images, picking visual information from their environment to store as a database of memories for future use.

Flow of Cross-cultural Influences

According to Yoshimoto (1991), the modern world is characterized by a global transmission of images and information which has created an increase in intimate influences and similarities across cultures. This study shows that Taiwanese children shared many similar images, icons, information, and also graphic formulas with American children. Taiwanese children's adoption of images and characters from American and Japanese comics and animations clearly illuminated the source of the imagery. What was popular or fashioned in the United States, became, sooner or later, widespread and well known in Taiwan as well. American basketball stars, popular music, animations, and TV programs have been adopted in modern Taiwanese culture. When exposed to this information, Taiwanese children's knowledge of another culture increased. In terms of visual coding, Taiwanese children were visually "bi-lingual", able to recognize, utilize, and depict these outside-in products and signs of another culture.

When influences come from other cultures, changing elements are easily discerned in children's graphic expression, in contrast with images of cultural traditions. This is especially evident in Taiwanese children's drawings in that two streams of Western influence and Chinese traditional stabilizing force were woven together. It was, however, not easy to perceive influences from outside western worlds among American children's

drawings. The linear expansion of the Western civilization remained persistent.

Conclusion

Unlike Balinese children who derived ideas and ready-made images mainly from shadow plays, American and Taiwanese children derived conventions from different sources. Presently, in both American and Taiwanese societies, children's books, comic books, and a variety of mass media are re-generating visual conventions for children to follow. This development is proving to be influential and powerful as evidenced by the great quantity of these conventional forms that appeared in children's drawings. This influence even extends across cultures, as was seen in the Western fairy tales portrayed in Taiwanese children's drawings. In this aspect, the movement of artistic and mythical traditions from one culture to another has blurred cultural distinctions in children's graphic expression as well as making it difficult to perceive cultural differences in children's drawings.

Findings illuminate the fact that no matter if influences come from other cultures or the changing dynamics of the culture, young people's graphic expression remains strongly linked to their unique socio-cultural contexts. As a fact, children's expressiveness matched with cultural patterning. Their imagination is based on the outside-in experiences (internalized being), and is socially, culturally, and contextually constructed.

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