

The Development and Evolution of Narrative Characteristics from Comic Strips to Original Chinese Picture Books

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Abstract: After nearly one hundred years of interpretation, comic strips can be chronologically sorted into emergent, prosperity, change and bottleneck. Through research, this paper discusses the comprehensive impact of social and economic factors on each of these periods and deduces and summarizes the characteristics of differentiated narratives. In the new period, Chinese comic strips gradually receded due to market factors, while original Chinese picture books grew. Although there is a difference in the visual presentation form between the two, they have partly inherited the characteristics of the comic strips in the 80's and 90's. The thesis conducts a comparative study on the differences and similarities between the two and discusses their creative value and contemporary significance.

Keywords: comic strips, original Chinese picture books, narrative features, innovation

1. Introduction

Comic strips usually contain several pictures with related or continuous narrative content characteristics. It is generally a popular paperback reading material with picture as the central part and text as the secondary part [1], which was prevalent in mainland China in the 20th century. A Ying mentioned in *The History of Chinese Comic Strips* that "Comic strips got their name later, in 1927 Shanghai World Bookstore's comic strips of the Three Kingdoms was the first book to be labelled 'comic strips', and it was only from then on that it became a commonly used moniker [1]." In 1929, Shanghai World Bookstore published four kinds of comic strips, *Comic Strip Water Margin* and *Comic Strip Journey to the West*, determining the characteristics of the manifestation of comic strips. It is characterised by using books as a carrier, small size, and easy-to-understand content. The picture and text are narrated together, and the content has continuity before and after the page. Unlike a set of illustrations, comic strips narrate the story in detail and rewrite the text to connect with the images. Images also have narrative and continuity through the unification of before and after the figure, scene and painting style to achieve the effect of narrative coherence before and after the image.

In the 1980s, the Comic strip publishing business was limited to many constraints and gradually fell into a trough from glory [2]. Driven by profit, publishers competed to publish popular subjects in mass distribution and ignored the purchasing power of readers. Some painters pay too much attention to the performance of individual art forms, thus bypassing the aesthetics of the readers. At the same time, the reform and opening up brought the rise of new culture and television, exacerbating the decline of comic strips. Sales fell sharply, and eventually, comic strips almost exited the book market

in the 1990s. During the same period, picture books entered the Chinese market as a new form. Ajia mentioned in *A Little History of Picture Books* that "in the 1980s and 1990s, Mr Tadashi Matsui of the Evangelical Museum of Japan began to communicate frequently with Chinese publishers, vigorously spreading the idea of picture books, and picture books gradually entered the domestic market as a new form of books [3]". Although domestic publishers attempted to publish the picture book *Vixen of the Wasteland* as early as 1991, it was not a bestseller due to the small print run and novel format. Only after introducing the Jimmy series of picture books to the mainland in 2002, with sales exceeding one million copies, picture books began to make a name for themselves in the Chinese market. Some painters started to try to create picture books, such as Chengliang Zhu, Yongkai Hu, and other comic strips artists also joined the creation of picture books. The natural rise of China's original picture books was around the beginning of the 21st century [3]. A group of Chinese picture book artists created a large number of outstanding original picture books, such as Liang Xiong's *Picture Book China* and *Rhythmic China* series of books, and Chengliang Zhu's *The Flame*, etc., which laid the foundation for the development of this field.

The term "picture book" refers to books created for children in which graphic narratives play an important role. The interdependence of text and image creates an art form that combines the visual and the literary. Japanese author Tadashi Matsui mentions in *My Treatise on Picture Books* that "a good picture book is one in which the illustrations tell a story [4]." In addition, Yi Peng mentioned in *World Picture Book Reading and Classics* that "in the picture books we usually say, the pictures are no longer subordinate to the text, no longer dispensable, and can even be said to be the life of the picture book [5]." The content is primarily stories created or adapted for children, stories that hide ideas or connotations expressed by the author. The text values linguistic interest and reading experience; its words and images are complementary and interdependent. Picture books are usually 32-40 pages long and must be closely matched with images to present a coherent narrative within a limited space. By changing the pace of scenes and images, picture book images can create the visual effect of a short film and enhance the appeal of the story.

Comic strips and picture books blend images and words with a coherent narrative and storytelling. They fuse painting and text to form a holistic art form beyond pure textual and pictorial narratives. This paper explores the changing characteristics of textual and pictorial narratives, using examples of works on the same subject at different times.

2. Narrative Characteristics of Comic Strips in the Middle and Late Twentieth Century

2.1. Emergent Period: Images Illustrating Text

Since Shanghai World Book published five kinds of comic strips one after another, this kind of book with the characteristics of popularity has been active in society. In the 1930s and 1940s, publishers had a more significant say on the content of the comic strip publication, so the author of the comic strips created and published independently was rarely seen. They could only directly adapt or use the existing novels and stories as the text of the comic strips, so it triggered the social vulgarity of the comic strips. At the same time, the images in the comic strips of this period were created through reading novels or watching opera performances and were completed by multiple people. In addition, some booksellers asked comic strip artists to make new ones by grafting images from different comic strips [6]. As a result, the comic strips in this creative context are conspicuously lacking in artistry.

The comic strip *New Year's Eve*, published by Zhicheng Bookstore in 1948, demonstrates the narrative characteristics of the early development of comic strips (Figure 2.1). For example, "The monster is coming! Go and defend yourself!" "The masses are coming with their weapons," etc. (Figure 1). The comic strip artist puts the text in dialogue in the picture to make the relationship between the picture and the text closer. Still, the effect is minimal and remains at the stage of using

the picture to speak the text, which lacks continuity and visual expressiveness. As a daily pastime reading material, the cultural level of the audience restricts the literary nature of the work. In terms of pictorial narrative, the main use of line drawings, a single composition, the lack of ideas; character image performance is exaggerated, the action is strange, the proportion is out of proportion, the lack of realism; the image and the text of the complementarity between the insufficient, but also stay in the level of the image to explain the text of the level of the image intuitively.



Figure 1: Some pages of the comic strip *New Year's Eve*.

At this time, comic strips became a new form of artistic expression, but the works stayed at the level of entertaining the public. They did not reflect much artistry and literature, a feature that gradually disappeared until around the time of the founding of People's Republic of China.

2.2. Prosperity Period: Combining Images and Texts

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, based on the urgent need to widely publicise policy ideas among the masses, the art form of comic strips naturally became the primary medium of communication [7]. After implementing a series of policies to transform the old comic strips, the comic strips not only possessed the function of entertainment but also were emphasised with educational and aesthetic functions. The content shifted to be close to real life, from folk tales and myths, martial arts and other popular subjects to war stories, historical stories, propaganda science and other subjects. The circulation of comic strips grew exponentially in the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, and readers expanded to include peasants, soldiers, workers and other groups. The State set up the Popular Picture Publishing House, which specialised in children's books, replacing the scattered private workshops before the founding of the People's Republic of China.

The Government has also formulated a series of regulations on creating comic strips to ensure the quality and scale of their publication. Firstly, the division of labour and the vetting system for creating comic strips were clarified. Second, the text had to be written before starting a comic strip, establishing that the text was the basis for creating a comic strip. This change made the narrative structure of the texts more complete, the plots richer and more attractive to the readers; the characters' personalities and thoughts were portrayed more deeply, and the emotions were fuller. These factors together shaped the narrative characteristics of comic strips in this period. For example, *the Annual Holiday* published by New Art Publishing House in 1952 embodies this change (Figure 2). It is difficult to accurately summarise all of its contents based on the pictures alone. However, combined with the text, it appears clear and comprehensive.



Figure 2: Some pages of the comic strip *the Annual Holiday*.

In the 1960s and 1970s, as the cultural level of the peasant and industrial masses continued to rise, the reader for comic strips declined. Still, the number of teenagers and children readers increased, and children's books focusing on children's themes became the mainstay of comic strips. 1962's *Spring Festival*, published by Children's and Young People's Publishing House, was a comic strip created especially for children (Figures 3). The text is narrated from a child's point of view and in the first person, with pinyin added to some of the complex text, and the content is simple and easy to understand, depicting stories that occur in real life.

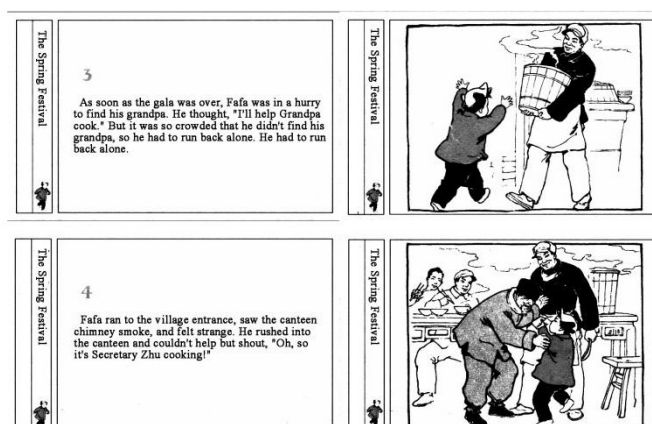


Figure 3: Some pages of the comic strip *The Spring Festival*.

As society changes and develops, the presentation of images also changes. Comic strip artists used more specialised techniques to portray the characters and the background of the picture to enhance the continuity of the picture. Compared with the previous comic strips, the characters are more realistic, and the lines are more straightforward. Compositions and perspectives are varied, and backgrounds are more concise. In *The Spring Festival*, the comic strip artist highlights the protagonists and deepens the reader's impression by portraying characteristic characters and the clever use of colours. At the same time, the creators of these two comic strips chose appropriate styles for the different subjects, showing the distinctive characteristics of the times.

After the 1950s, comic strips entered a period of development and prosperity, with paper-cutting, woodcut prints, and watercolour painting becoming new forms of expression for comic strips, and images, narrative techniques, and subject matter taking on a new look. Text writers began to pay attention to continuity, storytelling and ideology. At the same time, comic strip artists focused on characterisation, background and composition, and the joint narrative of words and images was further developed.

2.3. Change Period: Predominantly Images

In the 1970s, popular demand for comic strips skyrocketed. Comic strips ushered in a new round of prosperity and reached their heyday in the early 1980s. The creation of comic strips began to transform from revolutionary and historical themes, and Scar Art came into being, such as *Maples* and *Scars* and other comic strips that recorded the real stories of special times (Figure 4). The new subject matter pushed comic strip artists to explore new forms of expression, departing from their previous aesthetic preferences and painting habits. The images remained realistic but added elements of intention. The varied compositions guided the reader's gaze and advanced the story. The characterisation abandoned the formulaic look and had more impact.

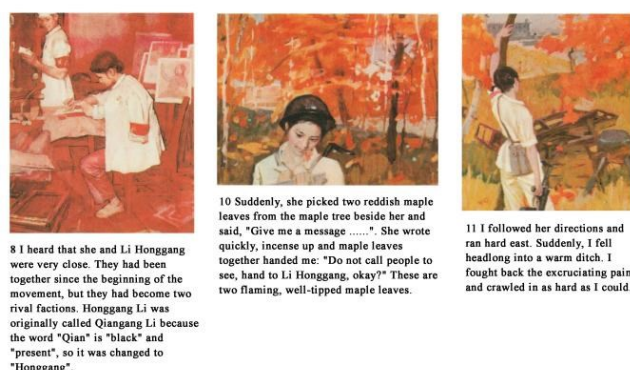


Figure 4: Some pages of the comic strip *Maples*.

During the same period, under the influence of Western literary thought, themes such as classical masterpieces, foreign masterpieces, poetry and folk tales began to revive. The comic strips related to the Chinese New Year also shifted from telling realistic stories to related folk tales, myths and legends. In the 1985 Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House publication, *In the Story of New Year's Eve(I)*, children's comic strips already showed some of the characteristics of picture books (Figure 5). The texts are no longer isolated from the images, and the phrases are brief and funny, more in line with children's reading habits. In terms of image presentation, there are more variations. The images no longer pursue realism, and the compositions are novel and flat. Characters are no longer required to be accurately stylised but are fun to look at, with witty movements and expressions. The characters' costumes point out the era in which they live through a specific element, and the traditional patterns are retained in the other aspects of the picture, with the addition of paper-cutting features.

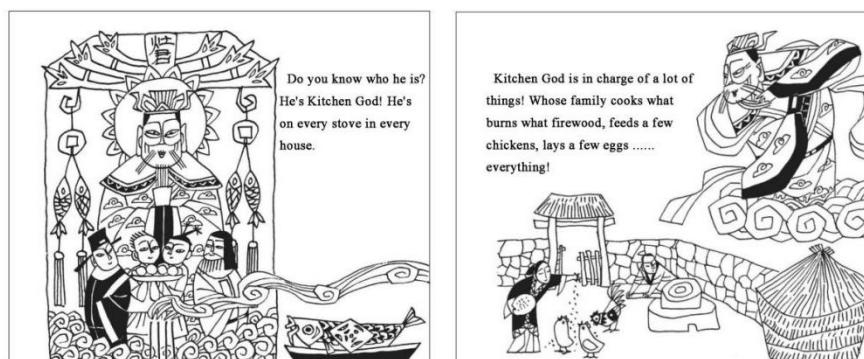


Figure 5: Some pages of the comic strip *In the New Year's Eve(I)*.

2.4. Bottlenecks Period: Images Over Texts

In a very short period, serial painting has exploded into various forms of expression, but it also brings some problems. The serial artists pursued too many new methods of expression and the image's sense of formality and neglected the serials' most essential characteristics. In the mid-1980s, the sales volume and circulation of comic strips decreased sharply, and a series of countermeasures were implemented with little effect, which marked the beginning of the decline of comic strips. In *The Story of Spring Festival*, published in 1988, it can be seen that the readers of the comic strips have shifted to children (Figure 6). The style of the images has changed significantly, no longer using traditional outlining and flat colouring, but rather colour blocks and generalised images. There is a lack of detail in the pictures, emphasising overall expression and the aesthetic implications of the artist's individuality. The transition between text and image is more indirect, but the importance of the text is overlooked because of the over-emphasis on the representation of the pictures.

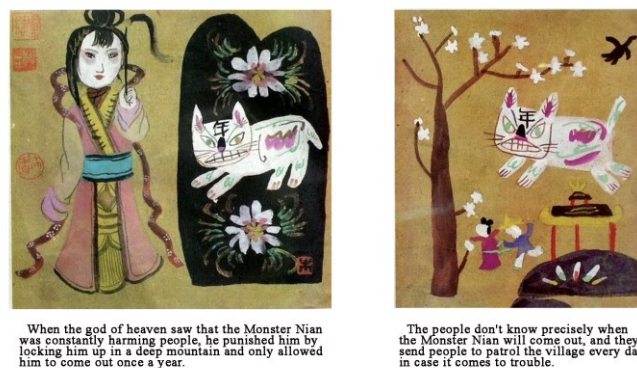


Figure 6: Some pages of the comic strip *The Story of Spring Festival*.

However, with the increase of international communications in the early 1990s, domestic writers and painters began to understand the creation of picture books [8]. A few comic strips were already very similar to the presentation of picture books, such as Chengliang Zhu's 1991 comic strip *The Story of the Little Year* (Figure 7). In that comic strip, the picture is concerned with the expression of details, and the artist reassembles the narrative focus and creates a second creation through the image, which complements the text. Some pages do not even have text, relying entirely on image narratives. The artist's style is more prominent and has a robust national style, no longer catering to the market aesthetic and pursuing picture expression and artistry. Unlike the realistic style of early comic strips, the clumsy style and brightly coloured illustrations are closer to children's aesthetics and attract children to read. However, with time, the traditional form of comic strips is no longer popular in the market.

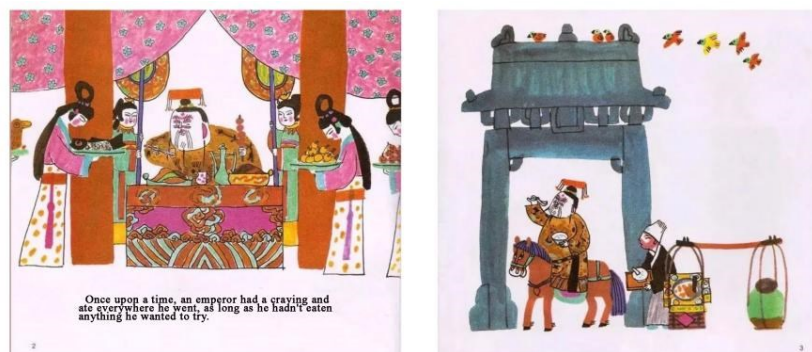


Figure 7: Some pages of the comic strip *The Story of the Little Year*.

3. Narrative Characteristics of Original Chinese Picture Books in the Twenty-First Century

3.1. The Booming Rise of Original Chinese Picture Books

During a not-so-long publishing cycle at the turn of the century, China's children's literature and publishing circles showed great enthusiasm for translating and publishing picture books abroad. For the creators, these excellent works also brought them a lot of stimulation and enlightenment [9]. The close communication between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait in children's literature has also promoted the understanding of picture books among publishers and creators on the mainland. Some artists with experience in creating comic strips, such as Chengliang Zhu and Xiang Zhou, became pioneers in creating original Chinese picture books. In 2007, Liang Xiong's series of books, *Picture Book of China*, was published by Tomorrow Publishing House, which became a significant event in the rise of original Chinese picture books. The series was well received both at home and abroad, introducing Chinese picture books to the international stage and becoming one of the representative works of early Chinese picture books [10].

The Picture Book China consists of four books, one of which is *The Nian of New Year Monster*, adapted from a traditional story, narrated from a child's point of view and rich in philosophy (Figure 8). The dark blue colour of the Nian in the story implies melancholy and loneliness, echoing that the convergence of loneliness forms the Nian of New Year monster. The picture book conveys the idea that children need companionship in their childhood through their interaction with the Nian. Meanwhile, unlike the traditional images, the Nian in this book are presented naively, breaking the stereotype. The images use ink and wash as the material medium, highlighting Chinese cultural elements and adding many red features to render the atmosphere of Chinese New Year. Cross-page compositions and details enrich the visual experience, and indirect plot-driven lines imply the narrative rhythm of the picture book. The language is concise and focuses on essential information, while the illustrations complement the visual information with hidden details.

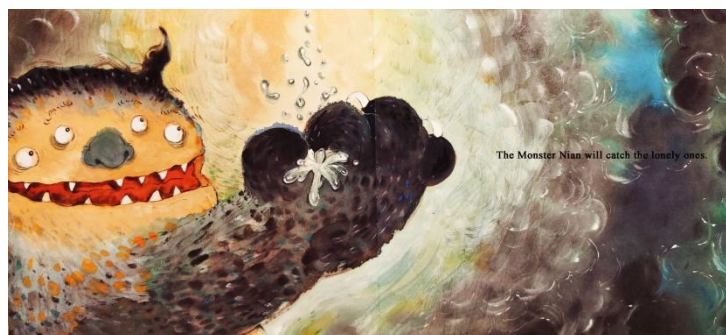


Figure 8: One page of the picture book *The Nian of New Year Monster*.

3.2. The Road of Exploration for Original Chinese Picture Books

Yi Peng once said in an interview that "the development of China's picture book market in recent years has been unimaginable, and the path it has taken is different from that of any other country: while other countries have been travelling slowly, China's picture book has been a geometrical progression of explosive growth [11]." With the rapid development of the market, Chinese picture book artists have begun to think about how to create picture books with national characteristics, personal style and creativity. Relying on China's rich cultural traditions and diverse ethnic cultures, these picture book artists have absorbed the open and accessible painting concepts and forms of expression of foreign picture books and have gradually developed a more personal style of expression.

For example, in Huiying Zhu's picture book *Years*, published in 2015, the author's style is more explicit, using diverse painting materials and forms, such as collages, three-dimensional crafts and paper-cutting. These elements enrich the picture and make it more creative and modern art. The picture's composition guides the reader's visual direction and adds interest. The use of black, white and grey tones and the contrast of red in the colours creates a sense of mystery and an ancient atmosphere (Figure 9).



Figure 9: One page of the picture book *Years*.

In Chengliang Zhu's picture book *Fighting Lanterns*, published in 2017, the artist accurately recreates the story's background through details such as scenes of modern life and clothing styling. The dynamic scenes and character movements in the picture book are appropriately designed, such as the episodes of hitting and banging lanterns, and the characters in the painting are full of a sense of the times and vitality under the artist's pen (Figure 10). The story has a depth of emotion and expresses a profound moral about growing up and cherishing.

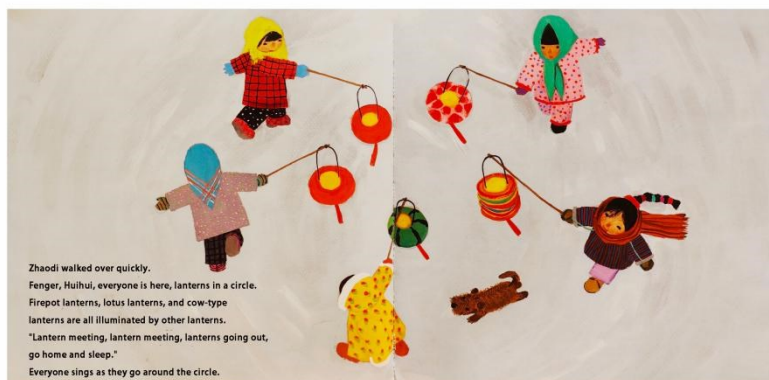


Figure 10: One page of the picture book *Fighting Lanterns*.

In general, Chinese picture book artists have begun to boldly experiment with new forms and styles of expression while maintaining their national characteristics, and the creation of local picture books has entered a more diversified stage.

3.3. Original Chinese Picture Books and Digital Painting

The rise of digital painting has brought new possibilities for picture books, which can simulate the texture effects of various materials and add details and visual layers to the picture. More strikingly, digital painting has provided space for the innovation of picture books. Creative forms such as dynamic picture books and three-dimensional books have gradually entered the Chinese picture book market, bringing new possibilities to the narrative structure of picture books. For example, in the three-dimensional book *The New Year's Eve*, when depicting the traditional custom of wearing new

clothes on the first day of the Lunar New Year, the text on the page is made into a corresponding organ (Figure 11). This interactive design increases the fun and creates a more exciting narrative experience by allowing children to become more deeply involved in the story [12]. This new type of picture book brings new possibilities to the narrative form of picture books and enriches the reading experience, increasing the interaction between books and children.



Figure 11: One page of the picture book *The New Year's Eve*.

4. The Transformation of Narrative Characteristics from Comic Strips to Original Chinese Picture Books

4.1. The Shift from Popularity to Interesting Textual Narratives

Textual narratives in comic strips presented different characteristics at different times. In the 1920s and 1930s, text in comic strips mostly existed as a subsidiary status. In the 1940s, to improve the status of the text, the text began to appear in the picture, but in most cases, it was made up by the artist, and the plot content was loose. With the founding of New China, the importance of scripts was emphasised in comic strips, and script writing was handed over to specialists. The quality of comic strips in this period was significantly improved, and the content of the stories became more realistic and close to life. The narrative function of images gradually appeared, but the text was still the main component of the narrative. In the 1980s, comic strips broke the limits of their subject matter, and there was a rise in children's comic strips, with the text shifting to a simpler, more childlike style. However, most of these stories were based on folktale archetypes and lacked deeper meanings.

Similarly, in the early days of Chinese original picture books, most were adapted from folklore and nursery rhymes, but the texts were mainly enriched with philosophical ideas or connotations. The texts have a certain artistic quality in picture books, echoing the pictures and echoing each other to build up the emotion and atmosphere of the story. The text of picture books is usually short and guided by the need to convey necessary information in a limited number of words, supplementing what the pictures cannot show, such as onomatopoeia and the inner activities of the characters. The arrangement of the text also has its own rules and can be designed according to the characteristics of the pictures.

4.2. The Shift from a Single to a Multifaceted Combination of Pictorial Narratives

One of the main differences between comic strips and picture books lies in their respective narrative mechanisms. Whereas comic strips rely heavily on text to drive the storyline, in picture books, images play a vital role in the narrative.

Although visually appealing to readers, Republican-era comic strips needed to be more expansive in their artistry. Picture coherence was usually maintained through consistent characterisation and scene transitions. The images were primarily focused on explaining the plot described in the text on

the current page and were, therefore, less narrative. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the development of comic strips also entered a new stage. Character design, scene perspective, and depiction of character traits were all improved, and the images became more narrative. In addition to the traditional white drawing style, colourful comic strips and cartoon styles gradually emerged. Although the concept of picture books had yet to be formed in the 1980s, comic strips were already displaying the characteristics of modern picture books. Still, due to their long length, they could contain multiple climactic episodes without a precise narrative rhythm.

Picture books usually convey more information in images than words due to the limited number of pages and the length of the text. Some pictures play a schematic role, and excellent picture books will hide many messages in the pictures to stimulate readers' thinking and lead children to be more curious [13]. Original Chinese picture books emphasise local cultural characteristics and boldly use traditional materials such as ink and paper-cutting. At the same time, the fascinating shapes, rich colours and full use of visual effects enhance the emotions conveyed by the picture books. The continuity of the image is enhanced by the repetition of scenes and the gradual addition of elements to build a unique rhythm. At the same time, acceleration and alternation at the same rate drive the story's climax, which is the narrative core of picture book images [14].

4.3. From Coherence to Philosophical Image and Text Co-Narratives

In comic strips and picture books, the textual and pictorial narratives tell the same story in separate ways, and the messages conveyed are unified at a higher level. Therefore, one is indispensable without the other. Otherwise, readers are prone to deviate from the original storyline in their understanding while reading.

In comic strips, the text provides the theme idea and storyline for the painting, which is the basis of the painting. For comic strips, the images are generally based on chronological order, which is the basis of the story. Painting is the concrete presentation of images, scenes and dynamics, which plays a decisive role in the quality of a work [2]. For comic strips, the images are mostly based on chronological order, thus gradually advancing the story development. Painting is the concrete rendering of the story. In the early days, most comic strips had yet to form the relationship between picture and text. The images are coherent, but the narrative is weak. The images only confirm the textual information, and the narrative structure is confusing. As the quality of the text and the artistry of the work improved, the images were more closely integrated with the text, and structures such as flashbacks, interludes, and multi-line narratives emerged.

Unlike comic strips, picture books, through the simultaneous combination of text and images, can introduce new dimensions to a story or allow the reader to grasp the deeper meaning or philosophy of the creator. Whereas comic strips tend to depict a simple plot, picture books offer more possibilities for interpreting metaphors through the nature of the pictures. As Guangcai Hao mentioned in *What & How Good Picture Books Are Good*, "A good story does not just give us one-way values; it does not give children monotony. It treats the child equally and is not afraid to give him complex clues and multi-faceted perspectives [13]."

5. Conclusions

Since its introduction in the 1920s, comic strips have maintained steady development until the 1980s. With the reform and opening up and economic development, as well as multiple competitions from foreign comics and domestic emerging media (such as television and radio), traditional comic strips failed to keep up with the trend of the times, lacked innovation, and adhered to the old ways, and gradually went into decline.

However, from the late 1980s onwards, some children's-themed comic strips began to see formal changes. Compositions and layouts became more design-oriented, artistic techniques became more exaggerated and anthropomorphic, fun and entertainment were added, and the goal of combining entertainment and education was successfully achieved, laying the foundation for developing early original Chinese picture books.

In recent years, new narrative forms and ever-expanding types of themes have injected fresh nutrients into Chinese original picture books, and some picture books rich in oriental philosophical stories, such as *The Sultan's Rhinoceros Horn* and *The Big Boat*, as well as children's enlightening picture books, such as *How Princesses Poke Their Noses in Nosebleeds* and other local picture books, have also become quite popular in the market. It can be said that one of the reasons for the prosperity of local picture books is that they have filled the gap in China's original children's book market, which is inseparable from the longstanding efforts of the artists of picture books to push forward the development of new books constantly.

Looking back at the history of the rise and fall of traditional comic books and the flourishing development of original Chinese picture books, we can draw important lessons from them. These two very different development paths remind us that, as artists, we must always grasp the pulse of the times and constantly explore the boundaries of media, themes, and forms of expression. Only through continuous innovation can art creation maintain a sustainable development trend.

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