

# Factors Affecting Illustration Creation for Children's Books in Laos

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The purposes of this research were to 1) study the development and the situation of illustrations of children book in Laos, and 2) study the factors affecting illustration creativity of the artist. This study is a qualitative study taking place in Vientiane, Laos. The participants of this study consisted of 1) 10 scholars from government sectors and private publishers, 10 artists from 3 publishers and 2 non-profit organisations, and 10 stakeholders—readers and purchasers. The target books were books for 7 to 9 years old children which were published in Laos People's Democratic Republic from 2008 to 2018. The data from a field trip: survey form, uninstructed interview and focus group was analysed based on the objectives and the conceptual framework of the qualitative study. The results revealed that: In term of the development and the situation, three main types of illustrations were found in this study: drawing, painting and computer graphic illustrations. Picture story books were the most popular children books for 7 to 9 years old in Laos. In 1986 to 2006, Lao local tales were the most popular content for children's book whereas after 2007, most of the content of the books was written by Lao writers. In addition, three styles of illustration were found: realistic, analogical and surrealist styles. A single page which was created focusing on the image of the main characters of the story was the most popular style for the cover. Finally, both single-page illustrations and double-page spreads were used as the arrangement for the illustrations. There were two types of factors affecting the creativity of the artists: internal and external factors. Internal factors were impression, education, aptitude and, expansion of other artists. External factors were experience to work with the experts, need of the customers, trends and training by their organisation.

**Key words:** *Factors, Illustration of Children Books, Creativity, Laos*



## Introduction

Lao People's Democratic Republic is a historic and cultural country. In 1893, Laos became a Modern Nation State because it was under French rule when the French expanded their power into Indo China. Laos was independent from 1953 since World War II until now. Lao People's Democratic Republic is openly endorsing communism (Teerasasawat, 2000). The change of politics and government of Laos affected its social structure, culture and life style of Laos' people. According to changes of world social conditions and environment, Laos' government had a goal to expand their economic worldwide in order to eradicate poverty of Laos' people. In 1986, Laos's government implemented the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) policy. This policy aimed to develop Laos's economy to a free trade system. Laos not only welcomed new foreign countries to invest in Laos, but it also tried to link the country to the world culture system. This situation affected Laos's economy, culture and politics.

Even though Lao's government loosened print media law and regulation, printed matters in Laos were still under the close control of the government. As a result, there are not many of Laos's books authored and illustrated in the country. Laos's government enacted the print media law and regulation; all of the magazines in Laos are from the government (Limpattamapanee, 2012). Limpattamapanee also claimed that, publishers in Laos have been controlled closely by the government. Recently, Laos's government allowed private companies to work on commercial TV and print media. It was found that, most of the print media was teenage and lifestyle magazines.

Nowadays, internet services do not cover all area in Laos. Based on the interview of Hung Alun Dan Wilai (Limpattamapanee, 2012), the government, then, allowed Laos' publishers to publish books for Laos' children. The government also promoted purchasing books for primary school libraries in order to provide opportunities for Lao's children to learn languages and cultures through reading. As stated above, children's reading books are claimed to be the main material of learning for Lao's children.

According to the interview with Hung Alun Sriwilai (Limpattamapanee, 2012), it was found that international non-profit organisations published children's book for Lao's children. The sale of children's books was better than other books because Lao youths were interested in reading. The reading statistics of children in Laos is increasing. The popular books for Lao's children were tales and picture story books. Therefore, it can be stated that picture books play key roles in learning of Lao's children. Chen (2015) claimed that picture books are books that contain pictures which can describe the meaning of the story. She also stated that pictures cannot be separated from the story because they lead the readers to the real plot and the concept of the story. It can be stated that, it is as important as clues to the characters traits, settings and mood. Yoonpun (1998), a Thai illustrator, stated that a good illustration was visual art that could communicate with readers instead of the content in each book. It indicated the alphabet in the form of a picture. Moreover, good illustration also led readers'



thought, belief and attitude. Finally, it firmly instilled taste, and aesthetic appreciation of visual arts in children's mind.

According to the information above, picture story books play key roles in Lao children's learning. Therefore, the researcher would like to study factors that affect illustration creativity of children's books in Laos and proposes that illustrations in books can lead the readers thought through many forms of creativity process. The study also, aims to indicate the background, situation and forms of illustration in Laos.

### **Purposes of the study**

The purposes of this research are to 1) study the development and the situation of illustrations, and 2) study the factors affecting illustration creativity of children's books in Laos.

### **Methodology**

The subject of the study:

The participants in this study included: 1) 10 Scholars from government and private sectors: the director of Laos National Fine Art School, publishers, owners and editors from private publishers and non-profit organisations; 2) 10 artists from 3 private publishers and 2 non-profit organisations: Mee Dee book publisher, Big Brother Mouse publisher, Wai Dek publisher, Room to Read Laos Organisation and Action with Lao Children (ALC) organisation and; 3) 10 stakeholders: readers and purchasers.

### **Data collection procedures**

The data collection procedure consisted of 4 steps over a period of 1 year and 9 months. Below are the procedures used in collecting data:

1) Preparation period, a period of three months, was spent studying and collecting information from related documents. 2) Collecting data period, a period of six months, was spent in field trips collecting data. 3) Data evaluating and analysis period, a period of six months, was spent classifying the data from field trips. 4) Writing research report and publishing period, a period of six months, was spent writing and publishing the research report.

### **Research instruments**

The 3 research instruments were used as follows:



1) A survey form was employed for collecting general information about children's books in Vientiane, Laos. 2) Unstructured interviews were employed to interview scholars, artists from government and private sectors—a director from the art school, the owners of publishing organisations, officers of non-profit organisations, and artists who created the illustrations for children's books, and stakeholders: readers and purchasers. 3) Focus groups with 5 to 10 participants were employed for gaining and evaluating insight of participants' attitude.

### **Data collection**

Data collection consisted of two main parts. The first is collecting data from documents from government sectors and educational institutes, books, textbooks, thesis and the internet. Another was a field trip for collecting data by using the survey form, unstructured interviews and a focus group.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analysed based on the objectives and conceptual framework of the research. As it was a qualitative research, the data from the field trip, unstructured interview and the focus group was analysed according to the data from the secondary source that was studied by the researcher.

### **Data analysis presentation**

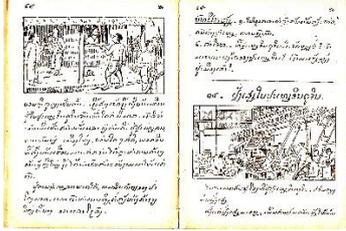
Descriptive analysis accompanied by the pictures or illustrations of children were employed to present the result of the study.

### **The result of the study**

#### **The development of illustration of children's books in Laos**

In term of the development of illustration of children's books in Laos, the study focused on 5 aspects: types of illustration, types of books, form of the illustration, the cover of the books and the lay out of the illustration.

Table 1 Types of illustration

Types of illustration	
Drawing illustration 1932 -1990	
Painting illustration 1991 - 2007	
Collage 1995, 2006, 2007, 2012	
Computer graphic illustration 20015 - Present	

Addressing types of illustration in children’s books, four types of illustration were found: drawing, painting, collage and computer graphic illustrations. As shown in the table 1, drawing illustration with black ink was popular in 1932 to 1990. Painting illustration was found in Laos since 1991; the majority of them were watercolor paintings and wood color paintings on paper. In 2007, computer illustrations created from the paint program were found in Laos, but they were not popular because the illustrations did not look lively. Computer graphic illustration was found in 2015. The majority of Laos’s artists were trained in how to create computer graphic illustration from non-profit organisations, but many artists learnt by themselves. The process of creating collaged illustrations was complicated; only 4 books were created by using collage illustration in Laos. They were published in 1995, 2006, 2007 and 2012.



Focusing on types of book, it was found that the most popular book for 7 to 9 year old children in Laos was a picture story book. In 1986 to 2006, Lao's local tale was the most popular content for picture story book. It should be noted that, after 2007, most of the contents of the books were new stories created by Lao writers as they would adopted new attitudes of Laos' children. Moreover, it was found that there were books for promoting other skills such as easy to read books, counting books and concept books. However, they were not as popular as picture story books because 7 to 9 years old children were too old to read them.

According to the style of illustration, three styles of illustration were found: realistic, analogical and surrealist forms. The combination of two styles of illustrations was found since 1990. This combination style was based on the content of the story.

According to the cover of the books, the most popular style of the cover was a single cover showing the pictures of the main characters without the scenery of the story. On the other hand, some chose the pictures in the books on the cover. It can be stated that, the illustrations in the book were created with complicated styles, especially ones that were created with a collage style.

Focusing on the arrangement of illustration, single-page illustration and double-page spread were found in Laos since 1986. Two arrangement styles can be found based on the content of the books. Single-page illustrations were found in the majority of the books of commercial publishers as this lowered the cost of the books.

### **The development of publishers in Laos**

Focusing on the development of publishers, 3 private publishers and 2 non-profit organisations in Vientiane participated in this study: Mee Dee book publisher, Wai Dek publisher, Big Brother Mouse publisher, Room to Read Laos and Action with Laos Children (ALC). All of them were established in 2004 to 2009 which was the time that the 4<sup>th</sup> Education reform policy (2006 to 2015) was announced. Non-profit organisations published picture story books for library of primary schools in Laos. On the other hand, private publishers published books for trading to Non-profit organisations. In addition, some books were sold in convenience stores and morning markets in Vientiane.

According to the aim of the publishers, all of them had the same aim of producing children books. The aim was to provide opportunities for children to read books. Only Room to read Laos claimed that another aim of the organisation was to increase literacy rates of Lao children by using picture story books as a tool to promote reading and life skills for the children. In addition, Big Brother Mouse aimed to increase knowledge and life quality for Lao's children. Action with Lao Children claimed that its aim was to provide opportunities for children to access to children books. On the other hand, the main aim of Mee Dee Book and Wai Dek publishers was to promote their business. Three out of five organisations,

Action with Lao Children, Room to Read Laos and Big Brother Mouse, were transnational non-profit organisations whereas the other two were Lao private publishers. Four of them, established in 2004 to 2009; however the Association for Sending Picture Book to Lao Children was found in 1982. In 2005, the organisation changed its name to Action with Lao Children. It should be noted that, the organisations were found at the same time that Lao announced reforms to the 4<sup>th</sup> Education Policy in 2006 to 2015. According to the management of the organisation, there were staffs that got funding for non-profit organisations. On the other hand, private publishers bought books for their finance. Focusing on the artists, because of Lao people believed that creating illustrations was a hobby, none of organisations hired permanent artists. It was found that, all of them managed hiring the artists similarly. Only Action with Lao Children and Room to Read Laos promoted their artists to be more professional by training them to have more knowledge. Room to Read advertised the training news through social media while Action with Lao Children advertised the training news through primary school's teacher networks. Thus, the ones who joined the training with Action with Lao Children were Lao teachers who worked in primary school where the organisations built for the library. On the other hand, the ones who were trained with Room to Read were new generations who trended to interest in creating illustrations for children books themselves. Big Brother Mouse spread the news about training by word of mouth while Mee Dee Books not only hired professional artists from Thailand to create illustrations but they also paid for the copy right of international children books in order to trade in Laos. As Wai Dek was a small publisher therefore the owner asked his relatives and acquaintances to create illustrations for his books. Focusing on the payment, different organisations paid for creating illustrations differently. The artists who worked for Action with Lao Children, Room to Read Laos and Mee Dee Books were given a lump sum of about 10,000 to 15,000 USDs for one book. If there were any reprinted books, the organisations would repay them with the same rate of the first time (This payment rate based on the rate for creating illustrations in 2019). Big Brother Mouse and Wai Dek publishers paid based on the number of pages the artists' created; it was about 5 USDs per page. (This payment rate is based on paid illustrations in 2019)

### **The situation of illustration of children's books**

In term of the situation of illustration of children's books, two main topics were taken into consideration: the content or the detail of the story and the composition or the unity, harmony, contrast, proportion, rhythm and emphasis of the picture books. Focusing on the content of the book, it was found that the picture storybooks were combined with easy to read books. All the content was provided by Lao' Ministry of Press. Content that was not allowed to be published was shown to be against government, law and culture. Also, the government did not allow the publishing of credulous or pornographic content.

Focusing on types of illustration, the most popular type was painting illustration. Non-profit organisations had plans of creating illustration for children’s books in terms of form, colour, page layout and content. On the other hand, private publishers focused more on the content of the books. They employed Thai freelance and amateur artists to create illustrations for their books. Moreover, they bought copyright to publish and sell Chinese and Thai books in Laos. It was found that, computer graphic illustrations were used from 2017.

### Factors affecting artists’ creativity in creating illustration of children book in Laos

Focusing on internal and external factors affecting artists’ creativity in creating illustrations; it was found that there were 5 internal factors. 1) Artists’ impression—all artists from 3 publishers and 2 organisations were impressed by the illustrations in the books they read when they were young. As a result, the illustrations became their inspiration in creating their own illustrations. 2) Artists’ education—artists from Action with Laos Children (ALC) and Room to Read Laos graduated from Laos Fine Art Institute where they gained their knowledge and skills of art. They created their illustrations based on their knowledge and creativity especially when they created pictures for surrealistic stories such as pictures of devils, monsters and places in their imagination. 3) Artists’ aptitude—the artists had different aptitude in creating different styles of illustration such as realistic, analogical and surrealistic forms. In addition, they also had aptitude in using their own style of color application and ability to use computer programs to create illustrations. 4) Artists’ ability to extend their own skills from others artists’ illustration—the artists from non-profit organisations had their own trends when creating their illustrations, whereas the amateur artists created their illustrations by using other artists’ illustrations as their inspiration. For example, Chumreon Thihumpan created his own illustrations for “The Tale of Peter Rabbit” by using the concept of Beatrix Potter, who created illustration of “Peter Rabbit” as his model. Chumreon had a chance to study the illustrations of Beatrix Potter because Saza Alison, one of the American partners of Big Brother Mouse publisher brought him the book. This confirmed the statement of Franz Boas (Kunnasoot, 2009) in cultural diffusion theory that factors affecting cultural diffusion happened because migrants aimed to exchange their strategies, behavior and knowledge.



The illustrations of “The Tale of Peter Rabbit” by Big Brother Mouse Publisher

According to external factors affecting artists' creativity in creating illustration of children's books in Laos; it was found that, there were 4 external factors in this study. The first factor was the experience of the artists in working with the experts who created illustrations for children's books. The artists who worked with non-profit organisations had opportunities to work and to be trained with the experts. They, thus, had more creativity to create illustrations for children's books than the freelance artists who worked for private publishers. The second factor was customer needs. It was found that, the customers' need did not affect the creativity of the artists as the organisations had already known the styles of the artists. The third factor was trends to create the illustration. It can be found that, trends of creating the illustration affected the form of illustration. For example, in the past, the artists created illustrations by drawing whereas nowadays they create their illustrations by using computer programs. This is because the artists can create illustrations more quickly, use more colours and make the images more beautiful. Moreover, the artists can work with page layout at the same time they create the illustrations, thus the publishers did not need to create it again. According to the opinion of the artists, it was found that, they changed the technique of presenting their picture story books to an international style. This phenomenon can be explained based on modernisation theory that states, it was the process of Growth-only Development Approach. A modernisation process was one way gradual change occurred in the center of the development which was in the central area of the country. The direction in developing, then, was set by the government and private sectors based on a capitalist system. It can be seen that, Lao artists used computers to create their illustrations for children's books. Sirasoonthorn (2004) claimed that modernisation had changed simple lives in traditional society to a lifestyle based on science entrepreneurs. As can be seen, in the past, there was only the national printing press, however nowadays there are many publishers in Vientiane, Laos. The last factor was training from the organisation. Only the artists who worked with non-profit organisations were informed about training in creating illustration. Therefore, only the artists of non-profit organisations were trained in creating illustrations.

### **Conclusion of research results**

Focusing on the development of illustrations in children's books, in terms of the types of illustration, drawing illustrations was found in Lao primers in 1932 to 1990 and painting illustration was found in 1991. Computer graphic illustration was found in Laos since 2015 which was the time that Laos started a free trade policy. Addressing the styles of illustrations, it was found that, from 1932 to 1986, realistic illustration was the most popular style of illustrations in Laos. From 1990, all three styles of illustrations: realistic, analogical and surrealist styles were found based on the types and the content of the books. In 1986 to 2006, picture story books were the most popular type of books in Laos. The most popular content was Lao's local tales that were familiar with Lao's people. Surreal illustrations were

found when the content of the tales was about the miracle and doing good deeds. From 2005 to present, the content of picture story books was written by Lao writers.



Drawing illustrations in Lao Primers, 1932

Focusing on the condition of illustrations of children books in Laos, it was found that, from 2008 to 2018, picture storybooks were combined with easy to read books. All the content was provided by Laos' Ministry of Press. Focusing on the form of illustration, in 2008 to 2016 the most popular type was painting illustration. Computer graphic illustrations were found since 2015 because non-profit organisations trained Lao artists to create them. In terms of the form of illustration, it was found that non-profit organisations were concerned more about the composition of the books. They had well-plans to publish books for children in terms of composition and content. In addition, they cooperated with foreign lecturers who were experts to produce picture books for children. They also controlled quality standards of their books. Private publishers focused more on content of the books for the reason that they wanted to follow the print media law. They employed freelance and amateur artists from Thailand to create illustrations for their books. Furthermore, most of the owners of private publishers were the ones who worked with the content of children's books. For example, Punnalee Teppawongsa used to be a kindergarten teacher and Mana Jeangmuk was a writer. Thus, both of them were more concerned with the content of the story than the illustrations. In addition, they hired freelance artists who did not study how to create illustrations to work for them. They controlled the quality of their books based only on the owners of the publishers who were not the expert of creating illustrations.

Focusing on internal and external factors affecting illustration creativity of the artists, it was found that the first internal factors was the impression of illustration the artists saw when they



were young affected their creativity in creating their own illustrations. The second factor was the education of the artists. The third factor was the aptitude of the artists. The last one was the expansion of their knowledge from other artists. When we turn to the external factors, it was found that, the first factor was the experience to work with the experts of the artists. The second one was the need of the customers. The third was the trends of the books. The last factor was the training from their organisation.

## Discussion

Focusing on the development and the situation of illustrations of children's books in Laos, it was found that, graphic illustrations were first found in 2015. At that time, Laos's government implemented New Economic Mechanism (NEM) policy. The government department concerned with representing a country in foreign countries worldwide. This led the exchange in term of technology, culture and knowledge information from other countries. According to the study of Wisarutmontri (2008), it was confirmed that the development of magazine businesses made progress in printing and designing technology. Therefore, there were up to date and various types of illustrations in magazines. Similarly, Simahasan (2009), claimed that the factors affecting the creativity of culture was the change of people's need, therefore people invent new innovations and techniques in order to meet their need including the strategies in creating illustration. Illustration types were changed based on the types of picture books. Two types of illustrations were found according to the content of the book. It was found that picture story book was the most popular book in Laos. Garnpojana, (1981) also reported that forms and types of illustrations in Thai children's books were changed based on the content of the books; the illustrations had to suit the content of different books.

According to the situation of illustrations of children book in Laos, it was found that, the main factor was the policy of the government. As the print media law control the content of the book, the illustration, then, was controlled based on the content of the book. Wisarutmontri (2008) also found that the key factor of the development of illustration in Thailand was government policy about statist. Thus, the trend of illustration was the mixture between Thai and Western culture. Boontawong (2013) studied on the title of the Development of Newspapers in Vientiane, Laos in 1975 to 2010. It was found that, Lao government controlled communication system as it was the part of politic. This phenomenal in Laos can be described by the communication theory. There were three groups of sender namely Lao government, children book publishers and artists who created illustration. Two out of three sender groups communicated with receivers through the content of the story whereas the last group communicated through forms. In case of picture book, a message was an illustration in a book. Two channels for communication were found; the first one was studying in education system and another one was trading book in markets. The children, then, were receivers.



According to the types of illustration, it was found that, painting illustration was found in 2008 to 2016. Computer graphic illustration had found since 2015 because non-profit organizations trained the artists to create it. Sirasoonthorn (2004) pointed out that, the change of simple lives in traditional society to lifestyle that lived based on sciences knowledge and high technology can be explained based on the Cultural Diffusion Theory. Diffusion refers to the dissemination of method, behavior and knowledge; this can be claimed as a direct diffusion of culture.

Focusing on the content of children book in Laos, it was found that Lao people were not aware of the human right as other countries. According to the Compulsory Education in United Kingdom, the government allowed delivering the topic of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) with primary schools students through picture books. They planned to employ the book as teaching material in 2020 (Thai BBC, 2019). In addition, not only in United Kingdom but also in China, the content about Sex Education and LGBT was also found in picture books for primary students. They planned to employ the books as teaching material in 2020 (Voice online 2017). Harper & Row (1963) stated that the sensitive issues in children's books were present since 1960. There were sexual violence, death, sorrow and violation to human rights. Nowadays, these issues are in picture books for primary students in many countries. For example, in the United Kingdom, you can find issues in the book "And Tango Makes Three"— the book for kindergarten students. It is the book about the two male penguins living together and hatching the egg of another female penguin and feeding the baby penguin as their child. In China the issues stated above can be seen in books for grade two, however in Laos these issues were taboo subjects.

According to the development of the publishers who publish children books, the survey indicated that it was not traditional commerce that the producers sold their products directly to their consumers. Private publishers publish books and sent them to transnational non-profit organisations. Then the organizations selected the books and sent them to primary schools and their libraries. The books that were not selected would be sold in retail stores in Vientiane. There were four basic elements of the communication theory: sender, message, channel and receiver. According to the case of illustrations in Lao children books, the senders were non-profit organisations and publishers. The message referred to children books and the channel were libraries, schools and retail shops. The last element was receivers which referred to Lao children. It should be noted that, the content and the process of publishing children book would be provided by the Ministry of Press. From the information stated above, it can be claimed that, Lao's government was the most important sender.

Focusing on the artists who created the illustrations in Laos, it was found that the policy of transnational non-profit organization trained and supported Lao people to be artists. They advertise their training courses through social media and primary teacher network.



Addressing to the technic they employ in advertise their training news through social media, Sirasoonthon (2004) pointed out about this phenomenon that, the change of life style to live based on technology and science knowledge was a part of culture diffusion. When we turn to Mee Dee Books publisher, not only hiring Thai professional artists to create illustrations, it also bought copyright of books from foreign countries in order to publish and sell in Laos. Moreover, it was found that computer graphic illustrations were found in books that were published by Mee Dee Books publisher. This phenomenon can be described based on the Cultural Diffusion Theory of Boaz (Kunnasoot, 2009) that, the exchange of methods, new behavior and knowledge were the directly spread of the culture. Direct diffusion occurs when people of two cultures were in a relationship such as work together, intermarriage and trade. Moreover, it was found that Mrs. Pankum Inthawong, the owner of Mee Dee books got married with Thai, Mr. Mana Jangmuk. Thus, the culture diffusion as creating computer graphic illustrations can be found in their books. In addition, most the content of their books that were sold in Laos were written by Mr. Mana as well.

Focusing on the factors affecting the creativity of the Lao' artists, it was found that first of internal factor was the impression of the artist of the illustrations they saw when they were young. Tognoli (1994) also pointed out that the illustration of places as well as the work places that were found in children book impressed the children who read them. It did not only affect children's development but also inspire the children about their work in the future. Moreover, it promoted children to be proud of themselves. The second factor was the education of the artists. Garnpojana (1981) claimed that the 47.50 percent of artists who graduated from Poh-Chang Academy of Arts or Rajamangala University of Technology Rattanakosin had their own aptitude in creating illustrations in Thai children books. The third factor was the aptitude of the artists. Sinlapametakul (2005), conducted his study about the factors affecting the art creation of the artists, confirmed that artists' creativity was from their knowledge and experiences accompany with natural and art materials and presented based on the artists' intelligence, creativity and imagination. Therefore, their works would be beautiful, wonderful and amazing based on the components of aesthetic. The last one was the expansion of their knowledge from other artists. Focusing on the external factors, it was found that the first factor was the experience to work with the experts of the artists. The second one was the need of the customers. The third was the trends of the books. Simahasan (2009) pointed out that; the key role factor affecting cultural creativity was the large amount of the change of human being's needs. People, then, try to meet their need with new innovations, new strategies and new technics.



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