



OKEN: Childhood Memories of a Taiwanese Poet

OKEN：詩的端倪

Author: Yang Mu **Illustrator:** Wu Shih-hung **Publisher:** Fisfisa Media

Date: 8/2023 **Right's contacts:** bft.children.comics@moc.gov.tw

208 pages | 19.7 x 26 cm **Volume:** 1

Rights sold: French, German

Award: 2021 The Raymond LeBlanc Prize at the Brussels Comic Festival

2024 The 15th Golden Comic Awards, Best New Talent

BFT2.0 Translator: Michael Fahey

Oken: Childhood Memories of a Taiwanese Poet is adapted from *Mountain Wind, Sea Rain*, a classic autobiography of Yang Mu, one of Taiwan's most influential poets. In this work, Yang reflects on the spiritual events of his childhood and the enlightenment that inspired his pursuit of art. Oken is Yang's childhood name. As a young boy, he is considerate and sensitive. When he encounters a master wood craftsman who creates deity statues, he undergoes a transformative journey.

Oken delves deep into the inner world of this literary master. Amidst the backdrop of bombing raids during World War II, the Chinese Nationalist government's occupation, the Hualien earthquake, and the authoritarian White Terror period, Yang Mu revisits his childhood through the lens of his forties.

Oken has garnered acclaim, winning the Newcomer Award at the Brussels Comic Strip Festival, and has been highly praised by European judges. This project marks a significant step for Taiwanese literature onto the international stage, showcasing a cross-border collaboration between Taiwan and France.

In *Oken*, illustrator Wu Shih-hung displays his profound talents in both Eastern and Western traditional painting. His dynamic imagery impressively captures movement and emotion. This comic, Wu's first foray into the medium, conveys a poetic essence that harmonizes with Yang Mu's text, reflecting a search for the enchantment and mystery within his landscape and world.



Wu Shih-Hung

Wu Shih-Hung is a visual artist skilled in both traditional Chinese and Western painting, as well as dynamic image creation. He has been involved in the production of numerous documentaries, animated series, and commercial films, earning acclaim at both domestic and international film festivals. A father of two, he fondly considers this book his third child and feels incredibly fortunate.

Wu Shih-Hung is the recipient of the 2021 Brussels Comic Festival Newcomer Award and has showcased his work at various prestigious film festivals, including the Manchester Lift-Off Film Festival, REDCAT Children's Film Festival (USA), NHK Animation Grand Prize (Japan), Singapore Children's Film Festival, and several others across the globe, including Taiwan. His work has also received recognition at the Golden Bell Awards and the Taichung International Animation Festival. The book was awarded the 2022 Ministry of Culture Manga Creation and Publishing Marketing Award and has been licensed in French.



Yang Mu

Yang Mu, born in 1940 in Hualien, Taiwan, is a prominent literary figure, poet, essayist, critic, translator, and scholar. His works span Taiwan's post-war literary generation, with a career shaped by Taiwan's history from the end of Japanese rule through the Pacific War and Taiwan's restoration.

A Lushly Illustrated Life: The Story of Yang Mu, One of Taiwan's Most Celebrated Poet- Scholars

by Michael Fahey

Lushly illustrated by Wu Shih-hung, *Oken* is an autobiographical account of the origins of Yang Mu's poetic sensibility. Born in 1940, Yang Mu is widely considered one of Taiwan's most prominent 20th-century poets. The graphic novel uses his childhood name, Oken, until the final pages, where his identity as Yang Mu is revealed. "Oken" is the Japanese version of his childhood name, which in his native Taiwanese is pronounced A-Hiàn. In classical Chinese, the name means "sacrificial offering to the gods," a meaning Yang Mu, a deeply erudite poet, would have understood.

This interplay between Taiwanese and Japanese encapsulates one of Oken's virtues: its fidelity to Taiwan's complex

linguistic environment. When American bombs fell on Hualien, the eastern Taiwan city where the poet was born, Taiwan had been a Japanese colony for nearly 50 years. Oken's family flees into the mountains through the magical rift valley. There his educated parents trade and converse with indigenous Austronesian Taiwanese in Japanese. Later, his mother struggles with the new rulers' language—Mandarin Chinese brought by the defeated Nationalists from China. Her children are frustrated by her inability to pronounce it correctly, but she remains amused.

At first, it seems that Oken's poetic inspiration lies in Taiwan's magnificent mist-wreathed mountains. Wu's full-page

ink-wash illustration of Chilai Mountain masterfully conveys the sense of awe and mystery that Taiwan's wilderness has produced in the souls of visitors for centuries.

After the war ends, the family returns to Hualien. With the Japanese expelled, the Taiwanese think they will resume the old ways, worship their own gods again, and speak their own tongue free from interference of fastidious colonial authorities.

But their new rulers have different ideas. A stultifying educational system forces Oken and his friends to speak Mandarin. Despite this, Oken doesn't reject the new language. Indeed, he delights in the sounds of the

new language especially when spoken by a shy girl from China named Goldfish, whose passion is embroidery.

Some teachers from China, however, are traumatized refugees who harbor a deep hatred for both the Japanese and,

by extension, Taiwanese like Oken. A series of calamities soon befalls Oken, his friends, and his family.

First, rough soldiers from China kill and eat a dog beloved by the family of one of Oken's impoverished

classmates. Oken witnesses the butchering and the tears falling from the loyal dog's eye. As he later says, a part of him died forever that day. The government also confiscates a samurai

Although Yang Mu was an erudite scholar as well as a poet, we do not see him reading as a boy. His artistic model is a Taiwanese temple craftsman, fiercely dedicated to carving gods from Taiwan's precious cypress wood. This fusion of nature, art, and healing lies at the heart of Yang Mu's poetics.

sword gifted to Oken's father by a Japanese client, and later, Oken's father is arrested. Though he returns, a senior employee from their printing company does not, leaving his fate unknown. After this encounter with the secret police, who enforced martial law during Taiwan's 37-year White Terror, Oken's father becomes withdrawn and depressed.

Worst of all, Goldfish is killed in an earthquake. Her death jolts and unmoors Oken's soul. In this section, the sparse text fades into the background, allowing Wu's slightly psychedelic illustrations to convey Oken's mystical and traumatic experience.

Although Yang Mu was an erudite scholar as well as a poet, we do not see him reading as a boy. His artistic model is a Taiwanese temple craftsman, fiercely dedicated to carving gods from Taiwan's precious cypress wood. This fusion of nature, art, and healing lies at the heart of Yang Mu's poetics.

The novel ends with our narrator in Seattle, three decades later. Taiwan has

just emerged from the darkness of state terror and democratized. He is heading to a literary event with his son. His books, in English, are on display in the window of the shop. He shares his values with his son—freedom, the importance of artistic expression, the beauty of nature. Yet we sense that the story he has told—of trauma, a specific time and place at the western edge of the Pacific—is a story that only he can tell. There is a gulf between an immigrant father and his son, born into a new world. And yet, in the novel's final image, the famous poet looks at his son and sees not the child of a new world, but Oken—the boy he once was.

An American lawyer who has lived in Taiwan since 1988, Michael Fahey studied English and Chinese literature at the University of Chicago and Princeton. He lives in Taipei but would like to live south of the Zhuoshui River.



December 7, 1941
A Japanese naval armada suddenly attacks Pearl Harbor.
This causes the United States to enter World War II.

Spring 1945
General MacArthur takes Japanese-occupied Manila.
His next target is Iwo Jima.
He also launches intense air raids against the small city of
Hualien on the east coast of Taiwan. My native place.

Japan had ruled Taiwan for nearly 50 years.
Many young Taiwanese only spoke Japanese.



A few especially far-sighted people
began to feel anxious.

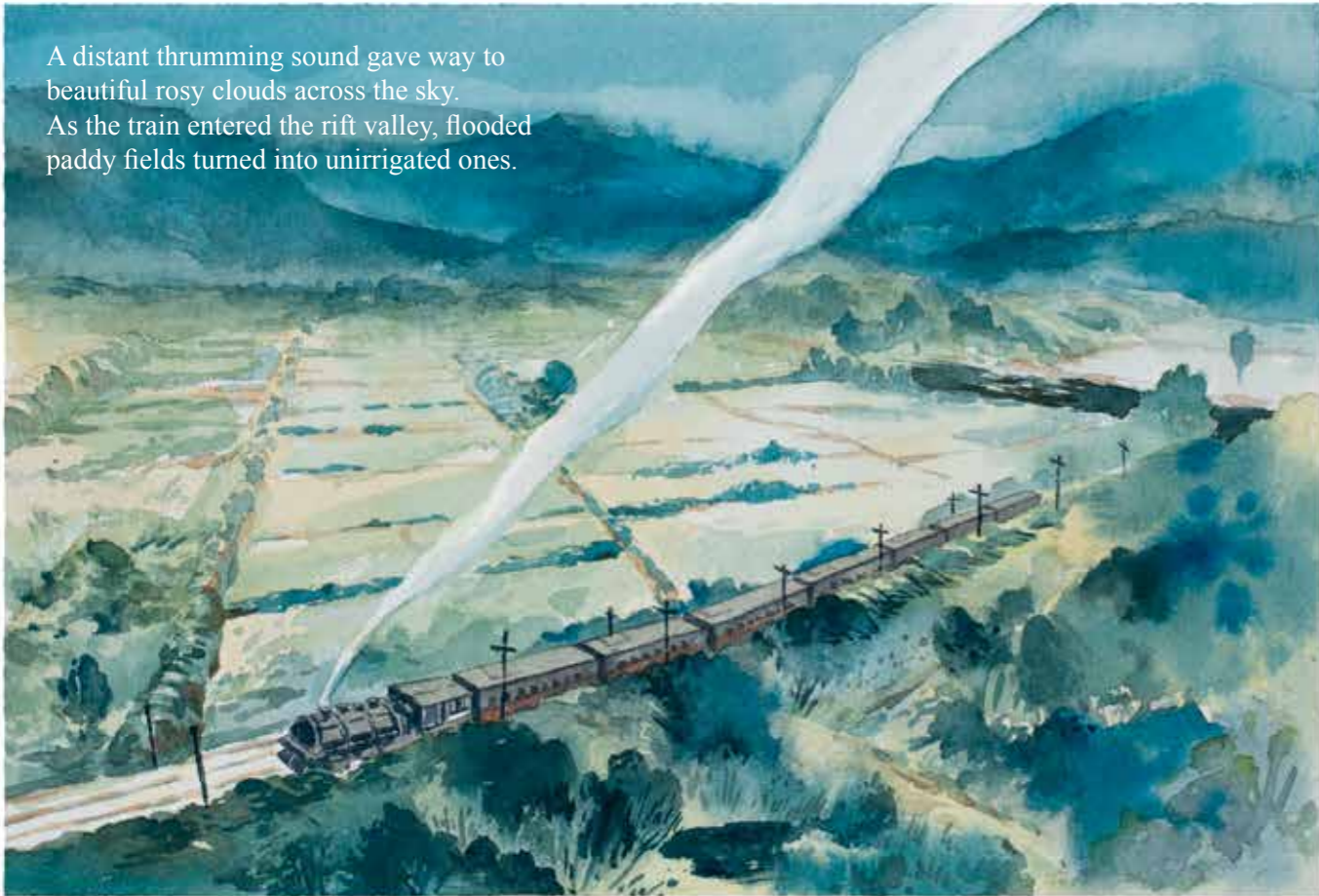


What if the American planes bombed
the railway going south from Hualien?





That was the first time I ever took a long-distance train.



A distant thrumming sound gave way to beautiful rosy clouds across the sky. As the train entered the rift valley, flooded paddy fields turned into unirrigated ones.



I thought that planes must have never flown through the skies over these fields. It all seemed so peaceful. It was all so new. So wonderful.



How much longer before we get there?



I hope our employees were able to get away without any problems. They've been with us so long.



I'm just praying that the air raids don't hit the building with the printing presses inside.