



Hans Christian
Andersen Award

2026

Cai Gao

Illustrator Nominee
(China)



Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. Biography of Cai Gao	5
2. Statement of Contribution to Children's literature	12
3. Interview with Cai Gao	33
4. Most Significant Titles	46
1) <i>The Land of the Peach Blossom</i>	47
2) <i>Baoer</i>	52
3) <i>Blazing City 1938</i>	56
4) <i>How I Came to be Me</i>	62
5) <i>What Would it be Like Without...?</i>	66
5. Ten Most Important Titles	71
6. Bibliography	90
7. List of Awards and Other Distinctions	96
8. Exhibitions, Lectures, Fairs, etc.	104
9. Foreign Language Editions	114

Introduction

The Hans Christian Andersen Nominating Committee of the CBBY is honoured to introduce Cai Gao as a candidate for the 2026 Hans Christian Andersen Award.

Cai Gao places the significance of childhood at the core of her philosophy, namely, ‘returning to innocence’, and ‘maintaining an inclusive and open attitude to various possibilities’. This is both a way of life and a creative pursuit for her. Her picture books draw upon classical Chinese culture in a form that is accessible to young readers. At the same time there are timeless philosophical ideas beneath the surface that can be appreciated by adults as well.

On the New Year’s Eve 2024, in one of the most watched national television programs, Cai Gao could be seen with a group of primary school children from the countryside at the top of Mount Heng reading their poetry. To Cai Gao, this event was a celebration of children's creativity to welcome the New Year. It testifies to the cultural importance of the ‘Picture Book Grandma’ whose books are loved by children all over the country.

Cai Gao is a pioneer of the children’s picture book, in China. In 1994 she received the BIB Golden Apple Award for her book *Baoer (AKA The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden)*, becoming the first Chinese artist to obtain this prestigious accolade. In the book, Cai Gao uses innovative techniques that transcend the folk story’s origins. She places a child at the centre of the narrative with his feelings of courage, loyalty and quick-wittedness as he confronts danger. Cai Gao captures both traditional and modern approaches, she manages to create works that are both culturally specific and completely universal; books that look to tradition and are modern at the same time.

She has been honoured with the Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award on three separate occasions. In 2013, *Hua Mulan* was awarded the Chen Bochui Excellent Picture Book Award. In 2022, Cai

Gao was presented with the Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award, Special Contribution Award. In 2023, *Blazing City 1938* received the Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award, Excellent Picture Book Award. In 2024, she was shortlisted for the Hans Christian Andersen Award. From the recognition of Cai Gao's *The Beautiful Garden* in 1980 to her recent shortlisting for the Hans Christian Andersen Award, Cai Gao's name has been inextricably linked with the transformation in children's literature that has taken place in China.

Cai Gao's work reflects her philosophy of life. Books such as *The Land of the Peach Blossom* are about the positivity of lived experience when looked at in the right way. *The Land of the Peach Blossom* is an ideal, but it is also our own world seen in a different light. The people that inhabit this mythical land are ordinary people like us, who live like us. Many of the things that Cai Gao experienced of village life, as a school teacher in the early 1970s, appear in the picture book. The paths, tea houses, rice planting, and elders depicted in those pictures represent the beauty of ordinary life. The story is derived from the ancient text by Tao Yuanming, featuring very elegant images that present the idyllic life yearned for by traditional Chinese scholars.

Many of Cai Gao's picture books are based on traditional literary classics, reflecting the beauty of rural life as it was lived in China for thousands of years. This connection between our roots in the past and an embracing of the future is a theme that runs through Cai Gao's work. The past in its everyday experience is depicted through her brush where it becomes the new form of the Chinese children's picture book. Cai Gao aims to impart the classics of traditional Chinese culture in her picture books, making traditional culture a feature of childhood, enabling children to discover new ideas through looking again at the past. These experiences can be applied to all aspects of life and help nourish the spiritual life of children. Whether it is the story itself or the scenes in the pictures, they can inspire a child's imagination.

Cai Gao's work also possesses a rich diversity. In her 2023 reissue of *Blazing City 1938*, she tells the story of the Wenxi Fire in the second World War. The work uses a style similar to old black and white photos. They capture the essence of daily life in the early 20th century, provoking emotions and thoughts from the reader. In the context of modern escalating global conflict, it explores themes of war and peace for very young readers with depth.

After retirement, Cai Gao entered her most creative period. In addition to creating her most important picture books, she also created lots of new paintings and held a solo exhibition in Beijing, in 2008, which influenced many young artists and established her reputation as a fine artist. In her spare time she cultivated a garden on the roof of the apartment block where she has lived for over twenty years,

bringing the spirit of *The Land of the Peach Blossom* to the urban sprawl of modern Changsha. She said “Green softens the hard.” Her idea of changing the everyday world in a positive way is an example of her philosophy in action, the same ideals that inform her children’s picture books.

Cai Gao once stated that her primary intention in choosing to create picture books was to bestow the finest gifts upon childhood. Her belief in childhood and innocence underpins her visual-poetic universe. At the age of 78, Cai Gao continues to be innovative and productive with new works such as *How I came to Be Me*, and *What Would it Be Like Without...?*, published in 2024, which experiment with new artistic approaches. In the same year, *Let it Bloom*, a collection of her short essays was published. The title was used for the Bologna Illustrators Exhibition 57th, China Tour. In addition, her picture book *Baoer* has been adapted into a traveling puppet show by Xiao Cheng Bao Cultural Communication Co., Ltd, which won four international awards and received wide acclaim; a reflection of love and understanding from the public, 30 years after the book was first published.

The Chinese Board on Books for Young People (CBBY) is honoured to nominate Cai Gao for the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 2026. Her outstanding and sustained contributions to Chinese children's literature and international significance, make her a highly deserving candidate for this prestigious award.



Guo Feng

President of China Children's Press and Publication Association
Chairman of CBBY
Co-Chair HCA Nomination Committee



Biography of Cai Gao

1

Childhood

Born in 1946 in the provincial city of Changsha in south central China. Cai Gao's early experiences were steeped in the traditions of a pre-industrial China where traditional crafts still prevailed. Cai Gao's earliest memories were of a world filled with story-telling. She always emphasised the importance of good storytelling for childhood, something she learned from her grandmother Zuo Shurong.

Cai Gao grew up during the last days of an era when stories were passed on orally from generation to generation. Her work is full of the imagery of the everyday life of ordinary folk. This culture has been the bedrock of her ideas. Her family actively encouraged her creativity from an early age. They would make regular trips to the theatre and the young Cai Gao would paint the scenes from memory.

Cai Gao's life experience serves as her work's background colour. The love represented in her books is rooted in her happy childhood, and the transcendent spirit comes from her longing for light in troubled times. The beauty in her work is born with love and transcendence, and she always draws on her own life experiences. *Baoer (AKA The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden)* which won the 14th BIB Golden Apple Award in 1993, was an example. The young protagonist Baoer was suddenly under a strange and inexplicable pressure because his mother was threatened. Cai Gao had experienced a similar feeling when she was young. Her family was comparatively wealthy, so they became political outcasts. This put a lot of pressure on her as a child. Cai Gao recalled: "At that time, I chose to walk on small paths to school, because I didn't want to meet my acquaintances on the street, and I didn't want to see the contempt in their eyes. But when I look back on those days, I still had a lovely family and great teachers. The friendship between my parents and their friends was really precious."

School Years and Life in the countryside

Cai Gao was sent to Qunli Middle School. It was here that she discovered Chinese and Western classical literature and was inspired by many wonderful teachers. She devoured literature and took to writing down many of the books because they were so scarce at that time. Meanwhile she enjoyed painting posters for the school and would do illustrations for the school magazine.

Unable to go to university, Cai Gao began her artistic career painting political posters for the Zhouzhou County Cultural Centre. In 1969, Cai Gao was relocated to Taihu village. There she worked as a primary school teacher until 1975. Life was often hard, but Cai Gao discovered beauty even in the most difficult situations. Living in Taihu, she was able to connect with nature. Life consisted of working in the fields and building houses as well as teaching. The school was an ancient monastery situated in the middle of the village. Materials were scarce, but her husband Xiao Peicang, an artist in his own right, was able to make sketchbooks for her. She was also able to nurture her interests through collecting resources from newspapers and magazines and creating her own art scrap-book. Cai Gao often used to refer to herself as a “Sunday artist” picking up her brush when she had some spare time outside of work commitments.

Career as an editor

She moved to Lukou in 1975 where she worked as an art teacher and regularly contributed illustrations to children’s magazines such as *Red Scarf*. Her submissions were accepted and received significant recognition. Her first picture book *The Beautiful Garden* was published that year and won the first prize for art in the Hunan Children's books competition.

In 1982, at the age of 36, she landed a role as an editor for children’s books with Hunan Juvenile and Children’s Publishing House. During this period Cai Gao started editing picture books extensively, as well as illustrating. Books edited by Cai Gao began to win awards on a regular basis. Back in 1990s picture books were rare and relatively few people understood their value. They had yet to receive acceptance among the wider public. Some of her books took time to be appreciated. For example, *The Wanderings of Beibei the Kitten* by Zhou Xiang and *The Festival of the Bull King* by Chen Xunru were not initially understood because of their experimental style, but through her persistence were eventually published and won awards. 30 years later, a new edition of *The Festival of the Bull King* won the BIB Golden Apple Award in 2024¹.

From the early 1990s, Cai Gao began to cooperate with overseas publishers such as Fukuinkan Shoten of Japan, which published *Violet Nursery School* (1992). A breakthrough happened in 1993 when her book *Baoer* (AKA *The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden published by Zhejiang Juvenile & Children's Publishing House*) won the Golden Apple Award at the 14th Biennial of Illustration Bratislava (BIB). It was in 1995, under the auspices of the Chinese Board on Books for Young People (CBBY), that five books that she had edited were awarded the Little Pine Tree Award. The award brought her to the attention of the famous Japanese publisher Tadashi Matsui.² Tadashi Matsui was invited to give lectures to the editors in Changsha. Cai Gao began work with Tadashi Matsui. Cai Gao invited her best friend, Ms. Ji Ying, to translate Matsui Tadashi's most important theoretical book: *My Picture Book Theory*. The simplified Chinese version of this book was published in 1997. It is the first book to be published in China that put forward a theory of picture book creation, and played an important role in the development of contemporary picture book art in modern Chinese society. Later it was republished by many other publishing houses.

In 1997 Cai Gao illustrated for *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio* which was published by Wanami Shoten of Japan. In 1998 *The Flower Fairies* was published by Fukuinkan Shoten. Cai Gao participated in an original children's picture book artists' exhibition, and Fukuinkan Shoten held a forum on her work. The exhibition was held at Chihiro Art Museum and at Azumino Art Museum, both in Tokyo. In 2000 Cai Gao was invited to be on the jury of the 34th Illustrators Exhibition, held during Bologna Children's Book Fair in Italy.

1.The Festival of the Bull King, after being re-published in 2022, won the BIB Golden Apple Award in 2023. After winning the award, Chen Xunru wrote: "Cai Gao is the most respected mentor for us picture book authors in Hunan. Decades ago, shortly after I was transferred to the publishing house, we worked in the same building. We all loved Cai Gao's paintings very much. At that time, Cai Gao invited me to draw The Festival of the Bull King. I knew little about the culture of ethnic minorities at that time, but relying on my experience of going to the countryside many times, I tried to imagine those scenes. Cai Gao constantly encouraged me, helped me find materials, and gradually deepened my understanding of the subject. With her support, I finally completed the book. She has always been a good teacher and friend."

2.Tadashi Matsui is the former president of Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers. Inc and the former President of Japanese Board on Books for Young People (JBBY). He was on the jury of the Biennial of Illustration Bratislava, 1969, 1979 and 1995 (BIB), and is the author and editor of many award winning picture books.

Life after retirement

After retirement in 2000 Cai Gao entered her most creative period. Books from this period include such works as - *The Land of Peach Blossom*, *Beautiful Chinese Folk Tales*, *Meng Jianv*, *Hua Mulan*, *Blazing City 1938*, *Three Monks*, *What Can You See in the Moon*, *Where the Moon goes*, *I go*, *How I Came to Be Me*.

In 2001, the picture book *The Land of the Peach Blossom* was published by Fukuinkan Shoten in Japan. The first 5000 copies were sold out in a month and were reprinted immediately. At the beginning of August 2003, the story and two of the paintings were selected as illustrations in Japanese sixth grade Chinese textbooks, which was the first time that Chinese painter's illustrations entered Japanese textbooks.

Cai Gao has been active on the international stage, she engaged in a number of international projects as an author. In 2004 Japan, China and South Korea embarked on a cooperative project aimed at promoting educational and cultural communication, the “Japan-China-South Korea Fairy Tales Exchange Project.” Cai Gao illustrated the Chinese stories. This was later published in China as *Beautiful Chinese Folk Tales*. In 2007 Cai Gao participated in an endeavour initiated by a group of artist that became known as the ‘Pray for Peace Project’. They held their first meeting in Nanjing that year. Cai Gao’s *Blazing City 1938* was published as part of this endeavour in 2013. Ten years later, at the 35th Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award ceremony held in Shanghai, it won the ‘Best Picture Book Award’.

In 2008 Cai Gao held her first solo show in Beijing. The Beijing News reported on the event with the headline *Cai Gao Leads the Way for Original Chinese Picture Books*, where as the Beijing Youth Daily reported on it under the title Cai Gao’s World Blooms. At The Central Academy of Fine Art³, she shared her artistic experience and beliefs to a packed hall. Cai Gao is a passionate promoter of picture books. Since 2008, Cai Gao has given many speeches every year on children’s reading, for parents, teachers and children.

Because of her commitment to children’s picture books, Cai Gao turned down the opportunity to work as a fine artist on a number of occasions. Now she has the freedom to explore this aspect of her talent. In 2016 she held two exhibitions, *Ah, the Season of Sowing* at the Moon Centre for Contemporary Art, the

3. Regarded as one of the most prestigious Art Academies in China, established in 1918.

other *What Can You See in the Moon: the art of Cai Gao*, was held at Changsha Museum which showed only part of her oeuvre. Her artwork received wide acclaim.

She is affectionately known as the “Picture Book Grandma.” Over the past quarter of a century Cai Gao’s reputation has increased in China. In recent years Cai Gao has become something of a media personality. In 2019 she gave a talk on Yixi.TV Shanghai called *Life: an affirmation*, in which she shared her life experience. She has a video on the social media app RedNote which has been viewed more than 200,00000 times.

As Cai Gao approaches her 80s she is still active as an artist. Her recent books *Each Seedling Has its own Rainfall*, Published 2018 and *Let it Bloom!* Published in 2023, are selections of short essay from her diaries. These books show her highly individual perspective on life and nature. The latter has received 10 literature awards within a year of publication. In 2024 her two most recent book *How I Came to be Me, and What Would it be Like Without...?* Were published, and she has a number of books forthcoming, such as *Taihu*, *Roots* and a number of picture books including *I Found You!* and *The Little Ant’s Journey*.

Cai Gao once jokingly called herself a "borrower of light". When she was little, she “borrowed light” from childhood, and when she was young she borrowed light from literature, art and later from children’s picture books. Now the light she has borrowed all her life is illuminating others. As she said,

“Everything that receives sunlight will shine. If we walk in the light we will become part of it.”







2

Statement of Contribution to Children's literature

On Cai Gao

Martin Salisbury

*Professor of Illustration
Director, The Centre for Children's Book Studies
Cambridge School of Art / UK*



The exquisite visual storytelling of Cai Gao, initially forged during the years of the Cultural Revolution, when she found herself exiled and working as a schoolteacher at a remote primary school deep in the Chinese countryside, transcends numerous boundaries and builds links between many cultures that so often seem mutually exclusive. It was against this backdrop of rural isolation from the late 1960s to the early 1980s that she immersed herself in her painting, inspired by a deep affection for the landscape and the natural world. After the Cultural Revolution she took a post as Chief Editor at Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, winning the award for the nation's most outstanding young editor in 1996 and, combining her editorial role with the ongoing creation of her own picturebooks, going on to be named as China's most outstanding illustrator for children in 2000.

The bridges that Cai Gao has somehow built through her art include those between traditionalism and modernism, Eastern and Western visual culture, and between the Fine and applied arts, the latter often regarded, especially in the West, as among the most difficult cultures to reconcile. In a country where the unique artform of the children's picturebook has only recently fully emerged and begun to be recognised, Cai Gao has, over many decades, brought a rare combination of technical skill and aesthetic vision to her graphic storytelling, employing her exceptional draughtsmanship, painting skills and sumptuous use of colour in the service of the modern picturebook idiom. Though she may rightly be seen in many respects as a pioneer, the key qualities that underpin all of her work are deeply personal, and yet universal - a love

of nature and a very human, empathy and vision that perhaps explains the burgeoning cross-cultural reach of her output.

I first became aware of Cai Gao's work in the early years of the 21st Century, when Chinese students began to find their way to the MA Children's Book Illustration course that I founded at Cambridge School of Art in 2000. I was moved to include examples and introduce them to an international audience in my books, *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling* (2012, with Morag Styles, Laurence King Publishing) and *100 Great Children's Picturebooks* (2015). In the latter book, I wrote the following short text to accompany the selection of *Baoer* ('*The boy who outfoxed the fox*' - text by Xin Yi) as one of the chosen influential picturebooks:

Cai Gao was born in 1946 in Changsha, in central southern China. In 1993, her *Baoer* won the Golden Apple Award at the Biennial of Illustrations at Bratislava. Her books have been published in Japan and South Korea and in 2008 a major retrospective of her work was exhibited in Beihang University in Beijing, along with a published book of her collected works

In 2018, Cai Gao's body of work was especially celebrated at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, in the year that China was the official Guest Country. This body of work stretches back to the 1980s. On emerging from exile, she took on the role of Chief Children's Editor at Hunan Publishing House. After a few years, she began to combine this role with the creation of her own picturebooks.

Of the new wave of Chinese artists who work in the field of picturebooks, Cai Gao stands out for her mature fusion of rich Chinese folk art and elements of Western painting. *Baoer* tells the story of a boy who awakes one night to find his mother in a state of madness. He goes on a quest to root out the source of the evil fox spirits that have brought about her condition. This is explored through painterly artwork of rare depth. The artist combines pattern and space with unusual mastery and an exceptional, vibrant use of complementary colours – in particular, reds and greens - set against black.

As the picturebook emerges in China as an art form, rather than a purely didactic medium, the magnificent artwork of Cai Gao will provide a solid foundation.

Over the years, Cai Gao's contribution to the field of children's literature and the graphic arts has grown and widened. As well as her outstanding body of graphic work, she has contributed to the field through her work as a jury member at the Bologna Children's Book Fair as well as other panels in China and abroad. But it is perhaps *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, in collaboration with Japanese writer, Matsui

Tadashi that has done most, among so many important books, to cement her status as one of world's great masters of the picturebook form, and communicated so much about Chinese aesthetics and rural life to the wider world. Although her stylistic approach is deeply sophisticated, the warmth and affection with which her observations of daily life are imbued make this and other picturebooks accessible to all ages. Over the years, this stylistic approach has evolved, embracing a more graphic, often schematic approach to the arrangement of pictorial elements, retaining a deep respect for Chinese graphic traditions whilst seeming to be simultaneously entirely modern and accessible.

The keen eye for visual anecdotal detail can be seen to be constantly nourished by Cai Gao's devotion to her daily sketchbook/ journal, which she uses religiously to record in words and pictures her everyday experiences and observations. A selection of pages from these will be published in the UK and USA (as well as various other expected international co-editions) in 2023 by the publishers, Thames & Hudson in my forthcoming book, *Illustrators' Sketchbooks*, along with some of her thoughts on what these journals mean to her. They reveal a passion for the everyday, a fear that the little details may escape if they are not observed and recorded, as this passage shows:

"Plants grow every day and so do children. It would be a shame if I didn't pay attention to them. I discover many interesting things that I can't afford to forget. So I draw them, quickly. I enjoy collecting interesting things and ideas in everyday life, but how can I preserve them? A camera can't do it well, nor a computer. Only sketchbooks, they are like storage bins, or cabinets for keeping things fresh, keeping my collection safe and alive."

The integrity and stature of Cai Gao's work over the last four decades and places her among the giants of the picturebook world. These qualities justify the claim that she is truly the grandmother of the Chinese picturebook.

Statement of Contribution

Dr Laurence McKnight



Cai Gao's conviction that tradition is like a spring from which we can draw the positive things for growth and development, is like her view of childhood as the source of our most treasured values. Childhood is the most important period of your life, early experiences are like a source we can draw on for the rest of our lives.

Becoming a Child

Cai gao said: “What is the best way for parents to connect emotionally and spiritually with their children? What is the child's first bridge to the outside world? The picture book is my response to this kind of need, in the contemporary cultural desert. It is like a fresh spring.”

Cai Gao places the importance of childhood at the centre of her philosophy, a time of curiosity where, the imagination should be allowed to be free. What she understands by innocence is not naivety but an openness to possibility that we tend to lose as we get older and develop ‘common sense’. Common sense is not to be understood as a form of truth, but rather as a closed mindedness that believes that everything is ‘obvious’. In her work it is curiosity that leads the fisherman on in *The Land of the Peach Blossom*. She talks about ‘becoming a child’ as both a perspective on life and a creative endeavour.

Liu Xingbao¹ said: “It is precisely because Cai Gao still takes ‘becoming a child’ seriously as her creative ideal that she can stand unwaveringly at the same level as children.”

1.Executive Director of Hunan Juveniles and Children's Publishing House.

Innovation as Artist and Storyteller

For Cai Gao a story should be both a source of enjoyment and enlightenment. Her versions of traditional stories take them to be a source to be re-worked. Cai Gao's stories are often drawn from folk culture and contain insights in a form that connects with modern children. By re-working ancient literary classics and folk stories, Cai Gao hopes that children can glimpse their own culture and be enlightened by it. Works such as *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, *Baoer*, *Hua Mulan*, *Meng Jiangnv* and *The Dragon Robe Festival*, are all based on Chinese classical literature. According to Wang Lin²: "Her significant contribution lies in her classic interpretation of ancient Chinese literary works using traditional Chinese artistic techniques. The most profound impression her works leave on me is an indescribable warmth and emotional resonance that deeply touches the heart."

Her style, although recognisably Chinese, appeals to children from any culture with its vivid imagery and bold colours. It contains elements of both Western and traditional Chinese art. By connecting modern art with older traditions, Cai Gao creates art with a distinctive cultural identity. She is inspired by many strands from China's cultural heritage. From literati art, to folk art, for example paper-cutting, embroidery, shadow puppets and mural painting. In her hands, these apparently distinct traditions express her ideas in a way that forms a unified whole. She does not simply borrow visual motifs from the past, but adapts her style according to her subjects matter. Hence *Baoer* leans more towards folk traditions while *The Land of the Peach Blossom* adopts a style closer to the literati art³ Yet neither can be said to be folk art or high art, but a synthesis of styles that is a natural expression of her ideas and themes. According to Rotoh Tsuda⁴: "Cai Gao's painting does not interpret the tradition in any superficial way. She inherited it and transformed it. This is more than a style, it is the expression of a living tradition. She is not bound by any received wisdom about how picture books should be"

Her style is modern and innovative, with an impressionistic influence in the use of colour instead of the more usual black and white Chinese brush paintings. Cai Gao's uses a view that frames multiple events and perspectives to allow the reader to make associations between characters and objects, rather than a single perspective. Her work uses flat surfaces and apparently simple lines to create images that are striking, bold and harmonious. For example, black is used to convey mystery, death and danger. Colours

2.Editor-in-Chief, China Education Press.

3.Literati art refers to an aristocratic style of landscape brush painting.

4.Japanese picture book artist.

such as red, symbolise passion, life and love. Blue symbolises clarity, and truth. According to Matsumoto Takeshi⁵: “Cai Gao’s illustrations have a strong inner rhythm. If Mr Yu Dawu⁶ is a traditional practitioner, then Cai Gao’s painting gives that tradition a contemporary sensibility.”



Themes: Transcendence through Love and Beauty

Light and transcendence are common motifs that runs through Cai Gao’s books. These themes are explored in her works where characters find themselves in a new and difficult situation and go on a journey of enlightenment. Her stories have themes of home life, transcendence and return, love of family and love of wisdom. There is an opposition between fate and transformation, but one where the central character has a relationship to the home as a source of strength. Through fate, characters find themselves in situations that they cannot change and that force them to go outside of normal limits.

Baoer is from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling⁷. Pu Songling’s folk tales were not specifically for children. In 1996 Cai Gao was commissioned by Zhejiang Children’s Publishing House to produce a picture book from a series of traditional stories. At the time, this project was quite experimental. Cai Gao chose the only story that had a child as the main character and transformed it, making the central theme about a boy’s love for his mother and his courage in the face of evil and darkness.

Children all over the world love ghost stories and can identify with the hero’s struggle and with his fears, as he tries to outwit the foxes. *Baoer* uses the lamp to find his way through the darkness. Cai Gao uses black to suggest the oppressive atmosphere, with light representing understanding and truth. The famous Japanese picture book artist Wakyama Shizuko noted: “The little boy’s eyes are mostly black, but when he fixes his eyes on something, they become clear blue like the lake.” Suggesting determination and insight. In those moments when *Baoer* is active in his plan to defeat the foxes, he sees further and has greater understanding than the adults. Cai Gao said: “I paint this way because children retain the awe and respect for the mysterious. Children’s eyes are very clear, and they can often see the essence of things.”

5. Japanese art critic, Director of the Nagano Prefecture Shinano Art Museum, advisor of Chihiro Museum of Art.

6. Chinese picture book artist.

7. Pu Songling (Chinese: 蒲松齡, 5 June 1640 – 25 February 1715) was a Chinese writer during the Qing dynasty, best known as the author of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*)

The final image uses traditional folk imagery that is used as a talisman to protect the home. In Cai Gao's version, the guardian of the home, is Baoer himself. Baoer is able to transcend his age and save his home and his mother through courage and wisdom.

In *Baoer*, Cai Gao uses a decentred perspective, but with an innovative colour scheme, dominated by the contrast between black and red. Cai Gao, here draws on the traditions of folk painting which eschews detail in favour of blocks of colour that give the paintings a deliberately primitive atmosphere. The use of vivid colours give the images a warmth and passion in keeping with the folk story tradition and with the raw emotions at the centre of the story. The mood is one of finding the light in the surrounding darkness. The book evokes a feeling of oppression and heaviness through black.

By contrast, *The Land of the Peach Blossom* is about an ideal and so the approach is completely different. Here the emphasis is on openness, beauty and light. So the book gives us a feeling of lightness. *The Land of the Peach Blossom* is based on the classic poem by Tao Yuanming⁸ conveying the traditional Taoist vision of 'the beautiful life.' So the images used are bright and open, an idealised vision of nature with peach blossom in full bloom. The literati style gives the images a dreamlike quality. The fisherman on the river strays from his usual routine, enticed by a vision of beauty in the peach blossom grove. Abandoning his worldly concerns he is curious about the light emanating from a cave. According to Cai Gao:

"The value of dreams, and the beauty of the search, and following these ideals comes from the poetic beauty of the author Tao Yuanming. Beauty is a force that drives me to be creative, and I very much like *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, where there is a river running through it, with a strong sense of structure. Where there are hills there is water, and landscape of Hunan is full of hills and valleys full of water. Chinese culture is nourished by hills and water, as the saying goes, 'A kind man loves the mountains, a wise man loves the water.'"

Cai Gao makes use of the Taoist aesthetic in her imagery to suggest the infinite where the viewer can use their imagination. The blank space acts as a centre in which the meaning lies elsewhere. Like the value of silence, in music emptiness has a particular potency. Cai Gao often uses the bird's eye view of framing where the distance and the near scenes are grouped together so they form part of a top down unified space but where the painting has distinct layers. This technique breaks with the fixed viewpoint leading the eye to the infinite beyond. The white spaces make the pictures less crowded, allowing for the development of

8. Tao Yuanming (365–427), was a Chinese poet and politician. He was one of the best-known poets who lived during the Six Dynasties period.

layers of meaning rendering the scenery richer and more unified.

For example the scene in which the fisherman discovers the peach blossom features two riverbanks with an impressionistic depiction of the peach trees in full bloom. It mixes the green of the grass with the branches and the pink petals of the peach blossom in a 'riotous profusion', hazy. The image depicts the reality of nature unrestrained, in its true state. At the same time it is an idealized version of nature.

The spiritual resonance in the work reveals the vitality of nature, which includes human nature. Emptiness creates a sense of ease, where overcrowding would bring boredom by forcing the reader to take in too much. As it is, the eye moves freely around the page exploring the detail at its own pace. The image of the river is a white space present in many frames. The land is divided into definite regions while unified by the river which breaks up the scenery creating spatial balance and beauty, at the same time both separate and connected. The river is often central and flowing to the edge of the frame, creating balance. In the story the river represents a journey which is not only physical but spiritual. At the same time the image of the river flowing through the narrative gives the book and the narrative its sense of unity like a scroll.



A Wordless Monument

In 2023, amid escalating global conflict, Cai Gao revisited the idea of a wordless book for the reissue of *Blazing City 1938*. She created an entirely visual monument to the Wenxi Fire, encouraging readers to explore the images and discover the story independently. Cai Gao believes that compelling visuals can speak volumes without words. In 2024, it won the Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award ceremony held in Shanghai.

There two ways into the book: sequential page-by-page exploration or unfolding the entire book for a panoramic view. Page by page, the reader follows the little girl and her family through the traumatic events, you see details of everyday city life, people on the streets, from all walks of life. When you unfold the whole book, you will understand this is not the story of a single family, but the story of a city, and a time.

Any child anywhere can get a sense of what is happening. There is a sense of inclusivity in the book. You can see the whole community, from the street vendors to the elderly. You can see the effects of the fire on

everyone. Anyone can identify with the scenes depicted.

Readers will witness the contrast between pre-fire prosperity and post-fire devastation, symbolizing the broader impact of war on society. This approach helps children grasp the futility and cruelty of war, understanding that its cost extends beyond human lives to include civilization itself.

Cai Gao has a penchant for black which she uses to convey heaviness and oppressiveness. Black contributes to many scenes, becoming an atmosphere, a structure, a contrast, a conflict.

Reconstructing the memory of Changsha through a picture book presented significant challenges. Cai Gao meticulously gathered information, including historical images and first-hand accounts, to recreate an authentic depiction of the old city. In 2022, they discovered a film taken from the air of old Changsha, which closely matched their reconstructions based on photographs and memories. "Seeing that old film felt like a dream," Cai Gao remarked.

Blazing City 1938 explores multiple themes: war and peace, family history, and societal transformation. It captures the essence of daily life in the early 20th century, evoking emotions and prompting reflection. The juxtaposition of past and present fosters a deeper appreciation of history and encourages independent research among young readers. Cai Gao hopes this book will inspire children to develop critical thinking skills and a sense of historical awareness. Returning to history allows us to find strength. Cherishing life means recognizing its value, and all new beginnings emerge from the ruins of the past. Endless mysteries lie hidden in the dust of history, waiting to be uncovered.

Lightness and Innocence



"Innocence" is an exceptionally profound concept, embodying a creative perspective. — Cai Gao

How I Came to be Me and *What Would it be like Without...?*, are two books Cai Gao produced in 2024, embrace lightness and refined her style. In *How I came to be Me* Cai Gao reflected on her own experiences as a mother and then grandmother to tell the story of birth. Firstly from the perspective of the baby as it develops and is borne. Secondly from the perspective of a grandmother waiting for new life to emerge, which is connected with Cai Gao's own journey of self-discovery, using her own painting.

The new edition features an innovative book design. Cai Gao's poetic monologues have been organized into 12 segments, accompanied by her 'Flowers and People' series of paintings, placed on the reverse side, readers discover that behind each seemingly simple pencil sketch lies a vibrant world. The large paintings serve as a backdrop to the smaller illustrations, symbolizing that "behind every simple life, there is a hidden richness."

Cai Gao once wrote in her diary, "When I was young I sought novelty, thinking that newness lay outside of the ordinary, then I realised that I was looking in the wrong place. Newness lies inside what we already know. It is in the unchanging where newness lies. Everything in nature progresses quietly without fanfare." When Cai Gao talks about the importance of seeing, the point she is making is the need to see the world anew, to the extraordinary in the seemingly mundane. *What Would it be Like Without....?* Cai Gao returns to the idea of the playful association of images and words. The text and images take the form of a game, which explores basic everyday things that we take for granted and gives them an imaginative twist in the way that a child might view them.

It takes the form of traditional Chinese brush painting with warmth. The brush strokes have a fluent movement which give the images an almost abstract quality. The images have a poetic quality in which there is no barrier between the imagination and real life. We see images that suggest air and movement. The opening page shows an abstract painting, we see specks that could be seeds carried on the wind but on the final page, we notice that it is the pattern on the little boy's clothes. We see the sun surrounded by what might be children or fairies acting with surprise and delight. The wind and the sun and the rain are images that metaphorically suggest imagination, light, and growth literal and spiritual.

Cai Gao bases the book on the innocent words that she recorded from conversations with children around 2005. Through this book we see the world of children through Cai Gao's eyes. Cai Gao says "In my 60s I had come to discover the sun, in the same way a child sees it, having cast aside many preconceptions to do so."

What would it be like without the clouds? The clouds are a soft pillow or eiderdown, a resting place, a bed for the sun but also a place for us to sleep and dream. The cloud also shelters us from the sun, so we see a child wearing a hat made from a cloud. The wind carries dreams, the seeds are our dreams. What would it be like without a thread? A simple idea that is explored in an imaginative way. We see a girl tying her hair, then the thread turns into a rope which runs across the following page to be used in a game of tug of war. The emphasis is on seemingly taken for granted things, not with money or power which dominate the adult world whether we like it or not. The point of the book is that the important things are already

there and most of them are free.

Cai Gao said :“What is the significance of becoming a child? It emphasizes the qualities of spiritual life, nurturing a healthy human nature, and a life without worrying. My childhood has influenced me for a lifetime, and art is its own fulfillment. Creativity for me, is a continuous process of seeking truth, pursuing spiritual growth and self-improvement.

Awakening is important, so is thinking, intuition, wisdom, action, willpower, taste, and character.....Each creative activity is a journey, between the picture book and the self. All my creativity has its origin in childhood experience. Once you find the origin and source its gift is without limit. Enduring hardship is no longer experienced merely as suffering, but as flourishing.

To adults, becoming a child is a journey to find simplicity and truth and to be true to yourself. Becoming is a long journey, a thing that is worth pursuing throughout my life.

A child's innocence is unknowing. Knowing how to discover innocence is real innocence. Real innocence is sincerity rather than naivety. To be cynical is easy but to keep an open mind and an open heart requires thought. Being true and being honest are connected.

Picture books carry a lot of seeds. I want to sow the seeds of happiness. Literature has its own movements, its own seasons. But the spirit of literature is eternal. Reading and creating are forms of self examination and education, and therefore a route to a greater self awareness.”

Childhood is the source of happiness. The motive that compels Cai Gao to create for children is the feeling that it is the form of consciousness that has not been restricted by dogma and conformity. As we get older we lose the sense of wonder and awe in which the everyday can be enchanted and full of significance. If we become too worldly we lose a certain freedom, hence the metaphor of a fresh spring. We return to it to clean ourselves and we are saved from the traps of the adult world. Cai Gao once said:" Childhood is my warm pillow." The idea of childhood as a pillow suggests that a happy childhood is fundamental. It is the best gift we could bestow upon our children. Being happy and comfortable allows us to sleep peacefully at night. Cai Gao's artwork and writings are ultimately meant to bring warmth and fun and are flights of the imagination for children and adults alike.

Cai Gao: Discover the Hidden Gift of Childhood

Jonas Stampe

Contemporary art critic and senior curator, Sweden & Switzerland.



In an elegant and poetic challenge to a male dominated art world, the curator of the 59th Venice Biennial in 2022, Cecilia Alemani decided to select 192 female and only 21 male artists in a outspoken 9 to 1 ratio. A selection which, furthermore, included artists situated outside the international art market, that had never before had been showcased at the biennial.¹ Cai Gao could undoubtedly have been one of them, had Alemani's selective perspective been more inclusive. Yet, it was a refreshing and symbolic questioning of today's gender unequal art world and the tunnel vision of a ubiquitously dominating market aesthetics. Two issues and courageous acts which perhaps overshadowed one another : the iconoclastic decision to entitle the Venice Biennial after a children's picture book, *The Milk of Dreams*, by Surrealist Leonora Carrington. Alemani's choice had of course a tremendous meaning, a children's picture book as a title for the art world's most prestigious exhibition, considered the Olympics of contemporary art.

Alemani's subtle yet forceful curatorial act, empowers and highlights the signification of the children's picture book as a medium. Both as an educational tool for enlightenment, as a contemporary art form with meaning that problematizes pictorial and societal hierarchies. An act that expands a potential understanding of the function of art, of meaning and intention, in questioning how we see and appreciate. It elevated in one elegant stroke, its signification and function as a tool to educate with a social language of text and images, figures, colours and stories. Children picture books for the art world to learn from. It gave significance to the notion of the children's book as an artwork of image, text, intention and function, as an essential language to enlighten and develop the imagination and cognition of both children and adults. As an embodiment of a human bridge, the unique double reading-listening-seeing bond, it creates and sustains between adult and child - before being read by the child alone. It also raised questions about the complex relationship between text and image, as well as between the notion of art and illustration. How to read the text's organized hierarchic and linear discursive order with the pictures unhierarchic, simultaneous and spatial structure. With its dialectic narrative between text and image, the children's

1. Alex Greenberger. Venice Biennale Names 213 Artists for 'Transhistorical' 2022 Edition. Artnews. February 2 2022.

picture book stands out as a highly complex conceptual medium with an essential function and a powerful potential.

The history of children's picture books, in its turn, has an intricate connection to modern and contemporary art as it becomes manifest with Carrington's *The Milk of Dreams*. But also as a medium explored by other artistic giants like Oskar Kokoschka in *The Dreaming Boys* (1908)², Marc Chagall in *A Story about a Rooster* (1917)³, El Lissitzky in *About Two Squares* (1922)⁴, Andy Warhol with *The Little Red Hen* (1958)⁵, Salvador Dalí in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1969)⁶, David Hockney in *Six Fairy Tales from the Grimm Brothers* (1970)⁷ and Yayoi Kusama in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (2016)⁸. Cai Gao's paintings for children's picture books functions exactly in this spirit. Not only as images of graphic design to support a story visually, but also as artworks, paintings created by an artist to accompany a famous tale, a poem or a classic ancient text.

By tradition, Chinese painters has a preference to relate to ancient stories as to raise the significance of their work and sustain a dialogue with history. It elucidates the truth in Cai Gao's observation "how poetry, and traditional Chinese aesthetics, have developed through thousands of years of history, and permeated throughout people's ordinary lives".⁹ But also her admiration for "the accomplishment of intellectuals in the past. They treated life as art itself. With a spirit of self-consciousness, and an ability for introspection, they were able to elevate themselves and (their art) to a higher realm".¹⁰

It is true that the visual fusion and dialectic dialogue of text and image forms a cornerstone within Chinese aesthetics. Merging text and image in a unified composition constitutes two of three types of pictorial narrative. The most familiar of these is the long handscroll format used to illustrate a story in multiple

2. Oskar Kokoschka. *Die träumenden Knaben (The Dreaming Boys)*. Kurt Wolff Verlag. Leipzig. Published in 1917 with the prints executed in 1907-08.

3. Marc Chagall in *A mayse mit a hon; dos tsigele (A Story about a Rooster; The Little Kid.)* Vilner farlag fun B.A. Kletzin, Petrograd. 1917.

4. El Lissitzky. *About two squares: in 6 constructions*. Skythen Press. Berlin. 1922.

5. Andy Warhol. *The Little Red Hen*. The Best in Children Books. New York. 1958.

6. Lewis Carroll & Salvador Dalí. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. New York. Maecenas Press and Random House, 1969.

7. Grimm Brothers. *Six fairy tales*. Illustrated by David Hockney, Petersburg Press. London, 1970.

8. Hans Christian Andersen & Yayoi Kusama. *The Little Mermaid*. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. 2016.

9. Cai Gao, in Laurence McKnight, Cai Gao, *Art and Life*, unpublished document.

10. Ibid.

scenes. As each of the handscrolls unrolls section by section from right to left, either in a continuous landscape setting or in scenes punctuated by corresponding texts, the viewer is transported through time and space. The second type of narrative relies on a single iconic scene - usually the climax - to evoke an entire story in the viewer's mind. The third type of storytelling is represented by landscapes, still lives, and flower-and-bird paintings that contain no narrative imagery, but tell stories in their appended calligraphic writings. This type of storytelling is an important and distinctively Chinese practice. All these three types of narratives forms a part of Cai Gao's aesthetics and visual articulation. The organic approach to text and image makes them two halves of the same coin, as body and mind, in absence of any Cartesian separation. This organic non-dualist approach to image and text, and to the universe, gives Cai Gao's paintings a meaning that goes beyond the limited notion of a textual illustration. Instead they become integral parts of one poetic articulation.

Cai Gao grew up in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, characterized by its grey granite-paved streets and facing houses¹¹. She was brought up by her grandmother who excelled in telling textured and fragrant stories while knitting. An aficionado of Chinese opera she always brought Cai Gao with her to see opera troupes, local and visiting, so that the young girl could draw its characters and create a memory of the performance. Cai Gao's love for opera and the atmosphere of the theatre is rooted in this childhood, and has certainly influenced her paintings and the composition of various scenes. A natural born artist, as a small child she used charcoal from the fireplace to make large drawings on the interior walls of her home, before being given paints by her parents. Later, at Hunan First Normal School, she studied poetry



Long handscroll style: the girl grew up quickly, illustration of Meng Jiangnv.

11. Ibid.

and literature and explored the venerable institution library's unique holdings in-depth. After graduation, Cai Gao's artistic career began like so many other contemporary Chinese artists of her generation by poster painting. And like so many others of an educated urban youth during the Cultural Revolution, she was, as the saying goes, "sent to the countryside", to connect with the realities of the poor rural China. In fact, she was ordered to go to Taihu, a small village in the middle of nowhere, as a punishment for having been disobedient and not wanting to inform on friends, unwilling to be used as a tool for uncovering so called "intellectual enemies". Situated in a valley in the Hunan mountains, Taihu appears like a blooming lotus, with a 1000-year old temple at its center, like pistils. This temple converted into a school became Cai Gao's work place and home in Taihu. A school-temple with a 1000 year history.

Although Cai Gao liked the village, she was an exile. The shock of being sent away under such brutal circumstances was healed, to some extent, by her closeness to nature and of course the children, her little teachers as she called them - in front of whom she maintained her dignity however difficult the situation. After the morning and afternoon classes she became, like the other villagers, a farmer, learning the routines of sowing in spring, reaping in autumn, gathering firewood and water. It was obviously not like an opera, but was nevertheless a life-changing experience which gave her a certain mindset, to appreciate the hidden joys of hard life. Learning to understand the real meaning of the saying that "All things lead to the great Tao/Enlightenment".

In this micro-society with its harsh conditions, and intimate surroundings, Cai Gao kept her integrity and courage for her mission. Teaching the village children of all ages different subjects, from reading and writing, to history and mathematics, poetry and of course classes in visual art. It would form her



people seeking for their ideal land, titile page Illustration, The Land of the Peach Blossom

understanding of the value of education for children and adults. It was here that she learned, through practice, in a continuous dialogue with her pupils, about the relationship between reading and verbal articulation of meaning, in regard to drawing and painting. This rural temple-school at which she taught for six years, anchored Cai Gao's profound understanding of her children's aesthetics, of the young students own imagination and fantasies but also of their hopes and wishes, their doubts and fears. It was a rural school for life which formed the basis of her future passion and engagement with painting and children's picture books.¹² Moreover, it anchored and immersed her love for the act of painting, with a pluri-aesthetic approach to form as an artist, seeing with an innocent eye, with the freshness and vitality of a child.

"A child sees everything in a state of newness.... genius is nothing more nor less than childhood regained at will" wrote Charles Baudelaire in *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne (The Painter of Modern Life)* in 1863.¹³ It articulated a notion of the innocent aesthetic of the child as a source for creative inspiration, which ever since accompanies modern art in its development. The search for newness and originality, formulated a modern doctrine of a tradition of the new, which became the driving force behind modern and contemporary art's exploration of ever new aesthetic territories.¹⁴ From Claude Monet to Paul Cézanne, the child's eye was celebrated, with the latter even confessing his intimate wish; "I would like to be a child".¹⁵ Many of the greatest artists of modernism like Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, El Lissitzky Joan Miró and Jean Dubuffet owned large collections of artworks by children by which they were inspired, and at times used as templates.

Cai Gao's own practical hands-on experience during six years at the temple-school, not only witnessing the pictorial universes of children, but their actual process of creation, or the poïesis to use the concept and notion developed by the French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry, could only but influence her visual

12. After her six years in Taihu, Cai Gao was transferred to teach at a middle school in the small, yet less remote, town of Lukou in Hunan province.

13. Charles Baudelaire. *Peintre de la vie Moderne*. 1863. Paris. p.8

14. The notion the tradition of the new was coined and explored by Harold Rosenberg in his collection of essays Harold Rosenberg. *The Tradition of the New*. Horizon Press Inc. New York 1959.

15. Emile Bernard. *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne, et lettres*. A la rénovation esthétique. Paris. 1921. Republished in *Conversation avec Cézanne*. Séguier. Paris. 1995.

philosophy.¹⁶ That both the artworks poïesis, the act of creation, and the aesthesis, its reception, were essential, both the process and the result. Or as Cai Gao puts it, “In my view, an artwork is the expression of an artist's thoughts, what the artist has created, and how it is created are both very important”.¹⁷

The originality of Cai Gao's pictorial universe expands in an almost tangible sense parallel to the creation of a child, in its identification with the undistorted process of seeing and doing in proximity to a child's viewpoint. Cai Gao's painting is authentically naive, immediate, and colourful, like a child's vaccine against any adult habit or tradition. Yet conceptually conscious about tradition and a pictorial poetic legacy. Her perception corresponds perfectly with Henri Matisse's 1953 declaration in *Looking at Life with the Eyes of a Child*, that the artist “has to look at everything as though he saw it for the first time: he has to look at life like he did when he was a child, and if he loses that faculty, he cannot express himself in an original, that is, a personal way”.¹⁸ Yet, just like Matisse, Cai Gao's colour rich compositions shows a fragile and conscious universe, fresh and invigorating, denoting both to the modernist canon and the Chinese pictorial tradition. Appropriating folk art figures and colours as well as abstract flatness, two of her cherished influences. Or as she says, “Traditions are not just theory. They are necessary in our lives, things that we do daily, often unconsciously. You must rely on your soul, and not just your senses, to notice and appreciate this”.¹⁹ Cai Gao's style is not one of repetition but changes with the subject of her work, or her own emotional experience. She prefers to use gouache or water colour on paper, but employs sometimes ink, charcoal, oil paints depending on her needs. While not being attached to a particular medium she feels how “different media evokes new feelings” and that each new project brings a new round of exploration. “Sometimes”, she says, “I discover a new technique as I am painting, and that is a delightful experience for an artist”.²⁰ At times her work features a dense form of painting expressing feelings of fullness and weight, and at times it articulates the visual philosophy of the intended blank.²¹ A white emptiness with a spiritual resonance, spatial hierarchy, conceptual meaning of philosophy and aesthetic theories developed since millennia. The Intended blank is a unique visual style in Chinese painting, where blank space directs the viewer's experience of contrast between emptiness and solid form. Used as a way to emphasize the value of silence,

16. Paul Valéry. Discours sur l'esthétique (1937), in Paul Valéry, Œuvres 1, Paris, Gallimard, « La Pléiade ». 1957, p. 1331.

17. Cai Gao, in Laurence McKnight, Cai Gao, Art and Life, unpublished document.

18. Henri Matisse. Looking at Life with the Eyes of a Child. In Matisse on Art. E.P. Dutton. New York. 1978. p.148.

19. Cai Gao, in Laurence McKnight, Cai Gao, Art and Life, unpublished document.

20. Ibid.

21. Tianyi Zhang. Aesthetics and Philosophical Interpretation of the 'Intended Blank' in Chinese Paintings. In International Journal of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences. Volume 02; Issue no 10: October, 2021.



Cai Gao's Traditional style brush painting: Flower Fairies.

it follows Laozi's concept that "the great music is without sound, the great form is without shape".²² Intended blank, also simply called "blank" or more poetically "the remaining jade", is used as a tool to open up the beholder's unlimited imagination.²³ As an instrument of perception psychology functioning like a visual trigger and mind-opener, to stimulate optical participation. The diversity of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism permeates Chinese culture and values, and finds all a powerful articulation in the intended blank. Formulated in the *Prajñāpāramitā-hrdhaya* or *Buddhist Heart* sutra as : "Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form".²⁴ Or as Laozi put it in his *Tao Te Ching* : "everything on earth is born of Being, but Being is born of the nothingness of *Tao*".²⁵ The intended blank white empty space used by Cai Gao carries as such signification, relating to the depth of Chinese philosophy. While being a spiritual articulation meaningful as a compositional tool, inciting viewer participation, it connotes to a pictorial tradition of ages.

Besides the compositional use of a white wide open intended blank, Cai Gao employs an empowering colour palette. It is articulated in subtle monochrome tones as well as in the powerful colours of folklore

22.Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* , verse 41 (see Tim Chilcott's translation, Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* . 2005. p.91)

23.Tianyi Zhang. Aesthetics and Philosophical Interpretation of the 'Intended Blank' in Chinese Paintings.

24.Jayarava Attwood. Form Is (Not) Emptiness : The Enigma at the Heart of the Heart Sutra, *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, 13, p. 53 (2017).

25.Chilcott, p.89

she wore on her clothes as a child. Her use of colour and form all depends on how she understands the content, the story and its language, connecting subjective personal feeling to artistic expression and meaning. She prefers an “open feeling, unrestrained, all at one go” and likes to “work with a structure that leaves room for a sense of movement and freedom”.²⁶ She prefers not to revise her work but to make it in one go, saying that she “would rather start over than make a correction”. This work process, or, all-in-one-stroke poiesis is visible and tangible in her paintings, emotionally and conceptually. Yet, only made possible through a thoroughly elaborated main structure and detailed visual plan.

What gives Cai Gao’s compositions an outstanding and at times sensational visuality is her conscious use of perspective. Employing both a flat abstract-like frontal view, and an aerial perspective of a bird’s eye. It articulates an observation of the world from above, seeing its figures and landscapes like a child with a satellite zoom, at a distance or just up-close. It can be a central-perspective, at times distorted, or merging several viewpoints in one picture. In a sense this multi-vista on the world and its appearance, relates to Chinese landscape painting which employs a flattened perspective useful for the long handscrolls. As a result, there is no specific setpoint guiding our view, which at first can make a logic-minded adult feel confused. Yet the absence of a central perspective stimulates a wider space of thought and imagination, as a way to go beyond the self-imposed spatial restrictions proclaimed in the single viewpoint. It also functions as a rational solution to depict multi-perspectives.

Another perceptual tool employed by Cai Gao to raise the visual attention, is her use of stark contrast between foreground and background. It can be a flat covering mountain wall, parallel to the picture plane, with a hole opening at the center, through which one can distinguish, as a reversed background, flowers and figures at a distance. Or a foreground with dense flowering bushes and above it far away exceedingly small human figures. Cai Gao’s conscious play and change of perspectives stimulates a perception and reading that incites the viewer-reader to be on constant alert, as an authentic visual intelligible opposite to any notion of monotonous industrial repetition.

This variation is also inherent in her figures and use of form, which can change following a new book or project. In some she uses a figurative and popular folk-form that accentuates profile and sharp contour against a white or black background, similar to the traditional Chinese paper cuttings that inspired both Henri Matisse and Hans Christian Andersen.²⁷ In others she employs an almost abstract informe, in which

26. Cai Gao, in Laurence McKnight, Cai Gao, Art and Life, unpublished document.

27. See for example Hans Christian Andersen’s paper cuttings to Astrid Stampe’s Picture Book from 1853.

human figures and flowers of flora integrates as a flat all-over-pattern.²⁸ In front of which one, again, has to stay alert to visually distinguish hidden figures and forms, inciting seeing as a notion and practice of optical exploration.

Seeing Cai Gao's art works published in her many picture books with their different visual articulations stimulates certainly any child's potential to learn how to see. As it can incite any adult who has preserved the capacity to observe detail and analyze form, to appreciate the perception psychology inherent in its visual compositions. Openness, opacity, space, form, figure, ground, flatness, colour, achromes, the written text from selected stories and poems, form all parts of Cai Gao's visual-poetical and authentically youthful universe. They go beyond all ideology other than a human belief in the child and in innocence. As a visionary and intuitive being, accompanying the logic-blinded adult, in an imaginative journey of the senses. For which the only truth is simply to console souls and complete spirits. To become children, to see anew, to look back at the past and into the future with consciousness and the self-sufficiency of a new born, ready to move forward, slowly, to explore a new strange world of vision.

It is of course impossible to select any of Cai Gao's more than 20 published picture books over any other. Together, they all constitute a monument of a formidable and positive life achievement. Not in marble, bronze or stone, but in the souls and minds of her readers, in the memories of children and adults alike. It is an impressive accomplishment. Yet if we had to choose one picture book it would be *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, which tells a story with an open ending, posing more questions than giving answers, textually minimalist and visually expansive, beautiful, invigorating like the colours of spring. It is a story about all of us, children and adults, about the human being's social exploration, curiosity, friendship and kindness but also betrayal and failure. Cai Gao gives here a rainbow of colours, forms and words, a visual waterfall of human warmth into which we can immerse with our own seeing and imagination. She articulates a monumental mind on a human scale, creating relationships of questions with perspectives and colours, the intended blank of course, and a bond of surprise and understanding between children and adults. Painting as a wide open spatial potential to empower an inherited intellectual human vision. This is what Cai Gao's artwork is all about, of course, with the humble and profound understanding that the act of doing is intimately linked to the way of seeing, in creating meaning.

28. "Informel" meaning formless, was a term used by the French art critic Michel Tapié in regard to a certain painting in the late 1940s and 1950s comprising matter painters like Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet, alongside abstract painters like Jackson Pollock and Wols, giving the name to the categorie "l'art informel".



*Intended blank, illustration of **The Land of the Peach Blossom***

3

Interview with Cai Gao

Our Peach Blossom Land-Childhood, Mother Tongue and Chinese Culture

Xu Dongmei

founder of “Be Close to Mother Tongue”

Liu Ying

Educator and Senior Researcher

Xu Dongmei and Liu Ying had an in-depth interview with Cai Gao. They talked about Cai Gao’s picture books, especially *Baoer*, *The Land of the Peach Blossom* and *Hua Mulan*.

Liu Ying:

Your books (*Baoer*, *The Land of the Peach Blossom* and *Hua Mulan*) have a distinct Chinese style, yet in the same time very modern, and they are beautiful. Children are very happy to read your books.

At first, I thought children would think the book *Baoer* was a bit scary. However, our parents all said that their children might feel this way at the beginning, but after reading it, they especially liked this book. Some students even said it was their favorite.

The parent of Xu Peijun in our class would like to ask Ms. Cai: “Why did you choose the picture of Baoer holding an oil lamp for the cover, instead of the one that has Baoer brandishing a sword?”

Cai Gao:

I chose that picture as the cover because I want to highlight the important role of a lamp, especially in darkness. A child has a lamp, which can illuminate himself and the road before him. Where there is light, the darkness recedes. In addition, the lamp itself has a good symbolic meaning in literature, so it is more representative.



Liu Ying:

Very clear thank you! I researched children's responds to the pictures in *Hua Mulan* and I found boys like pictures depicting the following sentences:

*She gallops ten thousand miles,
For the war she has to honor.
She crosses lofty hills,
Like an eagle soaring over.
From northern gusts, through biting chills,
Echoes the watchman's clapper.
With wintry glow, of icy hue,
Light glimmers on her armor.
Generals die in a hundred battles,
Our warrior's back, how ten years fly.
Upon her return she is summoned to see the Emperor.
In the Hall of Light, she receives the highest honor.*

Boys can feel the bravery of *Hua Mulan* and the tragedy on the battlefield, while girls prefer the pictures of:

*Click click, and click click click,
By the doorway Mulan weaves.
When all at once the shuttles cease,
A sigh is heard with solemn grief.
Besides the window, I dress my hair;
In front of a mirror, I paint my face.*

From which they can feel the warmth of home. The picture that both boys and girls like is:

*And when I walk out to meet my compeers,
They are perplexed and amazed.
For twelve years, we fought as comrades-in-arms,
The Mulan we knew was not a lady of charm!*

When Hua Mulan puts on women's clothes, her comrades are amazed. Everyone's expression looks different. The young readers felt as if they were in the scene. Ms. Cai really brought the children into the story.

Feng Yiqi, our student, after reading the book asked “ Why the feelings of Hua Mulan's father were not depicted in the book when Mulan said goodbye to him? ” She felt it was a very cruel for Mulan’s father to see his daughter go to the battlefield instead of him. Why is there no such scene?

Cai Gao:

In fact, the father has been with his daughter all the time. When Mulan was buying a horse, her father was by her side; When Mulan led the horse on the street, her father walked in front of her. A father's love and a mother's love are different.

When people saw Mulan off, I let Mulan's father lead the horse, and Mulan's mother, sister and younger brother bid goodbye to her. If the whole family was drawn together in the scene , the composition of the picture would not look good, so I drew a well next to them. It is the scene of the family saying goodbye.

Most of all, I want to use a bigger scene to express the "parents " in "she leaves her parents by the city wall", The ‘parents’ not only refers to Mulan’s, but all of those who are going to participate in the war.

There is also an association between *Hua Mulan* the poem *Song of the Conscripts*:

*“Chariots rumble and horses grumble.
The conscripts march with bow and arrows at the waist.
Their fathers, mothers, wives and children come in haste
To see them off, the bridge is shrouded in dust they’ve raised.
They clutch at their coats, stamp the feet and bar the way;*

Their grief cries loud and strikes the cloud straight, straightaway."

(written by Du fu, poet in Tang Dynasty; English translation by Xu Yuanchong)

That's the farewell scene I wanted to portray.

Liu Ying:

I have one last question about the book *The Land of the Peach Blossom* asked by Feng Yiqi. As you mentioned in the postscript, "I put the unforgettable things in the pictures", what is the most memorable thing for you? Where is the closest place to paradise in your mind?



Cai Gao:

What I can't forget the most is my childhood and my life teaching in the countryside. Unlike schools of today, in the 1970s, during my years of teaching in the countryside, teachers did everything. We became peasants when we put down the chalk. During the busy farming seasons, the school teacher had days off for working in the fields. It was a period in which my life was closest to that of a peasant. Sometimes I would return to that place in my dreams, a simple but very beautiful place.

The place where I worked was an ancient temple surrounded by mountains. In that huge temple, some houses were converted into school buildings and many other places needed to be rebuilt. We participated in building houses. The place where I lived was also converted from the temple. There was a pine tree in the middle of the temple, which was planted during the Six Dynasties, It was 1000 years old. When I left that place, the tree was still alive and very green. When I was teaching there, when the class bell rang, it would echoe all around.

In *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, when the fisherman first entered the peach blossom land, he met an old man standing on the bridge. There was a small thatched pavilion beside the stream. When I was going to school for class, I would pass a place where there was a thatched pavilion with a wooden bucket filled with tea for passers-by to drink. It also served as a place for pedestrians to rest. Peasants are really good at taking care of passers-by, so I painted a thatched pavilion in the picture.

The orderly cultivated paddy fields are also something I am particularly familiar with in my life. Walking barefoot on the ridge was pleasant. It was deeply imprinted on my mind. In springtime, the soft mud under my feet, and the feeling of being close with seedlings in the fields, are still vivid memories.

When I created *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, I basically painted my experience of rural life into it. Mills, bamboo forests...everything in *The Land of the Peach Blossom* has its prototype. The roads crisscrossed, the small cottages lined at the foot of the hills, one after another, the dogs barked and chickens clucked...It was really an enjoyable experience.

I especially like to draw the brushwood gate. There are many sentences about the brushwood gates in Chinese poems, such as "I knocked at the brushwood gate, but no one answered me at all"(poem,by Ye Shaoweng, Song dynasty), "the birds twitter on the brushwood gate"(poem,by Du Fu,Tang dynasty) and so on. All my life time these poems have deeply influenced me and I can't forget them. Sometimes, I can't even tell the difference between poetry or life itself.

Hardship sometime also could be a gift. With certain distance and perspective, it could also be a very unique experience, and sometimes even beautiful.

The pictures in *Hua Mulan* are all contrasting: war and peace, before and after the battle, life and death, desolation and tranquility, close-up and fading away.

Mulan joining the army and returning home are also contrasting scenes. This is a scene of going and returning. Some people can go out, but they can't come back. It was not easy for Mulan to come back. If she didn't have the love for her homeland, the kind of love that is deep in her soul, she would never be able to come back. Not to mention fame, if she had other ambitions, such as politics, or a desire for higher status, she would never come back.

However, Mulan was eager to return to her homeland. If there was no previous description of the peaceful life there, how do we explain Mulan's decision to return without hesitation?

There is no explanation in the poem, but I should give an explanation to our children. Otherwise, it would be pointless for me to illustrate this poem. I want to tell our children: never forget your homeland. Childhood is our homeland, poetry is our homeland, *The Land of the Peach Blossom* is our homeland and Chinese culture is our homeland. Isn't unity such a power? Such a power is strong enough to call a wanderer from afar to return home.

I don't like the way people look at the country with pity, not at all. I don't quite agree with the opinion that children in the country live an impoverished life. I think the countryside is very good and beautiful, even if it is difficult.

Let's go back to the picture book. There is a picture which shows Mulan before she leaves, holding her heavy armor, she keeps looking at the spinning wheel next to her. Her expression is complex. What is on her mind? Maybe she is saying goodbye to it. "I may not be able to come back" or "I will come back and hear you sing again"?

After Mulan returns home, with her sister she goes to her room to take off the armor and dress as a woman again. Her steps are slow when she passes her spinning wheel. The joy of "seeing an old friend again" is obvious on her face.

The creaking sound of the spinning wheel is very pleasant, and there is a sense of tranquility and eternity.



Mulan leaving home



Mulan returns home

Therefore, I also pour out my feelings for the spinning wheel here. Mulan grew up listening to such voices, could she not have feelings for the spinning wheel? Men farming and women weaving are the main characteristics of Chinese civilization for thousands of years. Can a hard-working girl not miss the spinning wheel?

When she goes to the battlefield, she takes the responsibility of a citizen. She serves in the army in place of her father. "My father is old, so I have to take his place and fight for our homeland". Her motivation is simple, it is not for glory.

I like Mulan very much, and I drew her beautifully. Her battle robe was carefully designed. I dressed her in a green cape with red decorations, The colour of her armor is the colour of the black earth; Her battle robe is woven with gold and silver threads. I dress her carefully to show her liveliness and her love for life.

Look at the two pages one is of her home before she left and the other is after she came back. One can see the exterior of Mulan's house has not changed. Why? More than ten years had passed, the house is still the same, and so is her room. Mulan takes off her battle robe and puts on a girl's dress. She looks beautiful. This is an expression of being in the same space at different times.

The peach blossom is still the same, but people and things have changed. Some people can't come back, but Mulan is lucky. Her house and her room (*the little attic*) are elegant. We can see the inside of the attic through the window, which is very neat and beautiful. Mulan loves beauty, and this kind of beauty is like nature, neat and delicate.

For the colours of the quilt and clothes, I deliberately used red and green, which have a symbolic meaning, not the actual colours used by Mulan in life. Mulan in real life may not be dressed in red and green, but she may be dressed more plainly in blue calico or grayish purple. However, I want to detach myself a bit. I use colours to symbolize the beauty of a girl's life before going to war. Even in those ordinary days, she is very beautiful.

In addition, some children asked about the last picture The picture is quiet and peaceful and there are two little rabbits at the bottom. They want to ask why I didn't draw the rabbits bigger ?

I just can't draw them too big. The size or gender of the rabbits is not important. The important thing is time. As time goes by, the era of Hua Mulan is very far from us, so far that we cannot really imagine it. I want to paint the feeling of fleeting time in the book. The scenery is also like this. It is clear and complete at the beginning, but at the end, it is farther away from us. We can no longer see it as it was, we only know that it was beautiful. At the end of the book, I used a place similar to *The Land of the Peach Blossom* to express the tranquility after the war. That place should be fading and faraway; it should be hazy rather than clear, and the rabbits have to be as small as they are.

A painter must have their own thinking. All big things have a rhythm, when we give it to children, we also present it in a rhythm. It is the rhythm of the picture book, the rhythm in our heart and of time. When I want to reflect the rhythm of time, ten years is just an instant, and a dynasty is also an instant.

Today, when we think about the meaning of *Hua Mulan*, we'd better start from this point: we want our children to obtain a kind of solid affection and love similar to that of Mulan for her homeland and her family. In general, I drew the book Hua Mulan according to the rhythm of a front-to-back comparison. If children cannot comprehend it fully, it doesn't matter, just let them get as much as they can at the moment.

Liu Ying:

If one has a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, one will understand Cai Gao's books more. If one understands the details of Cai Gao's pictures, one will understand the stories better.

Xu Dongmei:

I personally not only like Cai's picture books, but also especially like your language and your attitude

towards life. I recommend everyone to read Ms. Cai's collection of essays *Each Seedling has Its Own Rainfall*. The language of this book is beautiful and it records a full life. Can you talk about your creation, your language and your attitude towards life? What factors have influenced you?

Cai Gao:

I have already mentioned some before, and I will tell you more. How I came to be me? Why do I make picture books and enjoy planting green things? Those things all rooted in my early life.

I am able to become what I am today, especially thanks to my childhood. This is exactly what I want to talk about: free to be oneself. It is not easy for a person to be free and live a calm life. Many problems need to be solved.

All my picture books and words are to find my childhood. If a person has obtained good things in childhood, they can gain a kind of power throughout their life. Though, of course, other stages cannot be ignored too, as each stage has its benefits.

Another thing is the country life. Children must be close to nature. They should often go to fields and the riverside. We can do that easily.

Each Seedling Has Its Own Rainfall (graphic book)
CITIC Press, 2018





Each Seedling Has Its Own Rainfall (graphic book)

How do we understand our cultural tradition? Chinese culture has great potential, yet there is a lot of dross, which hinders a person's longing for freedom and beauty. However, there are also strengths in it to help us resist these things. Our poetry and literary works can help us distinguish the good from the bad.

I embrace a few things, one of them is childhood the other is self-reflection.

If a family creates a good environment, children will definitely benefit. For example, the strength, the courage, the ability to perceive things from a different perspective, which is sufficient to support one for a lifetime.

When we read picture books, we must use our eyes, voice, emotions and heart. We can also treat life in this way, because life is a larger picture book. We should learn how to use various senses in our early days, which requires help from adults. Parents need to have the ability to help their children.

Let us provide children the best environment: more beauty, less vanity. Beauty and vanity are two different things. The elements of life should be simple, but not rough. Simplicity comes from our heart, if we do things sincerely, with our full attention, to make them good. That will make one feel happy.

When I was young, whenever my grandmother peeled broad beans, she would sing nursery rhymes to me. She was not trying to educate us, she did it just because she enjoyed it. She inherited nursery rhymes and many stories from her own childhood.

She had received no formal schooling, she couldn't read or write until in her late 40s. However, she memorized a lot of things from the past, including nursery rhymes and folktales. I got these by word-of-mouth, which are authentic and precious. At first, I just listened to them and later I could recite them.



Your attitude towards life affects your children the most. Even in the most ordinary house, you can create a good environment .

Creating good things for children is wonderful. I know it, so I make children's books. It would be a shame not to give good things to children. Beauty is everywhere, we just need an eye to discover it.

The traditional three-generation family has changed, but the way of word of mouth has not. For example, my mother asked me to wash my face and told me to wipe my ears at the same time. People want to be clean, it brings a very comfortable feeling, and produces a kind of awareness. My duty is to maintain hygiene, to maintain a clean environment for children, so I need to find the source of clean water and provide it to my children.

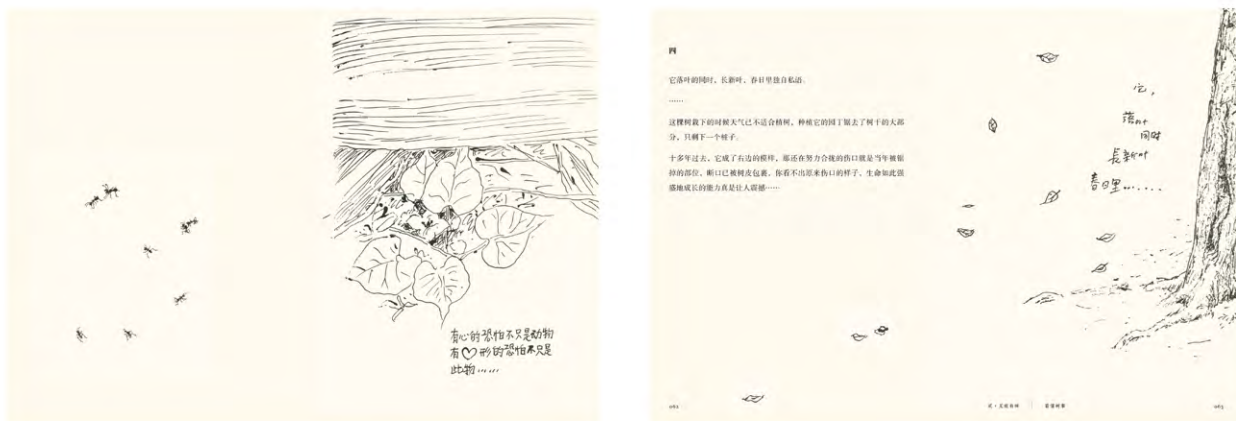
We need to protect our children and our heart from being polluted. There are too many things that pollute us. We have to clean up instinctively to refresh ourselves. If we can reflect on our behavior and keep clean, our children will love to be clean, as well.

We have *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, the *Book of Songs* and a rich cultural tradition. These are beautiful things, and we need to bring them alive for our children.

Educators are like miners who dig to find good things. They have the habit of searching for the source; They keep thinking. Everything has an origin, the ability to find it is something educators and picture book promoters must have.

Xu Dongmei:

Thank you,your answer is from your heart. In fact, your knowledge of classical literature is particularly



Each Seedling Has Its Own Rainfall (graphic book)

good. I think the knowledge is not from your grandmother; What she gave you were nursery rhymes, stories and attitudes towards life. So where did you acquire it? Was it from reading or from your teachers?

Cai Gao:

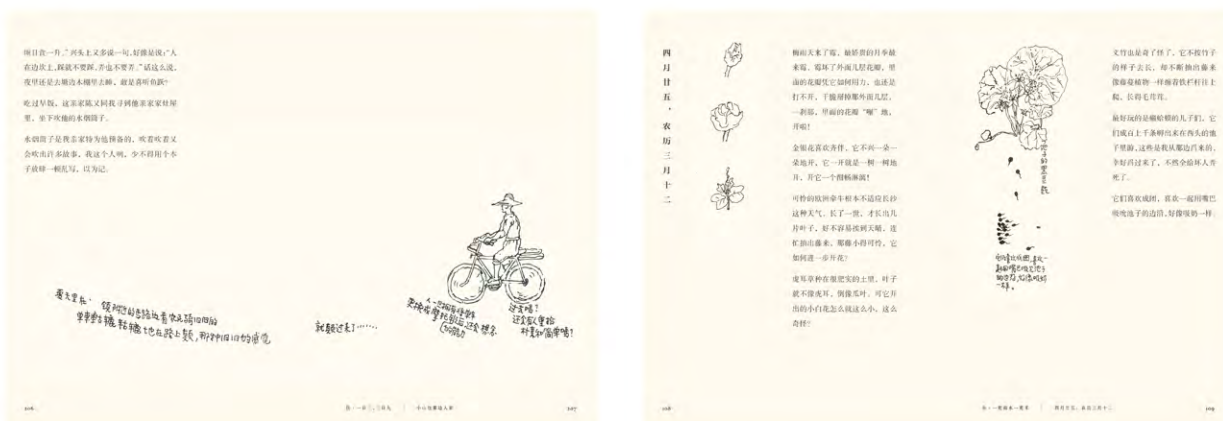
My literacy is attributed to my teachers. I really thank those teachers who have taught me. During 1950s, because of the political movement, I was not accepted by any public middle schools. What could I do? I could only go to schools that require no political background. The school I attended was Weiwen Secondary School, which was later renamed as Qunli Secondary School. In this middle school, there were many excellent teachers.

Qunli Secondary School was converted from a old shabby house in an old street. There was no auditorium, no lawn, but a few bare classrooms.

The classrooms were very dark, but the teachers were really good. My Chinese teacher was like an artist. He was very young, but as soon as he entered the classroom, he sparkled. He was passionate about literature. Often, he finished the text very quickly, then talked about Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, Lu Xun, Li Bai and Du Fu.

I had no chance to read foreign literature at that time, and felt that the teacher's words were thrilling. I was able to memorize many articles by Mr. Lu Xun because of this teacher who led the way. He made me feel the charm of poetry and classical literature.

Later, I was completely immersed in independent reading. I went to read the source of Chinese literature, for example *Records of the Grand Historian* and more classical works. The beauty of literature and poetry



is in my bones.

I liked my teachers; My math, physics, chemistry and English teachers were very good. I was very fortunate to have them leading my way.

A capable child will take the initiative to find the source, and they will block some things they don't like. What if a child does not have this awareness and ability? There need to be teachers who will lead them to literature. If the teacher loves literature, it will be easier for students to enter that world. As long as the door is open, many good works will flow in. When we see the first buds we know the spring has come.

Thank you, your questions triggered a lot of memories.

Thank you all.

Xu Dongmei:

Thanks to all who participated in interview, the children, the teachers and parents, and specially thank you Ms Cai Gao for sharing your stories with us.

Ms. Cai Gao's work will bring the mother tongue and our cultural tradition to our children. Let's open our senses to experience its warmth and strength.

Thank you all.

4

Most Significant Titles

The Land of the Peach Blossom

written by **Tao Yuanming** (Eastern Jin Dynasty)

adapted by **Matsui Tadashi**

2021/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

Baoer (The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden)

written by **Pu Songling** (Qing Dynasty)

adapted by **Cai Gao**

2021/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

Blazing City 1938

(an accordion-style wordless picture book)

illustrated by **Cai Gao and Aozi**

2023/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

2013/Yi Lin press

How I Came to Be Me

2024/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

What Would it Be Like Without...?

2024/Daylight Publishing House

The Land of the Peach Blossom



Introduction to *The Land of the Peach Blossom*

Since the 1990s, Cai Gao began to cooperate with the Fukuyinkan Shoten of Japan and published ***Violet Nursery School***(1992) ,***The Old Man who Loved Flowers***(1998), etc. In 2002, ***Tao Hua Yuan Ji- The Earthly Paradise*** was published.

Looking into The Land of the Peach Blossom

Written by *Cai Gao*

The Land of the Peach Blossom depicts the beauty of seeking. I naturally draw my feelings about rural life into the painting, and put my ideal relationship between man and nature into the painting. It depicts all that I know about nature and country life.

My “peach blossom land” is a very ordinary village in southern China, a place where people can live in peace. When I was settled in the village in 1969, after school, I learned to press oil, to do menial work, to plant rice... to read under the oil lamp midnight, to rise with the morning bell and to rest at the evening drum, these life experience are all pictures and poems. I might not have been able to paint *The Land of the Peach Blossom* without the real experience of country life.

I don't want to paint *The Land of the Peach Blossom* as an illusory place. I hope it reflects real lives. I illustrate how people work, eat and drink, all are included in my book. I like to describe the warm

relationship, the smell of rice soup, the aroma of burning wood, and fragrance of trees ... I painted how people in the countryside live their lives. Don't look at it from the historical perspective. It's not history. I made it up. It is a work of fiction.

The fisherman, I depicted him as an ordinary man but probably descended from a poor intellectual family. He is different. Because the fisherman initially went out to fish, to make a living. When he saw the peach blossom, the fisherman was surprised and abandoned his boat out of curiosity. That is a bit different: he is more interested in beauty than fishing.

I drew the beauty of the peach blossom, the misty waterway, that lets the fisherman walk all the way because of his curiosity. He was lost. Being lost itself is interesting, because it is the best way to arouse people's emotions. I care a lot about personal experience. I don't think it's interesting to explain everything bluntly, the process of seeking itself is fun, to experience the unknown is particularly fascinating.

The moon shines upon our ancestors as well as on us. I must bring the good things out of tradition, but also invoke the feelings of modern people. We live in a global village, my painting language absorbed impressionism, expressionism, the influence is in my blood. But in my heart, the Chinese aesthetic concept, taste, expression and spirit, are equally important. What I want to pursue is to make all these into a whole. I prefer weightiness, texture, elegance, simplicity .

The Land of the Peach Blossom can be understood as a story about seeking the truth, the process is very beautiful, so is the result. When we go to pursue our ideal, it is better to bring curiosity and passion and with us. To find beauty is good, even without any company, even unknown, it is still good. Because your heart is changed in the process, when your heart is beautiful, everything will be beautiful.



Inherit the Peach Blossom Land in the Best Way

Written by *Ajia*

(Writer, translator, picture book reviewer, educator, who received The Carle Honors Bridge Award in 2022)

When I first read *The Land of the Peach Blossom* in 2009, I was astonished by its beauty at first glance. Although the text I read was the modern version, restated by Mr. Matsui Tadashi, when I saw the painting by Ms. Cai Gao, I was reminded of the ancient style prose of Tao Yuanming. "In the year of Taiyuan, Jin Dynasty, there lived a man in Wuling Prefecture, who earned his living by fishing." (The first folio in the text) -- Turn to the next page, "one day, he rowed his boat along a stream, unaware of how far he has gone" -- turn the page again, "when all of the sudden he found himself in the midst of a wood full of peach blossoms. There were no trees of any other kind, the fragrant grass was fresh and beautiful and peach petals fell in riotous profusion....." when I read "fell in riotous profusion", my eyes could hardly move away from the brilliant illustration, and my hand was reluctant to turn the page.

I have been able to recite this ancient prose since I was a child. I know it is actually the prelude to *The Tao Hua Yuan Shi*¹, although I can't recite the five-character poem, but this preface is deeply imprinted on my mind. I seriously thought, why is so popular with children? First of all, it is a beautiful and mysterious story, with a sense of wonder that can grip a child's curiosity. The second is the sense of sound and rhythm. Although the 321 characters are written in prose style, the sentences are basically three, four and five characters in units, which makes the reading very rhythmic, like a free verse without the constraint of the phonetic style. If you read the story and repeat it to a certain rhythm, you may be tempted to dance, and enjoy it.

As a picture book aimed at contemporary children, it was necessary for Japanese publisher Matsui Tadashi to adapt the prose into modern text. Because of his child-friendly retelling, accompanied with beautiful illustrations by Cai Gao, the story was included in Japanese elementary school textbooks. Thus fulfilling Mr. Matsui Tadashi's dream. Because he was influenced by his father since childhood, and deeply loved

1. *Tao Hua Yuan Ji* is the prelude to the poem *Tao Hua Yuan Shi*.

the story of the *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, now because of a life long effort, we finally have the opportunity to let Japanese children read this ancient classic thanks to international cooperation. I believe that asking an adult to read the text of a book to a child, while letting the child look at the pictures in the book, must be the best way to enjoy *The Land of the Peach Blossom*.

But I expect more from young Chinese readers. I think it would be much more enjoyable to read the original prose directly with the picture after being fully familiar with the story. Looking at the story told by the picture alone, it completely matches the meaning and rhythm of the original text, which also shows the artist's profound literary skills. In the original story, after the fisherman went back to the county, "he reported the story to the local official," According to the original text it is the the fisherman who takes the initiative to inform. The adapted story is more tolerant of human nature and it becomes the official who asks the fisherman after hearing rumours. Details of communication are added in the picture to make the process more natural. The adapted text, removed "Liu Ziji of Nanyang Prefecture, a learned scholar of high repute, was excited when hearing the fisherman's story. He devised a plan to find the village, but failed ." At the end of the book Cai Gao drew a boat. The man on the boat writing with great vigor could be either Tao Yuanming or Liu Ziji. Therefore, when I turn to the lonely boat on the last page, I feel that the mood of "since that time there have been no further seekers" is exactly with the rhythmic pace of the ancient style prose.

I have read this picture book in Tao Yuanming's original ancient style prose in many reading activities with children. The most impressive one was in the Beijing Concert Hall. With the improvised accompaniment of a performer, we were immersed in the beautiful imaginary world created by the joint efforts of the ancient prose and modern illustrations, a beautiful was world created. It's a story, we know, but it's not just a story, it's more like a good wish that deserves to be passed on from generation to generation in the best possible way.

Cai Gao's experience of having to teach in a remote village for many years in a special era has enriched her painting with a strong rural atmosphere. The folk customs in the book are authentic and vivid, "the villagers gave the fisherman all kinds of food and wine" are details written in the ancient prose, the artist illustrated it with the fragrant rural foods of the Wuling region. Young and old all like these images, and through reading this story will have a greater appreciation for the beauty of ordinary life.

There is water almost everywhere in the story, but the painter rarely paints water directly. The white space





in the traditional painting often happens to represent the water in the imagination of the reader, and sometimes it also happens to be used as the space to print the text. There is also some interesting details: the fisherman enters the peach blossom land from left to right, leaving the peach blossom land becomes right to left.

Here's an interesting detail. I have been wondering since childhood, when the fisherman left, in order to have the opportunity to return to the peach blossom land, "he made marks everywhere ", how did he mark it? And why did he lose his way? What happened to the marks? This book actually provides the answer! Of course, this is a game designed by the painter in the picture. I'm sure young readers would love to find out for themselves.



Baoer

Adapted from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, by Pu Songling

Talk on the Creation of Baoer

Written by *Cai Gao*

I like Pu Songling and many other Chinese folk tales, they are full of vitality. There are so many valuable things hidden in Chinese traditional culture that we need to dig for them and look at them with modern eyes.

Baoer (The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden) was drawn in 1992 and adapted from the *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, by Pu Songling. The story tells of a little boy named *Baoer*. His father who is a businessman, was not at home; his mother became entangled with the spirit of a fox, so the child had to deal with these problems on his own. How brave *Baoer* was! That was the story I wanted to draw.

Red and green are very positive colours, and I think they are suitable for Pu Songling's stories; I also used black, which can represent an inexplicable pressure surrounding the characters. There is a picture, -the fox, looking for, drink, is followed by *Baoer*, I drew it as a straight composition, with large blocks of black colour on both sides, to make it a bird's-eye view and flatten it, so it has a sense of oppression. The fox is

scared because it is out of place in the human world; Baoer's eyes are fixed on the fox, and he is painted in red. Baoer is on top in that picture, and his red colour can overwhelm the black colour.

For the cover of the latest edition, I replaced the above mentioned picture with one of Baoer holding an oil lamp, because I wanted to highlight the importance of this lamp. If a child has a lamp, he can use it to illuminate himself and the road in front of him, especially when facing some obscure things. Where there are lights, all darkness will recede, so this lamp is very important. Holding the lamp higher, people can see farther.

When I created this book, I finished it in 20 days. I drew it very quickly because I held it in for too long. When I finished drawing the last picture, I fell down and lay on the table, because I was too tired and my heart couldn't bear it. I really put my life experience into this book.

Baoer- A Special Witness to the Development of Chinese Original Picture Books
Written by Ajia

In 1993, when *Baoer* became the first Chinese picture book to win the Golden Apple Award at BIB in Bratislava, many Chinese people could not believe it, and some even doubted that it was by a Chinese artist at all: Aren't such high-level children's book illustrations created by the Japanese?

Indeed, our domestic original picture books were still in their infancy at that time. Even such an excellent work could only be printed in a thousand copies and most of them were used as gift books. The picture book market did not really exist at that time. I was fortunate enough to read one of the thousand copies published in 1991 borrowed from a collector. I was quite impressed by the splendor and delicacy of the book that did not match that era, and I also noticed the influence of traditional illustration, especially Lian Huan Hua, on graphic narratives.

We know that Lian Huan Hua¹ consists of a series of pictures with texts attached to each, the picture is

1. A type of illustrated pocket book usually in black and white. These were easy to read and were intended to help illiterate adults and children to learn to read. They were very popular between the 1950s and the 1990s in China.

usually like a middle shot, the size of the picture frame is fixed, and usually the picture frame is on top and the text is on the bottom. The original version of *The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden* breaks the boundary of the aforesaid picture frame. The left page is a frameless full-scale painting, and the right page is a close-up with blank surroundings. The relevant text is placed on the top of the right page and is divided into two parts, respectively with arrows to indicate that the text belongs to the left page or the lower picture on the same page. This can be seen as a transitional form of graphic narrative between Chinese Traditional Lian Huan Hua and modern picture books. However, Cai Gao adapted to this narrative style very well that she made the rhythm of the narrative just fit the needs of story development.

But I have to admit that it is not easy to adapt Pu Songling's tales into children's stories. Even a story like *Baoer*, which tells wittily of the elimination of demons, punishing evil and promoting good, still has some dark and gloomy colours. The painter boldly used black as the main colour of the background, and at the same time she used red and green that can produce strong contrasts to highlight the characters, especially the wise and courageous child. In this way, the colour of the pictures shows a feeling of first suppressing and then rising, gradually guiding readers into the scene. When the fairy tale ending of "they live together happily ever after" appears, if readers look back at the previous pictures with dark tones, they will feel the powerful strength from the use of black. The story may seem dark, but the deep-down simplicity and honesty will make children feel understood and respected.

The 2008 reprint of *Baoer* was a fairly successful adaptation. The title of the book was changed from *The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden* to *Baoer*, which is closer to children's stories. For the first time, the little hero had his name "Baoer" instead of "son of the merchant", and the focus of the story has shifted from the fox spirit causing trouble to the little hero eliminating demons.

Careful readers will find that the updated story lessened the details of the fox spirit's entanglement. Also, in the process of exorcising the demon, the narrator added some necessary explanations in the plot where Baoer begged for poison, poisoned the wine, and stored the wine in the wine shop to prevent accidental injury to others. It reflects Baoer's sense of responsibility.

However, for some reason, the 2008 version ended with "Baoer's family has returned to peace, and the family lives happily and harmoniously", which probably fits the ending of the usual fairy tales. But since this is a story about a little hero, I think all readers, adults and children, would really want to know "what happened later" and "what happened to Baoer when he grew up...". In fact, this was explained in Pu Songling's original story, and only in that way can the story be complete.

I am glad the ending design is back in the latest version of *Baoer*. I really like the finale image drawn by Cai Gao, which looks like a painting of a door god. It adds a bit of festive colour to the story, which can help readers escape from the oppressive atmosphere. I believe that children will stay for a while in front of the picture; it will completely relax their mood with a promising future for the little hero.

For adults who care about children's education, the story of *Baoer* is actually quite inspiring. For example, it reminds us that we must not underestimate children but should give them more trust and opportunities to exercise their abilities. Moreover, in terms of education, we might as well learn from Baoer's father, to respect children's preferences and strengths, and to teach them in accordance with their aptitude.

I think, if Pu Songling was alive, he would be happy to see his story adapted into such an inspiring picture book.





Blazing City 1938

Beneath the Tragedy, Lies the Warm Colour of Human Life

Liao Huiwen

Reporter of *Hunan Daily* / *Xiang Jiang Weekly*

In the winter of 1938, the fire raged for five days and five nights.

Across the Xiangjiang River, people who managed to escape by chance, clutching their remaining household items, gazed at the soaring flames and thick smoke from Changsha City on the opposite bank.

The ashes, like a cotton quilt, descended from the sky. They used to be the white-walled and black-tiled residences, the imposing official buildings, the winding and secluded pavilions and gardens, as well as the peddlers' carts, small pushcarts, and cherished furniture of the people...

These were the fragments of the city, the accumulation of over two thousand years of construction.

"Everything is over," murmured her uncle when recalling the past events, this scene was imprinted on Cai Gao's mind.

Cai Gao, a renowned picture book artist, was born in 1946 and had never seen Changsha before the

Wenxi Fire. That Changsha was preserved in the memories of her grandfather, uncle, and aunt, who often recounted it to Cai Gao.

In 2007, Cai Gao and her daughter Xiao Aozi, who is also a painter, began jointly creating the picture book *Blazing City 1938*. It took them five years to complete and was published in 2013. Even after its publication, they did not put down their paintbrushes. This year, on the 85th anniversary of the Wenxi Fire, a new edition of the picture book *Blazing City 1938*, carefully refined by Cai Gao and Xiao Aozi, was published.

On November 15th, at the 35th Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award ceremony held in Shanghai, *Blazing City 1938* won the Best Picture Book Award. In the awarding speech of the organizing committee for this work, it was stated: *Blazing City 1938* uses a poignant black-and-white long scroll to restore, from the perspective of a little girl, how the Wenxi Fire swept through and devoured the ancient city of Changsha. The text is condensed into a handwritten letter and placed together with illustrations like small photos full of texture and warmth, in a letter from the creators to the future, waiting to be unsealed, recalled, and commemorated.

That Catastrophic Fire

In late October 1938, the smoke of the battlefield drew closer and closer. Wuhan fell, and Changsha was in peril. The Kuomintang decided to adopt the scorched-earth policy and burn Changsha to prevent the Japanese from obtaining military supplies. Chiang Kai-shek sent a secret telegram to Zhang Zhizhong, the highest military commander of Hunan Province, stating, "If Changsha is lost, the entire city must be burned. Please make thorough preparations in advance and do not delay!"

At 3 a.m. on November 13th, a fire suddenly broke out at the south gate of Changsha. The city's garrison command mistakenly took it as a signal to start the fire and hurriedly set the city ablaze. At that time, not all the residents of Changsha had evacuated.

To illustrate this historical event, Cai Gao and her daughter Xiao Aozi interviewed witnesses and carefully examined thousands of pictures for verification. They decided to use pencils to depict the story.



The picture book opens with a depiction of the ancient city in its tranquil state. Two young girls from Changsha are shown going to school daily, passing through historic streets, past theaters, Yang Yuxing Noodle Restaurant, and Dasheng Silk Store. Their small figures move between pavilions and houses, captivated by the bustling street vendors and the various modes of transportation on the road. As the girls traverse these streets, the "scorched earth resistance" slogans on the walls and scenes of people preparing for evacuation hint at the impending war. This culminates in a moment where one of the girls questions why fire engines are transporting gasoline, foreshadowing the imminent disaster.

At 3 a.m. on November 13th, the little girl and her family were sheltering under the altar table in the hall. The clock and vase symbolizing "lifetime peace" were placed on the altar table. Suddenly, flames erupted from the streets and alleys, causing the citizens to panic. They then hastily carried the elderly and children and rushed out in a frenzy.

After the fire, over 90% of the houses in Changsha were destroyed, leaving the city in ruins. The thick smoke and dust obscured all familiar scenes, reducing the once vibrant city to rubble.

Blazing City 1938 resembles a black-and-white silent film. Cai Gao explained, "When approaching history, it appears in black and white. When recalling the past, it also appears in black and white. I must start from my own creative feelings. Black is concentrated and evocative."

Due to various constraints in 2013, the work was not initially produced as an accordion-style wordless picture book as originally envisioned but instead took the form of flip-page style book. Now, after considerable effort, this 9-meter-long picture book can finally be presented to readers as originally intended.

This new edition has removed the accompanying text from the illustrations. Cai Gao believes that images themselves have the power to narrate. "Children are accustomed to this kind of imagery. Images directly convey what a city originally looked like, what war was like, what a big fire was like, and what it looked like after the fire. Adding text would complicate the experience. Children will enhance their ability to recognize images, and their perception will be stronger as a result."

The black-and-white scene ended with the two little girls facing the ruins. Closing the book and looking at the back of the fold, a warm pastel colour comes into view. This was the little girl leading the reader into

her memory: Entering through the door engraved with the character for "blessing", using the long paper surface as the street, the pictures show the lives of Changsha residents throughout the year in the order of spring, summer, autumn and winter. We see children playing in the courtyard, a girl waving on the bridge, an old woman drying clothes, a peddler carrying goods and walking through the streets... Eventually, the steam train leads everyone away from the street and the city.

The back of the book is about home. We decided to use very light tones. It comes from the past, like it has been washed by time, yet it is warm. The colourful part at the back was newly drawn after collecting many online and physical photos as references for several months, and it is not limited to Changsha. Some inspirations also emerged naturally. "In this version of the picture book, the front is macroscopic, showing history with medium and long shots. The back is colourful, with the camera zooming in to present the various lives of ordinary people. This contrast allows readers to feel and think about this story, and to think about the theme of 'war and peace'."

Cai Gao believes that the power of gentleness is beneficial to the world. "When a city is so beautiful and warm, the destruction caused by war will appear all the more cruel, and thus there will be tension and questioning." At the same time, she hopes that this historical retrospection can provide a "reference" for urban construction. To "innovate" in construction, one must "know the past". "Picture books are not exclusively for children. I hope parents and children can read them together and learn about the past of Changsha through them. Every city has its own story and personality, just like people have their own personalities. Telling the past is not just about nostalgia, not just about a kind of sadness and lamenting the passing of time. Tradition is a great force. We should cherish it, restore it, protect it, and reflect on it."







How I Came to be Me

我觉得有种力量在鼓动，我总是想要动一动。
终于有一天，我听到外面有强大的呼唤：宝贝，你准备好了吗？你现在可以出来了吗？
是妈妈的声音。是妈妈在呼唤。
我想出去，我开始用力往外钻：
一二三，一二三……
我被一股热流簇拥着，妈妈也在努力帮我，就像小鸡破壳那样，我在里面啄，她也在外面啄。
“来了，来了”，有谁在说，“请再努力一下！”
像小苗破土，像太阳喷薄而出，“我来了！”

Endow Life with Dignity and Significance.

Xiao Aozi

Artist, picture book author/illustrator

“If life lacks meaning, it may lead to a state of decline. It is essential to provide meaning to sustain a healthy existence.”

—Cai Gao

In the book *How I Came to be Me* Cai Gao explores the meaning and dignity of life.

Does life possess intrinsic value? In an era where nihilism has become pervasive, Cai Gao felt compelled to convey a different message to children. In 2016, she curated selections from her 2001 notes, edited them, added illustrations, and published *How I Came to be Me*. In 2019, under the title *Life: an affirmation* Cai Gao delivered a 30 minutes talk at Yixi¹, expanding on this theme in a more personal manner. She shared her stories about her grandmother, father, mother, and teachers, deeply resonating with her audience.

1. Yixi is a platform that combines live speeches and online videos to share knowledge, information and viewpoints. On average, it holds one live event every month in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Her reflections on enduring love and resilience prompted the question: How deep must one's love be to declare 'life is worth celebrating' at her age? What strength is required to transform adversity into beauty?

In 2024, following the global pandemic and various social upheavals, Cai Gao felt that the topic of the meaning of life warranted further exploration for children. Collaborating with her editors, she reorganized her original notes, incorporating previously unpublished diaries into a new edition of *How I came to be me*. The revised book employs a dual narrative structure, with one tracing the journey from conception to birth, and the other presenting Cai Gao's philosophical inquiries into life through her stream-of-consciousness prose.

In 2001, prior to the birth of her first grandson, Cai Gao experienced a period of profound grief. Her mother had been seriously ill for a number of years and had passed away. Shortly thereafter, her father also died. For a considerable time, Cai Gao struggled to cope with her loss. She had always believed there would be ample time to spend with her parents. Due to her busy work schedule, she could not provide as much companionship as she had wished. When her parents became ill, she worked diligently to ensure their medical expenses and living costs were covered. However, their sudden passing left her with a feeling of emptiness.

It was the arrival of her grandson that lifted her out of despair. The newborn evoked a flood of memories, reminding her that her loved ones—her parents and grandparents—continued to exist in another form. This realization reignited her passion for life and creativity. As the child grew, so did she, spiritually and artistically. Cai Gao exemplified the spirit of perseverance. Her works consistently explore the theme of the enduring and self-renewing spirit of life. By observing the process of birth, Cai Gao reflected on the interconnection of past and present, revealing the hidden dimensions of existence. "When I gave birth to my daughter, my mother waited outside the delivery room, it repeat generation after generation " she mused. "Observing the baby is like observing myself, by doing so I am reborn, anew!" She explained, "Birth is a remarkable event! The existence of life itself embodies its meaning. To walk on this planet itself, is a miracle. Witnessing a child's birth instills in me a profound respect for life. From this perspective, the individual and the infinite are intricately interconnected, endowing life with a sacred quality.

A profound understanding of birth implies a spiritual rebirth.

While many believe our existence is accidental, Cai Gao prefers to believe that we are not cast into this world without purpose; rather, we come because of love. Life is fragile and brief, yet its value lies within its fragility and brevity. It has endured countless hardships; the value we attribute to life determines its worth.

The new edition of *How I Came to be Me* employs an innovative book design, transforming the dual narrative into an interactive seek-and-find experience. Attentive readers will discover that behind each simple pencil sketch lies a vibrant, colourful painting. Cai Gao's poetic monologues, richly coloured paintings, and the stories depicted in the sketches create a harmonious and layered reading experience.

Notably, from her first pop-up book *Where is Dengdeng* in 1997, to the folding page version of *Blazing City 1938*, and now *How I Came to be Me*, Cai Gao's innovations in book design serve the content's needs rather than novelty. Generally, she adheres to the traditional form of picture books.

The new edition of *How I Came to be Me* uses large paintings as the backdrop for smaller illustrations, symbolizing that "behind the simplicity of life lies the magnificence we often overlook."

The Birth of My Grandson Gave Me a New Perspective on Life



Anny

The story *How I Came to be Me* is based on the stories in Cai Gao's notebook. The date is around 2001, when her grandson was born. His birth brought her many surprises. She took him home and took care of him. She recorded many stories about him. Later she intended to turn some of them into picture books. The first one she developed was *How I Came to be Me*.

A person might ask where they came from. This is a big question. Without it, life would seem to be incomplete. So, when a child asks this question, how should we answer? How can we express the importance of life? Thus, *How I Came to be Me* came into being. Originally, the pictures and words were connected in her notebooks. At first, Cai Gao thought of representing the words as handwriting, but she finally adopted the traditional typeface approach because it is what readers expect. Cai Gao hoped to convey through pictures and words the expectations and hope for a new life.

"Growing and growing, for ten months, I grew bigger and bigger, until I felt that Mom's belly was a bit too small. I wanted to move, my hands, my feet. I felt that there were many parts of me that could move. My head, my mouth, my ears, my eyes, they all wanted to move a little. There were many voices outside calling me. What was it like outside? I felt a force urging me, I always wanted to move a little. Finally,

one day, I heard a powerful voice call outside: Baby, are you ready? Can you come out now? It was Mom calling. I wanted to go out, I began to push hard: One, two, three, one, two, three..."

The "I" in the story is vividly depicted, starting to communicate with the outside world while still in the mother's womb. Yes, this a life that needs to interact with people and the outside world. From the very first day in the womb, it is like a seed sown in the soil of life, and from then on, it needs the nourishment of language. it is the hope and future of the mother and the family...

Cai Gao began to imagine everything that her little grandson could feel and hear while in the mother's womb. She conceived in spring, so Cai Gao expressed the sounds of spring, summer, and autumn until she was full-term. Then, she observed and described in a humorous tone how the baby looked at our world with a sense of wonder.

This is a book that Cai Gao loves very much. Drawing it was like being reborn as an infant. She said "I didn't have this feeling when my mother was still alive. I didn't truly appreciate how precious life was until she passed away. Then, every moment became increasingly vivid and beautiful. I was eager to depict all of this, to illustrate the anticipation for new life.

Cai Gao praises this kind of bond between humans and the earth, and between babies and their mothers. Our relationship with the earth and nature is just like the affection and connection between an infant and its mother. Throughout the entire creation of *How I Came to be Me*, Cai Gao was filled with these emotions and ideas. What she expressed was the wonder of a new life coming into being. The birth of an infant is like a new dawn!



名字很重要，
不然谁分得清谁是谁家的宝宝呢？

名字很重要，除了妈妈，
第一次看我的人要靠护士阿姨翻名字找到我。
我自己很简单，我只要张嘴“哇”一声就把自己找到了！
“哇……”
“哇——”



What Would it be Like Without...?

The Beauty of Innocence Must Not Be Absent

Written by **Cao Wenxuan**

(Writer; translator; picture book reviewer; educator; who received The Carle Honors Bridge Award in 2022)

Unlike her classic works such as *The Land of Peach Blossom*, *Baoer*, and *Hua Mulan*, *What Would it be Like Without...?* is a surprising, light-hearted picture book that steps into the lives of modern children.

The seed of the story was sown from the dialogues between Cai Gao and children. She precisely captured the nature of childhood, namely that the spiritual world of children is not a blank slate. Their words are like that of sages and philosophers, containing profound thoughts. "What would it be like without the sun?", "What Would it be Like Without the rain", things that may seem insignificant in daily life are of great significance to children. Their thinking even reaches the philosophical concept of existence. The innocent words of children sparked Cai Gao's creation. Along this line of thought, Cai Gao conveyed her creative concept: having no external pursuits and living contentedly, freely, and naturally like a child. She is like a messenger connecting ancient sages and the natural world, transmitting the values of great kindness and beauty to Chinese children. It not only bears a unique oriental flavour but also conforms to the nature of children.

This work differs from her previous traditional-themed stories, yet the nourishment of Chinese traditional

culture for Cai Gao is still discernible. The work commences with a scene that evokes the imagery of "Heaven and earth are dark and profound; the universe is vast and primeval", rather than starting from an individual. She always positions the individual within the context of nature for understanding, emphasizing the harmony between humans and nature. Humans are part of nature, and they reflect on themselves through nature, expanding from their own existence to others. Love is the most crucial element in interpersonal relationships. This is an emotion that children can naturally perceive and need, and it is also the plain, simple, and powerful poetic literature that the author intends to convey to readers.

Readers familiar with Cai Gao's works will also observe that this 78-year-old creator has abruptly changed her former style. From her later published works such as *Three Little Monks* and *What Can You See in the Moon*, which shifted towards a traditional Chinese painting style, it can be seen that she is not immutable. Her works have been evolving in accordance with her own rhythm. *What Would it be Like Without...?* is completely distinct from her previously well-known works and also deviates from the traditional impression of the Chinese painting style, being simple, modern, and unrestrained. With just a few strokes and a few colour blocks, she accurately depicts the expressions of children, and the beauty of innocence of children flows out from each picture. Without years of communication with children, continuous observation, and practice, such precise and confident brushstrokes would not be achievable. From this, we can witness the growth process of an author who adheres to her creative philosophy while constantly transforming herself and continuously discovering her own development.

Cai Gao, with her life nourished by art, returns to simplicity and integrates plain and poetic words and pictures into works dedicated to the children she respects.



Capturing the Spirit of Children

Written by *Xiao Aozi*

Cai Gao has a unique talent for connecting with children. Since the age of 40, she has maintained the habit of recording her interactions with, and observations of children.

Many may be surprised by the sudden change in Cai Gao's painting style at the age of 78. Although she is generally recognized for her classic picture books, especially award-winning ones, she has been interested in incorporating traditional Chinese brush painting for over 30 years, her creative methods and styles have never been limited to one approach. While many view traditional Chinese brush painting as quaint and mainly of interest to scholars of art history, Cai Gao makes use of traditional techniques to create works that are expressive. Her techniques range from brushwork to splashed ink, from black-and-white to abstract forms, and from traditional styles to modern colour combinations. Her depictions of children are particularly groundbreaking.

A brief overview of her creative journey in Chinese brush painting:

In 1997, Cai Gao used Chinese brush painting to illustrate *Strange Tales From A Chinese Studio*, published by Iwanami Shoten in Japan. Later, she contributed illustrations to various books such as Zhong Shuhe's *Nianlou: Short Poetic Essays*, Li Xiuwen's *To the Elders of Jiangdong*, Ye Meng's *Boy Ah Mo*. These illustrated books were well-received, though they were not categorized as picture books and thus not widely recognized as part of her body of work.

Before retiring in 2000, editing and creating picture books for young children was Cai Gao's primary focus. She created numerous titles such as *Tiantian's Tears*, *Violet Nursery School*, *The River's Gift*, *The Angry Balloon*, and *The Greedy Boy*. She also edited many children's books, including *Little Caterpillar's Dream*, *The Adventures of the Little Eggshell*, *The Wanderings of Beibei the Kitten* and *Where Is Deng Deng?* These books have enjoyed enduring popularity, with multiple reprints over three decades.

After retiring in 2000, Cai Gao pursued multiple creative directions. On one hand, she continued with classic picture book illustrations like *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, *Mulan*, and *Meng Jiangnv*. On the other hand, she continued to explore fine art, such as watercolour and oil paintings, for example her "Flowers and People" series. Additionally, she experimented with traditional Chinese painting styles,



producing works of varying sizes. Her 2013 creation *Three Monks* became popular among young readers, although the children depicted in the book wore traditional attire. In 2020, independent publisher Tu Tu published a collection of Cai Gao's works from 2000 onward, in a gift box, titled *Once When I was Little*, which received "The Beauty of Books in China" award in 2021.

The precursor to *What Would it Be Like Without...?*² was one of many small stories from Cai Gao's notebook. Fortunately, at the age of 78, she decided to publish it as a picture book. As Cai Gao wrote: "At my age, simplification comes naturally." This simplicity is hard-won and represents the essence of her philosophy.

Chinese painting emphasizes vividness and spirit. Ancient Chinese painting has distinct characteristics, which are challenging for modern artists to grasp let alone incorporate. Cai Gao not only embraced the ancient tradition but also made use of it, making a unique contribution to the art of the picture book.

Painting children is notoriously difficult, especially capturing their personality and spirit. There is a Chinese saying: "It is easy to paint skin and bone but difficult to capture the spirit." Cai Gao deliberately aimed to capture the "spirit" of children. She rarely painted directly from models. Instead, she observed children closely, made sketches, and internalized them before putting pen to paper. I cannot draw if I am not moved. Without inspiration, I do not make a draft; that is how I create. Where does such confidence come from? When drawing, one faces a blank sheet of paper, requiring faith, encounter, and emotion. You

cannot paint without feeling. Modifications lose the original energy. Each stroke calls to the next, pushing forward. All elements are summoned on one go. They were always there, like a storeroom full of treasures waiting to be illuminated. In dim light, they look even better. I have collected treasures throughout my life, just for the sake of expression. People have expressive needs. I am not an artist who drafts extensively. I don't build works like assembling blocks, but I incubate ideas for a long time until my emotions are ripe".

Cai Gao's favorite term is "Lai Shen" which means 'capture the spirit' : "The love of childhood becomes something magical, taking form. Forgetting form allows one to capture the essence, the playful movements of children. General depictions of children are figurative, evoking specific details. When an artist matures, only the spirit remains. Capturing a child's expression without specific details is challenging, a refined distillation. Ignoring facial expressions and focusing on movement conveys the essence. Avoid specificity; depicting specific features leads readers to ask 'who is this?' 'or' what are they doing?' My paintings are vague, like fireflies, elusive yet luminous. At that point, form and spirit merge. Deep contemplation of life is required to extract and convey a child's energy and vitality, painting fluidly without hesitation." She paints not what she sees but what she feels, capturing the essence of children.

Cai Gao's works exudes an atmosphere, evident in her Chinese paintings. This ambiance and temperament is an expression of her entire being, not mere technical training. As the Chinese say, "painting reflects the artist." Traditional Chinese paintings depict children as happy and gentle, while those from the 1970s and 1980s portray children as rosy and healthy. Different eras project different ideas about how children are supposed to be. *What Would it Be Like Without...?* addresses a child's profound question: "Mom, can you tell me a story about a child like me?" Today's children need to be represented in picture books.



5

Ten Most Important Titles

The Dragon Robe Festival

Written by **Wu Chaozhu**, Illustrated by **Cai Gao**

2016/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

The Old man and the Flower Fairies

Written by **Feng Menglong** (Ming Dynasty)

Text by **Liu ShouHua & Yiwei**, Illustrated by **Cai Gao**

2024/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

Baoer (The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden)

Written by **Pu Songling** (Qing Dynasty)

Adapted/Illustrated by **Cai Gao**

2021/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

The Hundred-Birds' Feather Robe

Adapted/Illustrated by **Cai Gao**(Folktale of Miao people)

2023/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

The Land of the Peach Blossom

Written by **Tao Yuanming** (Eastern Jin Dynasty)

Adapted by **Matsui Tadashi**, Illustrated by **Cai Gao**, Tr **Tang Yaming**

2019/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

Meng Jiangnv

Written by **Zuo Qiuming** (the Spring and Autumn Period)

Adapted by **Tang Yaming**, Illustrated by **Cai Gao**

2019/21st Century Publishing House

Hua Mulan

Folk Songs of the Northern Dynasty

Illustrated by **Cai Gao**

2019/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

***Blazing City 1938* (an accordion-style wordless picture book)**

Written by **Cai Gao**

Illustrated by **Cai Gao** and **Aozi**

2023/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

How I Came to be Me

Written/Illustrated by **Cai Gao**

2024/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

What Would it be Like Without...?

Written/Illustrated by **Cai Gao**

2024/Daylight Publishing House

Hua Mulan

Folk Songs of the Northern Dynasty



Read Cai Gao: Imagine a Happy Hua Mulan

By Wang Yingrong

I recited The Mulan Poem when I was still a little girl.

I can still recite more than half of the *The Mulan Poem*, thanks to my cousin. This boy, who was joking, told me the *The Mulan Poem* was a tribute to his hometown (his family lived in a town also called “Mulan”). I admired him so much that I memorized the whole ballad for many years, I distorted it a bit though.

Mulan, a girl acting on her own will went to war. She not only returned safely but also met the emperor. Facing the highest, she was neither humble nor overbearing. She refused money and official status. She just wanted to return home. I knew nothing about war as a child, but I became fascinated with the story. Later, as an adult, I saw different versions of Mulan, westernized versions like Disney's Mulan who looks nothing like a woman born in ancient China. Some say she looks more like an American soldier.

Zhao Wei, a famous actor, also filmed Hua Mulan told the story. When Mulan was young, she would fight to protect her friends. Her father demanded that she apologize. He was a traditional father who told Mulan: "The Hua family only fight on the battlefield. If you have to fight, be a man in the next life."

As war approached, her father was eager to go to war even though he was seriously ill. Mulan, decided to sneak off to join the army in her father's place and without his approval. Without considering the reality of war, she threw herself into frontline for years. Fortunately, she survived and returned to the capital city

to meet the Emperor. Finally, for the sake of hard-won peace, she abandoned her lover and return home alone.

From patriarchy to imperial power to war... Mulan never saw a moment's peace. We think of Mulan as a tragic story.

Isn't there another possibility? Even in the story of Sisyphus, who was condemned to push a boulder up a hill for all eternity Camus advised us to "imagine Sisyphus happy".

The answer lies in Cai Gao's Mulan, let's imagine a happy Mulan.

Imagine a happy Mulan

One thousand readers, one thousand Hua Mulans. Why do Chinese people need to read Cai Gao's Mulan?

"There have been many contemporary adaptations of Hua Mulan's story," Mr. Ajia said. "Cai Gao doesn't deliberately tap into the female consciousness, but tries to recreate a faithful version that brings meaning and responds to real life. "Not to cater to the current trends, but to return to the original text, and restore Chinese tradition, a Mulan who appreciates the happiness of simple life.

Unlike *The Land of the Peach Blossom*, which has a fresh and bright colour scheme, The picture book *Hua Mulan* is full of the gray hues of the North. The story begins at the lining page, an anxious general riding on a horse, on the copyright page is a young girl weaving. On the title page, an old couple are reading a message, all are part of the prologue of Mulan.

The text is directly taken from the original poem of Mulan because there is no better way to tell this "dense and legendary story". Even without knowing its meaning, if one reads it aloud, one can feel the beauty of ancient poetry.

"Click,click,and click click click,by the doorway Mulan weaves."

Cai Gao said, the poem has a kind of beauty that "people cannot bear to disturb", "very poetic, very calm", "Cai Gao read the ballad many times, a sensitive heart capable of appreciating the beauty of everyday life.

It is from this perspective Cai Gao began painting a picture of Mulan's home.

In Cai's opinion, the detailed depiction of Mulan's house and daily life was necessary to explain why Hua Mulan chose to join the army in her father's place.

"If Mulan's family life was not so good, so warm or so beautiful, she would not have done such a brave thing, she would not have fought for her homeland, for her parents, for her people." In order to protect the family and the life which she loves so deeply, Mulan had to step out. She fought out of parental affection rather than filial piety, out of love and not to prove herself, she took hold of her destiny.

Oddly, while the original text clearly says "leaving my parents in the morning", many versions of Mulan focus on portraying Mulan as a rebellious girl who leaves without saying goodbye. Fortunately, in Cai Gao's version, Mulan doesn't have to get her father drunk and doesn't sneak away at night. When her mother heard Mulan was joining the army, she cried. Fortunately, she still had Mulan's sister at her side. The father and younger brother watch Mulan's practice with her sword. The boy is still young and curious.

In the end, Mulan wears a military uniform, says goodbye to her parents, and is accompanied by her family to the gate of village. I always think that the Mulan who said goodbye is much happier than that



silent girl at home.

Mulan is a story of transcendence,' Cai Gao said. From the time when Mulan joined the army in place of her father to the final victory in battle, it was the first time she surpassed her limits. And "I can serve in the army for my father, I can also walk away easily from fame and wealth", This is the second point where she transcends her limits.

Cai Gao asked her audience a question I had never thought about: "Why did Mulan choose to go home?" Is she tired of war, of being discovered? Or does she miss her parents? Mulan makes her decision to "return home". Cai Gao believes that at that point Mulan had 'broken the yoke', she surpassed material well-being, surpassed life-and-death", she has grown up, but deep inside she was still the same girl sitting in front of her door.

"The roots of childhood are deep enough for Mulan to come back," she said. Memories of family life, of the country, neighborhood, always called her back. Even after victory in war, Mulan turned down an official position and returned home. It is a memory as captivating as *The Land of the Peach Blossom*. To love one's homeland, is a very deep-rooted thing. With urban life we no longer have this connection to the land. We are homeless, A house is just a place to live. We have lived with each other for a lifetime, but we do not know our neighbors next door. *The Land of the Peach Blossom* and *Hua Mulan* can help us fight the apathy and anonymity of modern life and remind us to care about ourselves and others. I want to convey these messages in my work."

Before saying that, Cai talked about her grandmother and her parents. What could be more beautiful than being old enough yet still able to recall the trivialities of childhood? Who knows better than she what it feels like to have enough childhood roots?

So we see the last page, the world in gray and white, vast, broad, only the figure of Mulan riding a horse a riding, in gray red and gray green, Mulan riding a horse. It is not a feeling of having nowhere to go , or having to return, but a feeling of longing.

I talked with my friends about returning home for holidays.

Those who choose to go home happy are probably those whose "roots are deep enough in childhood", those whose roots are still able to draw nutritional support into adulthood; Those who have to go back or not go back at all are mostly reluctant to return to their childhood, let alone face the "poverty" in self-esteem or happiness after returning home. In the middle of the two, there are people who want to be close to their hometown, but want to withdraw as well. Kobayashi Ichicha's haiku "Hometown, touching, are all prickly flowers" describes this complicated feeling of home.

Thus, we understand Cai Gao's words: "The roots of childhood are deep enough."





Meng Jiangnv

Folkstory
adapted by TANG Yaming

About Meng Jiangnv

Written by *Cai Gao*

Meng Jiangnv is one of the four folk love legends in China. The prototype of the story can be traced back to the Warring States Period (476 BC -221 BC). It has been passed down from generation to generation and changed continuously. It was not until the Tang Dynasty that the story became what it is today.

A few hundred years is enough for folk tales to be formed, but the story of “Meng Jiangnv” took a very long time to develop. It is a story that has been retold for more than 2,400 years, what is written transcends any period of history. People had been reinterpreting this story, and collectively recreating it for millennia, reflecting the core values of a nation. In Cai Gao's view, there is a life affirming spirit in the story.

Meng Jiangnv is a representative of Chinese rural women. We had “Meng Jiangnv” in every dynasty. In China, the Great Wall was begun in ancient times. It was not until the Emperor Qin unified China that the Great Wall united the country. The Great Wall is majestic and solemn; built on the blood of countless ordinary people.

It could be said that every section of the Great Wall, or every brick and stone, has a soul. When the Great Wall sensed the grief of Meng Jiangnv, it empathized with her. When the Heaven and the Earth cried with her, then the Great Wall collapsed. The Heavens fell apart and the Earth shook. The story embodies the deepest respect for individual life. The sanctity of life lies in the the existence and dignity of individuals, even the humblest and weakest; the purest love cannot be desecrated.

Meng Jiangnv: The solemn and Stirring Love

Dictated by Cai Gao

Meng Jiangnv the story of a woman who faced great challenges as she sought her husband for the sake of love. Meng Jiangnv had to take care of her elders. This was resolved because of her parents' love and understanding. They understood their daughter's love for her husband, so they supported her to go and look for Xiliang. Meng Jiangnv herself symbolizes the completeness of love.

But taking the first step requires more than sympathy and understanding, it requires courage, determination and willpower. Before taking the first step, Meng Jiangnv knew clearly that the road ahead would be full of difficulties, she knew she might never return.

I didn't give Meng Jiangnv super powers. She is just industrious, simple, beautiful and full of primitive vitality. If there is anything extraordinary about her, it is her willpower. When Meng Jiangnv encountered difficulties, miracles always occurred. The mountain god came to give her instruction, and the river had to make way for her. What I wanted to express is that the difficulties had been overcome - Meng Jiangnv crossed the river, no matter how; the mountains bowed down to her. These miracles represented the physical world being subdued to her spirit. It is the great love and tenacity, the power of a life that made it possible for her to overcome these challenges.

Meng Jiangnv had overcome the forces of nature, but she still had to face political and imperial forces. Moreover, she had to face death. After much hardship, she found that her husband had died building the Great Wall like countless others. Meng Jiangnv's way of overcoming death was to unify with nature. Death brought her transcendence. She became part of nature.





The Dragon Robe Festival

Folkstory
adapted by Wu Chaozhu

About The Dragon Robe Festival

Text by *Xiao Aozi*

The Dragon Robe Festival was the first book where Cai Gao demonstrated her own direction as an artist and author. It is a folk tale from the Tujia people which deals with themes of good and evil and the conflict that arises between the ruler and the people. The story centers on the hero Qin Hou and his struggle against tyranny.

In the legend Qin Hou attempts to assassinate a cruel emperor to avenge his parents but is ultimately killed himself. The villagers treasure his bloody clothes and the blood-stained dragon robe. In order to commemorate the hero, they take out the clothes to wash and dry on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month every year. Since then, that day has become the Dragon Robe Festival of the Tujia people.

The story also questions the relationship between failure and success because although he is ultimately killed by the emperor, he becomes the hero of the people immortalized and celebrated down the ages.

The story uses mythic symbolism. Qin Hou is born with a tattoo of three dragons, an imperial symbol, which indicates that he is the equal of the emperor despite his ordinary birth. The emperor attempts to have the baby killed. His parents are killed because they refuse to hand him over. So when he grows up he vows to avenge them. Qin Hou becomes a master archer by training for three years but ultimately fails to take revenge at the right time because of his sister's impatience.

The story raises questions about the nature of heroism. Qin Hou's commitment to the people is the very thing that leads to his death. Heroism is more than the power to defeat evil. There is a deeper heroism at



work in the story. When the general threatens to kill the villagers, Qin Hou is prepared to hand himself over in order to prevent the slaughter of innocent people. To express the heroism in the story Cai Gao uses a very stylized way of drawing the characters combined with bold colours to match the themes of the story. The use of size is one example. When Qin Hou uses his supernatural strength, he towers over the other characters, almost filling the page. When he faces a daunting task, such as pulling some magic bamboo out of the ground, the bamboo towers over him, indicating the herculean nature of the task.

In the battle scene Cai Gao uses composition from a birds eye perspective to show the chaos and violence of war without any bloodshed. Cai Gao's technique allows the reader to interpret the image themselves, indicating horror without actually showing it. We bring our own understanding to the image, which is Cai Gao's intention. When Qin Hou is killed, we see him stretched out on the ground, with the dragons on his body ascending to heaven. It is clear what has happened, the surrounding figures recoil in terror. The use of black as a background makes the figures stand out and indicates the death of the hero. This contrasts with the white background indicating peace and tranquility on the following page.

Thus Cai Gao succeeds in using the folk tradition of painting with a modern perspective in order to suggest the themes of the tale.





The Old man and the Flower Fairies

Folkstory
Written by Liu ShouHua & Yiwei

“The Land of Peach Blossom” in Everyday Life

Text by *Xiao Aozi*

The first edition of Cai Gao's *The Old Man who Loved Flowers – An Old Chinese Tale* was published in 1998 at the invitation of Fukuinkan Shoten. The Japanese text was by Ms. Kyoko Matsuoka of JBBY, adapted from *The Old Man and the Fairies* by Feng Menglong of the Ming Dynasty in China. The protagonist of the story is an old man called Qiu Weng who loves nature and gardening. Unfortunately his carefully cultivated garden catches the eye of a rogue who intends to seize it by underhanded means and throw him into prison. The flowers, endowed with spirit, transform into beautiful fairies to rescue him, repaying his daily care for them. The ending sees the fairies punishing the rogue, bringing great satisfaction. The book's landscapes and characters are vividly depicted, especially the landscapes, which draw on the charm of traditional Chinese landscape paintings, making readers feel as if they were there and evoking their love for the charming scenery of southern in China.

There is connection between art and real life. In real life, artist Cai Gao is an flower enthusiast. Cai Gao said, "I like green things and enjoy spending all day with the flowers in my garden. Flowers do communicate with people, but in their own way. As long as you pay enough attention, you can understand their messages." Perhaps half of this habit comes from her deep love for nature and farming culture cultivated at Taihu, and the other half from her love of beauty. Cai Gao has always enjoyed planting. In

the 90s she began to cultivate her back garden with flowers with gourds and morning glories covering the fences. She would even decorate her office with plants in small bottles and jars.

In this public space, she planted wisteria, cypress vine, honeysuckle, roses, jasmine, hydrangeas, lilies, gardenia, and various vegetables... quietly creating her own little green spot in the midst of the gray concrete jungle. She did all this naturally. Planting for her seemed like an embrace of nature, life, and of beauty. She painted on the rooftop and wrote many notes related to planting. In 2016, with her two exhibitions at the Changsha Museum and the Moon Centre for Contemporary Art, her rooftop began to be known. People naturally associated her rooftop with works like *The Land of the Peach Blossom* and



The Old Man and the flower fairies, marveling at the little paradise she had created on her rooftop. In 2018, Cai Gao's diary *Each Seedling has its Own Rainfall* was published, and people were surprised to find that her writing was so warm and expressive. In 2024, *Let it Bloom* was published and won 10 awards across the country in one year. Cai Gao said that her texts, her picture books and her rooftops are all part of her peach blossom land.





The Hundred-Birds' Feather Robe

A Gift for All Girls

Written by *Cai Gao*



The Hundred-Birds' Feather Robe is a simple folk story of the Miao People. "Once upon a time," The story began like this "There was a young man named Azhuang who lived in a mountain village". His parents died and he was so poor, that no one would marry him. Azhuang might have been poor, but he was also kind, strong, upright, honest, and hard working. Unfortunately, these qualities were not valued.

One day, a man wearing shoes and holding a piece of meat, taunted Azhuang, who was barefoot and carrying wood "Why don't you invite an artist to draw you a girl to keep you company?" It was a joke, but Azhuang treated it seriously. So he sold the wood for money, and asked an artist to draw him a beautiful girl. The artist also joked: "This is my daughter Acai, treat her kindly, please." Now Azhuang was no longer lonely. The following pages show something wonderful happened: his cottage became clean and tidy, the stove was warm, the food was steaming hot, but who made it? Azhuang notices that the girl in the painting seems to be smiling.

It is the girl in the painting who did this for him. Once he found it out, Azhuang said to her, "Acai, I have called your name a thousand times. Will you marry me?" When he says this, Azhuang hides the painting behind his back, and it is easy for the young reader to see. Acai is shy, but happy. So, they get married.

Don't misunderstand the theme of the story. Doing house work was an important ability in ancient China, regardless gender. There is an old saying "Cultivating an individual's ability makes one capable of running the family and keeping a nation in order". Instead of treating housework as a burden, a wise person treats it as a practical skill and therefore a virtue.

The later part of the story tells of the conflict between the couple and an evil emperor. The story deals with many contradictions: sincerity and hypocrisy, altruism and greed, wisdom and stupidity, beauty and ugliness. The emperor wants Acai for his wife. He demands various of impossible tasks, if Azhuang fails, he will take Acai away or kill them both.

Acai represents the ingenuity of the Miao artist, and has the power to bring her creations to life. She cuts a paper flower, it becomes a real flower. She cuts a paper bird and it flies away. She also creates a living horse from bamboo. That is to say that the hands of creator bestow a liveliness' on their art work which gives them life.

The story follows from these miracles. The bamboo horse beats the Emperor's horses in race, the couple's small boat beats the Emperor's big ship, and the weak prevail over the strong. The righteousness are rewarded, and the wicked are punished. The story has a funny ending in which the evil emperor the symbol of power, is turned into a bird and flies away.

The folk's affirmation and praise of women, their attitude towards love, and their mockery of the powerful are vividly expressed in the story. When I was young, I heard my grandmother tell me the stories of "silly husbands and clever wives" and loved the respect and praise for women in folk stories. I think this kind of story is alive. Even today, it has a strong social significance for the gender inequality that still exists.

It is a gift to all girls.





Baa, Baa, Black Sheep

Book Review of Baa, Baa, Black Sheep

Dr *Wang Lin* (Editor of People's Education Press)



Baa, Baa, Black Sheep is a collection of English nursery rhymes. Nursery rhymes from various countries generally have a long history, passed down orally, with harmonious rhymes, often hummed between parents and children or among children themselves, serving to soothe emotions and also to improve language skills.

The nursery rhymes in *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep* are still sung by children in English-speaking countries and are all classics. The book includes the original English text, allowing Chinese children to recite them and experience their rhythm and musicality.

What makes *Baa, Baa Black Sheep* particularly special is that it is illustrated by the renowned picture book artist Cai Gao. This world-renowned painter usually takes traditional Chinese themes as the content of her creations. However, in this work of nursery rhymes, from the expressions, clothing, and behaviour of the characters, it shows the strong cultural characteristics of foreign lands. One can't help but marvel at the artist's creativity.

When I look at the illustrations in this book, I always feel that they share something in common with Cai Gao's picture books on Chinese themes - that is, a sense of innocent simplicity. All of Cai Gao's picture books feature innocent and romantic characters. This reminds me of a saying - we from different countries are so different, yet so similar.



6 Bibliography

1. As an illustrator

The Beautiful Garden (*picture book*)

written by Unknown
adapted by Cai Gao
Hunan People's Publishing House, 1979

The Understudy (*comic-strip*)

written by Unknown
adapted by Chun Fu
Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1982

Asian Folk Tales (*illustrated book*)

selected & edited by UNESCO
Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 1986

The River's Gift (*picture book*)

written by Tan Xianfeng
China Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 1986

Violet Nursery School (*illustrated Book*)

[Chinese]
written by Zheng ChunHua
Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 1985

The Little Mermaid (*comic-strip*)

written by Hans Christian Andersen
adapted by Yu Li
Shanghai Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 1988

Ganjiang and Moye (*comic-strip*)

written by Gan Bao Eastern Jin Dynasty
adapted by Yu Li
Shanghai Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 1988

The Snail Fairy (*comic-strip*)

Chinese folktale
adapted by Yu Li
Shanghai Children's Publishing House, 1988

Qingfeng (*comic-strip*)

written by Pu Songling (Qing Dynasty)
adapted by Yu Li
Shanghai Juvenile & Children's Books Publishing House, 1988

King Lear (*comic-strip*)

written by William Shakespeare
adapted by Yu Li
Shanghai Children's Publishing House, 1988

The Dragon Robe Festival (*picture book*)

written by Wu Chaozhu
Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 1989

The Greedy Boy - A Selection of English Nursery Rhymes (*picture book*)

edited by Zhang Jilou
Chongqing Juvenile & Children's Publishing House,
1990

I am a Chinese Child (*picture book*)

edited by Li Zhongyun & Liang Tingwang
written by Wang Miaowen et al
Hubei Juvenile & Children's Books Publishing House,
1992

The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden (*picture book*)

written by Pu Songling (Qing Dynasty)
adapted by Zhuang Yuan
Zhejiang Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 1991

Violet Nursery School (*illustrated Book*)

[Japanese]

written by Zheng ChunHua
translated by Naka Yumiko

Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers, Inc., Japan, 1992

Tao Hua Yuan JI- The Earthly Paradise

(*picture book*)

[Japanese]

written by Tao Yuanming (Eastern Jin Dynasty)
adapted by Matsui Tadashi

Fukuinkan Publishers, Inc., Japan, 2002

The Hundred-Birds' Feather Robe

(*picture book*)

A folktale of the Chinese Miao people
adapted by Cai Gao

Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 1993

The Folk Tales of China, Korea and Japan

(7 stories) (*illustrated Books*)

[Chinese, Japanese & Korean]

The Committee of Children's Fairy Tales Exchange
Project. Published in China, Korea and Japan, 2004

The Magic Leaf (*picture book*)

[traditional Chinese]

written by Handan Chun (Three Kingdoms-Wei Dynasty)
adapted by Chen Cheng-Hsin

Hsin Yi Foundation, Taiwan, 1993

**Butterfly and the Pea Flower: Classic
Chinese Children's Poem (*illustrated Book*)**

edited by Jin Bo
illustrated by Cai Gao et al

Heibei Education Publishing House, 2010

Chinese Legends (*illustrated Book*)

[Japanese]

Adapt by ZHuang Yuan (Original text by Pu Songling)
Translated by Zhao Fei

Cox Publishing Japan, 1995

Meng Jiangnv (*picture book*)

[Japanese]

written by Zuo Qiuming (the Spring and Autumn Period)
adapted by Tang Yaming

Ivanami Shoten Publishers, Japan, 2012

Strange Tales From A Chinese Studio (*illustrated Book*)

[Japanese]

written by Pu Songling (Qing Dynasty)
edited & translated by Tatsuma Shosuke

Wanami Shoten Publishers, Inc., Japan, 1997

Hua Mulan (*picture book*)

Simplified & Traditional Chinese

Folk Songs of the Northern Dynasty

Tomorrow Publishing House & Hsin Yi Foundation, Beijing
& Taiwan, 2013

The Story of Ahei (*illustrated Book*)

written by Shen Congwen

Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1997

Beautiful Chinese Folk Tales

(*illustrated Book*)

Chinese folk tales
edited by Liu shouHua

Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2015

Tiantian's Tears (*picture book*)

written by Jin Bo

21 Century Publishing House, 1998

The Land of the Peach Blossom (*picture book*)

written by Tao Yuanming (Eastern Jin Dynasty)
adapted by Matsui Tadashi

2019/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

The Old Man who Loved Flowers (*picture book*)

[Japanese]

written by Feng Menglong (Ming Dynasty)
adapted by Matsuoka Kyoko

Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers, Inc., Japan, 1998

Hua Mulan (*picture book*)

Simplified & Traditional Chinese

Folk Songs of the Northern Dynasty

2019/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

Baa, Baa, Black Sheep
(illustrated Book)

Edited/illustrated by Cai Gao Translated/Edited by Xiao
Aozi & Dr. Laurence McKnight

Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2024

The Old man and the Flower Fairies
(illustrated Book)

Written by Liu ShouHua & Yiwei
Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2024

2. As an author-illustrator

Cai Gao (Art Album)

Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2008

Blazing City 1938

Yilin Press, 2013
Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2023

Three Monks (picture book)

Chinese folk tale
adapted by Cai Gao
Education & Science Publishing House, Beijing, 2015
2019/Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2024

Where the Moon Goes, I Go (picture book)

Changsha folk song
Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2016

What Can You See in the Moon
(picture book)

Changsha folk song
Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2016

How I Came to Be Me (picture book)

Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2016
Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2024

Each Seedling Has Its Own Rainfall

CITIC Press, 2018
Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2024

Baoer (picture book)

Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2019

Once When I was Little (6 volumes)
(graphic books)

Beijing United Publishers, 2020

The Magic Leaf (picture book)

Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House, 2023

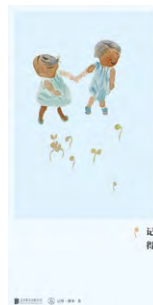
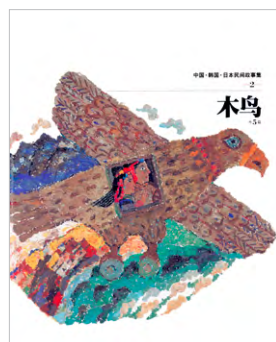
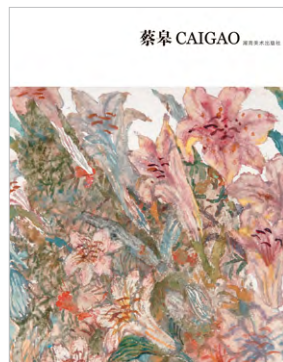
Let it Bloom

Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2024

What Would it Be Like Without...?

Daylight Publishing House, 2024







7

List of Awards and Other Distinctions



1) As an author / illustrator / designer

- 1980** **The Beautiful Garden** (*picture book*)
Won the first prize for the “1976-1980 Hunan Children’s Book Art” Award, 1980
- 1980** **The Story of Helong** (*comic-strip*)
Won the second prize for “excellent work” in the Red Scarf journal, 1980
- 1981** **The Three-Colour Ballpoint Pen** (*comic-strip*)
Won the second prize for “excellent work” in the Red Scarf journal, 1981
- 1983** **Meimei** (*illustrations*)
Won the third prize of “1982 Annual Illustration Award” of the periodical Little Bee by Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House.
- 1984** **The Angry Balloon** (*picture book*)
Won the third prize of Hunan Art Exhibition for Celebrating the 35th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China
- 1987** **Seven Sisters** (*illustration*)
Chinese Children’s Book Illustration Competition.
Won the Excellent Work Award in the Chinese Children’s Book Illustration Invitational Competition
- 1988** **The White Lotus Petals** (*Illustrated Book*)
Won the first prize of “The Cover Design Award of the five central and southern provinces (regions)”
- 1989** **The Dragon Robe Festival** (*picture book*)
Awarded the “Excellence Award for the 40th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” by the Hunan Department of Culture and the Hunan Branch of the Chinese Artists Association

- 1998** **The Mermaid Princess** (*illustrations*)
Awarded the second prize in the “The Contest of Art, Calligraphy and Photography Works for Bureau System Staff” by Hunan Press and Publication Bureau
- 1990** **The Little Rooster Wants to Borrow Ears** (*Illustrated Book*)
The cover design was awarded the “Excellent Work” by the Sixth Annual Conference of Book Design in the Six Central and South Provinces & Districts
- 1990** **The Rabbit King Sells Its Ears** (*illustrated book*)
The illustrations were awarded the third prize of Book Design in Six Provinces (Districts) in Central and South China
- 1992** **Li Xiaoguai’s Ears** (*Illustrated Book*)
The cover design was awarded the third prize of the Book Design in Hunan Province.
- 1993** **The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden** (*picture book*)
Won the BIB Golden Apple Award at the 14th Biennial of Illustration Bratislava.
- 2003** **Nianlou: Short Poetic Essays** (*Illustrated Book*)
The overall design won the first prize of the Hunan Book Design Award
- 2010** **Butterfly and the Pea Flower: Classic Chinese Children’s Poem** (*Illustrated Book*)
Won the Bing Xin Children’s Book Award
Won the Children’s Poetry and Painting Award – Children’s Book TOP 10
- 2013** **Hua Mulan** (*picture book*)
Won the gold medal in the picture book category of the first Chen Bochui International Children’s Literature Award
- 2016** **What Can You See in the Moon** (*picture book*)
The First ZHANG Leping Picture Book Award Honorary Art Creation Award
Listed in “The Beijing News Annual Children’s books”
- 2016** **Where the Moon Goes, I Go** (*picture book*)
Nominated for the “Book Times Award”
Shortlisted for the Feng Zikai Picture Book Award
- 2021** **Once When I was Little** (*picture book*)
The Beauty of Books in China , 2021
- 2022** **Special Contribution Award, 34th Chen Bochui International Children’s Literature Award**

2022

Baoer

was selected among the 100 outstanding children's books at the Bologna Children's Book Fair.

Cai Gao received the Special Contribution Award of the Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award.

Cai Gao was elected as the Chinese candidate for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award.

2023

Blazing City 1938

*garnered the Best Picture Book Award of the 35th Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award.

*was enlisted among the top ten original good picture books in China.

*was designated as one of the best books of the year by Zhongnan Publishing House

*received the annual honor of original picture books. Picture Book Award,

*was conferred the Special Tribute Work at the Fifth Chinese National Culture Grand Ceremony.

2024

Cai Gao was named as a "Most Influential Author of the Year" by Dangdang.com(one of the biggest online book dealer in China)

Cai Gao was shortlisted for the "Hans Christian Andersen Award" (Illustrator).

Cai Gao was awarded the title of "Chinese Excellence" at the Bologna Children's Book Fair.

Cai Gao won the Cultural Inheritance Special Award of the Fourth Hua Mao Education Award.

Let it Bloom

*Was among the "Top Ten" literary works in the Sixth "National Reading · Bookstore Selection"

;*Was shortlisted for the "Top Ten Children's Books of the Year" at the 25th Shenzhen Reading Month;

*the "Read Weekly" recommended book list of China News Publishing & Broadcasting Press,

*and the "Good Book List" of The Beijing News Book Review Weekly, etc.

*2024 Book Industry Annual Tribute Book

*Was selected as a "Best Book of the Year" by CCTV's "Reading" program;

* "Zhongnan Good Book" of the Year

*Good Books of Literature

* "Searchlight" Original Good Books in Humanities and Social Sciences

* Good Books Reading Children's Book List

The interactive installation puppet play Baoer (adapted from the picture book of Baoer)

*was selected for the first Dongbuzhou International Art Festival and won the Best Play Award,

1.CCTV(China Central Television)

* Best Director Award,

*Best Stage Design Award

* Best Actor Award

* It was also selected for the 7th Beijing International Puppet and Marionette Art Festival

* The 11th Wuhan International Drama Season, the 23rd Shanghai International Arts Festival -Golden Lotus Puppet Art Week, where it claimed the Best Performance Award, and the 6th Daliangshan Drama Festival.

2) As a children's book editor (awarded to books)



The Adventure of the Little Eggshell

1987 Won the "National Children's Book Awards -Excellent Book Award"

1995 Won the "National Children's Picture Book -Little Pine Award" by CBBY Children's Book Working Committee

The Black Eyes Series (*Series of picture books*)

1996 Awarded the "National Excellent Children's Book Editor Award" by the Eight ministries and commissions

around 1996 Won the "Special Award of Hunan Books"

1996 Won "The Best Works Award" by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee

1996 Won the "Annual China's Picture Book Award" by the General Administration of Press and Publication Chinese Publishers Association

The Hyacinths Series (*Series of picture books*)

1994 Won the second Prize of the "National Excellent Children's Books"

1994 Awarded the "National Excellent Children's Books Award" by the Ministry of Education

The Wanderings of Beibei the Kitten

1995 Awarded the "National Excellent Children's Book Editor Award" by the Eight ministries and commissions

1994 Won the second prize of "Excellent Picture Book Editor" issued by Hunan Press and Publication Bureau

1993 Won the second Prize of the "National Excellent Children's Books"

1995 Won the "National Children's Picture Book -Little Pine Award" by CBBY Children's Book Working Committee

The Clumsy Bear

1993 Won the second Prize of the "National Excellent Children's Books"

1994 Won the third prize of "The Excellent Picture Book Editor Award of Hunan Province"
The Peter Rabbit Series

1996 Won the second Prize of the "National Excellent Children's Books"

The Kitten Granny

1995 Won "The Colour Ring Award of Central and Southern Six Provinces"

1995 Won the "National Children's Picture Book -Little Pine Award" by CBBY Children's Book Working Committee

The Big Bunny and the Little Bunny Who Became Great Detectives

1995 Won the "National Children's Picture Book -Little Pine Award" by CBBY Children's Book Working Committee

Bega's Cherry-Class

1995 Won the "National Children's Picture Book -Little Pine Award" by CBBY Children's Book Working Committee

The Adventure of Qiqi

1995 Won the "Award of Book Design & Illustration" at the National Book Design Art Exhibition held by China Publishers Association and China Artists Association

Where is Dengdeng

1997 Won "The Colour Ring Award of Central and Southern Six Provinces"

A Green Dream: A Tree

1999 Awarded "The Best Book Award" by China Book Business Report

The Festival of the Bull King

1989 Won the third prize of Noma International Children's Book Illustration Competition in Japan.

1992 Won the second prize of "1988-1990 Excellent Picture Book Editor" by Hunan Press and Publication Bureau

Witty Storys From Around the World

Strange Stories From Around the World

Funny Stories From Around the World

1992 Won the third prize of "1988-1990 Excellent Picture Book Editor" by Hunan Press and Publication

Witty Stories From Around the World

Strange Stories From Around the World

1990 Winner of the 4th "National Golden Key Award" issued by the National Book Golden Key Award Working Committee and the Publishing Research Editorial Department

The Painting library of Chinese National Festival Custom Stories

1991 Won the Bronze Award of the “Chinese Arts Book Award” by the General Administration of Press and Publication

1992 won the third prize of “1988-1990 Excellent Picture Book Editor” by Hunan Press and Publication Bureau



3) As a children’s book editor (awarded to Cai Gao)

1990 “1989 Annual Award” of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House

1992 “1991 Annual Excellent Editor Award” of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House
Annual

1994 “1993 Annual Spiritual Civilization Award” of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House

1995 “1994 Annual Advanced Worker” of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House

1996 “1995 Annual Outstanding Worker” of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House

1996 “Top 10 Young Picture Book Editors in Hunan Province” awarded by the Administration of Press and Publication of Hunan Province and Hunan Publishers Association

1996 “National Outstanding Young Editors Award” by China Publishing Association and China Editors Society

1998 “1997 Annual Advanced Individual” of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House

1999 “1998 Annual Advanced Individual” of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House

1999 “1998 Annual Award” by the Administration of Press and Publication of Hunan Province

2000 “1999 Annual Advanced Individual” of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House

2000 “National Excellent Children's Worker” awarded by the Women and Children Working Committee of the State Council



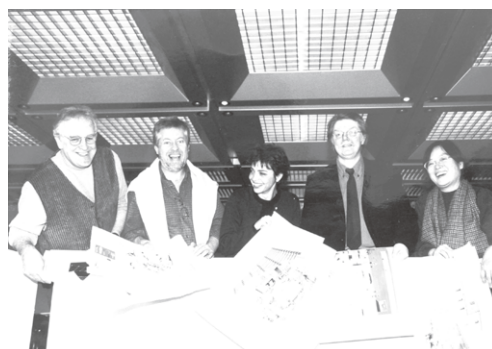
Illustrations from *The Little Mermaid*

4) Social position

- 1998** Elected as council members of Hunan Artists Association, director of Children's Art Committee of Hunan Artists Association
- Appointed as a council members of the CBBY

5) Social activities

- 1996** Served as a special jury for the first *China Children's Picture Book Award - The Little Pine Award of CBBY*
- 2000** Served as one of the five juries of the 34th *Bologna International Children's Picture Book Illustration Exhibition*



- 2010** Served as a jury of the first *Hsin Yi Picture Book Award*
- 2013** Served as a jury of the third *Feng Zikai Chinese Children's Picture Book Award*
- 2018** Served as one of the five juries of *The Golden Pinwheel Young Illustrators Competition*



8

Exhibitions, Lectures, Fairs, etc.

- 1984** *The Angry Balloon* was selected for the Sixth National Art Exhibition, 1984
- 1986** The illustrations for “*The Spear*”, “*The Carpenter's Son*” and “*The Fisherman's Daughter*” in “Asian Folk Tales” were selected for the 1986 National Literary Illustration Exhibition
- 1989** *Dragon Robe Festival* was selected for the seventh National Fine Arts Exhibition
- 1998.10** Invited by *JBBY* and the *Japan-China Cultural Exchange Association* to participate
1999.1 In the exhibition “Chinese Picture Books” held by Chihiro Art Museum Tokyo & Azumino in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the normalization of China-Japan diplomatic relations



at the same time, gave a Gallery Talk as a representative of Chinese picture book artist

- 2001** *The Land of the Peach Blossom* was first published in the 50th anniversary issue of *Kodomo no Tomo* (Children's Friends) series by Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers, in Japan
- 2002** *The Land of the Peach Blossom*-the original artworks are collected by the Kijo Picture Book Village in Tokyo

The original art works of "The Land of the Peach Blossom " tour exhibition in Japan

2003 ***The Land of the Peach Blossom***-Some of the illustrations have been used in the Japanese elementary school textbook (grade 6) since 2003

1998 ***Baoer*, *The Land of the Peach Blossom*** and ***The Story of Ahei*** were selected in
—
1999 “Original Paintings of World Picture Books” exhibition hosted by BIB and JBBY; it toured in Urawa Art Museum, Nara Prefectural Art Museum, Akita Museum of Modern Art, and Chiba City Museum of Art.

2007 The illustrations in “The Folk Tales of China, Korea and Japan” were exhibited at the Elizabeth Stone Gallery in Alexandria, USA.

2008 Held solo-exhibitions at Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing and gave a speech at the university lecture hall

Held solo-exhibition at Beihang Art Gallery in Beijing

Held in Shanghai Normal University of China Cross-Straits Picture Book Seminar in October, the theme of the forum was "Big Education in Picture Books" as a speaker (40mins to share creation)

2012 Invited by Japan JBBY and Japan-China Cultural Exchange Association, she participated in the exhibition of Original Chinese Picture Book Painters in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the resumption of diplomatic relations between China and Japan held in Tomihiro Art Museum and Amtano Art Museum.

2014 Gave lecture on ***Blazing City 1938*** in Poplar Picture Book Bookstore, in Beijing.



2015 ***The Land of the Peach Blossom*** was selected to exhibit in Asian Festival of Children's Content, Singapore

Stories behind The Peach Blossom Land, Cai Gao, shared about the classical Chinese inspirations behind The Land of Peach Blossom

2016.5 Held Solo exhibition ***Ah! The Season of Sowing*** at Moon Center for Contemporary Art, Changsha



Solo exhibition ***Ah! The Season of Sowing*** at Moon Lake Contemporary Art Gallery, 2016, Changsha

2016.8 Held solo-exhibition *What Can You See in the Moon* at Changsha Museum, and had more than 200,000 visitors

2017 *Hua Mulan*- Selected for the "Picture Book Go Global" fundamental bibliographic library constructed by the Import Management Department of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television.



What can You See in the Moon, solo illustration show of Cai Gao, 2016, Changsha Museum

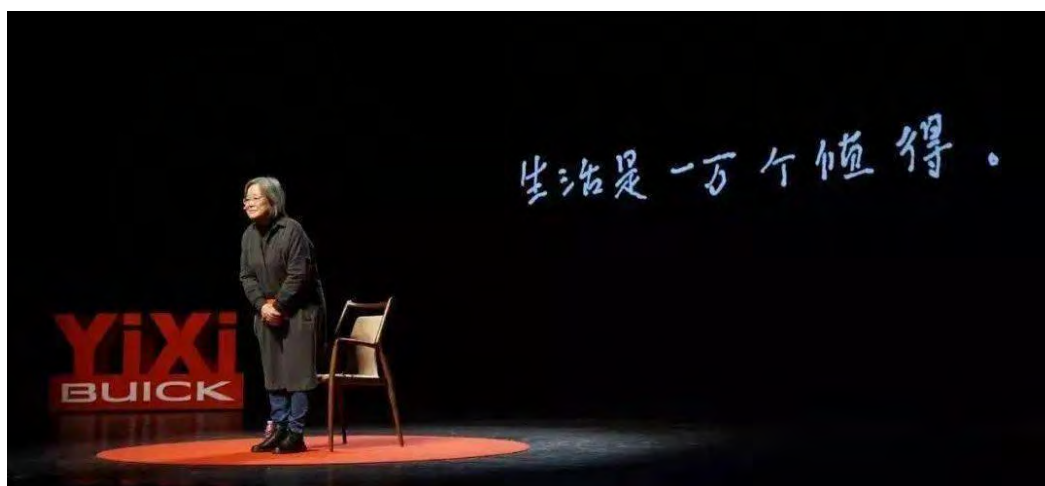
2017 ***Blazing City 1938*** was selected as a representative in China's Original Illustration Exhibition, in the Bologna Children's Book Fair

2018 ***“Crossing National Boundaries : China's Picture Books in relation to World Culture--An International Symposium on Cai Gao's Picture Books”*** On Bologna Children's Book Fair



2019 ***Hua Mulan*** was Selected as one of the 100 original Chinese picture books recommended by the National Library of the Children's Museum

Invited by Yixi.TV Shanghai, to give the talk ***Life :an Affirmation***



Still, We have Books, documentary film in Bilibili.com

https://www.bilibili.com/bangumi/media/md28220315/?spm_id_from=666.25.b_6d656469615f6d6f64756c65.2

The Flower Fairy was selected as one of the 100 original Chinese picture books recommended by the National Library of Children's Museum, 2019

2020 ***The Flower Fairy*** was selected as a representative in China's Original Illustration Exhibition, BIB, 2020

2021 Cai Gao, China News Service, Chinese Headlines: Can painting help Western children understand Chinese traditional culture?

Cai Gao: Protect the peach blossom in our heart, but also create the peach blossom in our real life

2022 ***76 year old national treasure picture book grandma: Bestow the Best Gifts to Childhood.*** Yitiao Shanghai

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Dw_UDnLQkp_-GWm26_kOTg

Guangming Daily, ***Brush in Hand, Ideal in Heart*** 2022-6-14

Why Cai Gao, the "grandma of picture books", gets attention

<https://app.gmdaily.cn/as/opened/n/55cc8d075332483895ef78661bdc6d34>

2023 ***Cai Gao: Be a good editor and give children the best*** rednet.cn

<https://moment.rednet.cn/pc/content/646745/63/12269128.html>

Cai Gao: The Grandmother of Picture Books

2023/CCTV13 Bai Yansong (News Weekly)

<https://haokan.baidu.com/v?pd=wisenatural&vid=15275758949168552102>

Cai Gao: Return to Clarity

In 2023, CCTV's "Face to Face" program aired a special episode titled

<https://tv.cctv.cn/2023/06/11/VIDE5udq3EisJUhrqGJSFw0C230611.shtml>

Xu Zhiyuan's Conversation with Cai Gao: Seeking Hope in a Complex World

2023, The Thirteen Questions

<https://v.qq.com/x/cover/mzc0020028mcii8/q00455q9i2x.html>

Cai Gao The Picture Book Grandma: Lighting a Lamp in Children's Hearts

2023_People's Daily

https://life.gmw.cn/2023-06/01/content_36602350.htm

77-Year-Old "Treasure Grandma": An Artist Who Captures Her Life Through Painting

<https://people.cctv.com/2023/06/18/ARTInNrI25VTFVGompNXi14f230618.shtml>

When the Rain Falls, Innocence is an Umbrella

March 2023 Character Profile

Cai Gao Art Symposium: Becoming a Child - Between Tradition and Modernity

2023/Chengdu International Book Fair

Blazing City, 1938 : Beneath Tragedy, Lies the Warm Colour of Human Life

2023/Hunan Daily & Xiangjiang Weekly

<https://www.hunantoday.cn/news/xhn/202312/19099935.html>

Parenting without Worry

An Interview with Dongfanzhenxuan, Beijing

April 25, 2023

Good Books of Central South

Blazing City 1938_ Underpin the Human Tragedy there is a Warm tune of faded life

Beneath the human tragedy lies a warm undertone of faded lives

2023/Xiaoxiang Morning News

https://www.sohu.com/a/726571134_120914498

2024

Tang Haoming and Cai Gao in Conversation:

Keeping True to Oneself, Being with Books, and be Happy

2024/World Book Day>Interview

Celebrating Chinese Picture Book Artist Cai Gao's Award of Chinese Excellence at the Bologna Children's Book Fair

2024/CCTV>Report

<https://book.cctv.com/2024/04/09/ARTIZuPEe6RfHlk2hPyNSnb2240409.shtml>

Chinese Illustrator Cai Gao Shortlisted for the 2024 Hans Christian Andersen Award

2024 - Guangming Daily / CCTV>Report

<https://edu.cctv.com/2024/01/20/ARTIdOekuiOfNHZrW0sEgptd240120.shtml>

The 2024 Hans Christian Andersen Award was announced, with Chinese original children's books drawing attention.

2024CCTV/Education Channel >Report

<https://edu.cctv.com/2024/04/09/ARTIAntqMOBe2kS6pV2xccl8240409.shtml>

The Artistic Life of Painter Cai Gao

2024/Zhao Jian's Book Studio>Interview

Going to the Garden and Living a natural Life

2024New World Outlook:

<https://www.douyin.com/video/7414366371930230066>

Entering the Beautiful World of Folk Art - Cai Gao & Xiao Aozhi

2024, Xi'an, Fangsuo Book Store>interview

Another Possibility for Education

2024/QinHuangdao, the 100th special episode of "13 Questions">Interview

2024, Set Sail 2025 - CCTV New Year's Eve Program

Cai Gao, together with eight students from the "Field Poetry Class" of Suyu Hope Primary School in Huitong County, Hunan Province, read poems and sang songs to welcome the new year.

Receiving Light

In 2024, the 5th CIID Design Festival, the China Interior Design Forum > Lecture.

In 2024, Cai Gao was invited to participate in the 4th National Library Service for Minors Forum held by Changsha Library, and had a dialogue with Professor Fan Bingsi from East China Normal University and Zhu Aichao, the principal of Changsha Datong Primary School.

Cai Gao: Childhood, Reading and Life

2024 / the Five Sages Hall of Lujiang Academy >lecture

2024 Participate in the live broadcast of the well-known new media poetry art platform "Read to You">activity

Cai Gao: How Do Adults Protect Their inner Child?

2024 /The Beijing News >interview

<https://www.bjnews.com.cn/detail/1717470792168668.html>

Dreaming of Creation: A Legacy of Artistry

2024/ China Children's Book Fair (CCBF) >forum

2024 Detective of Life and Nature

>interview

BuNing Bookstore

Set Sail for 2025

2024-12-31 Video Channel · CCTV Culture and Art

Cai Gao has been invited to perform at the CCTV New Year's Eve Program, reading Poems with countryside primary school children

<https://www.163.com/dy/article/JKU02ITC05521W5B.html>

Cai Gao was one of the guests of CCTV's "New Year Reading Night"

2024-12-31 CCTV Education Channel

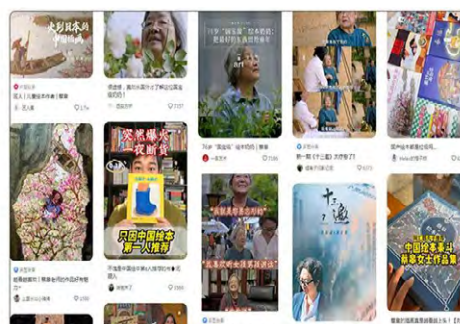
<https://news.cctv.com/2024/12/31/ARTIxQWTMfk7jNKaE1QCOaZ241231.shtml>

2025 Let it Bloom became a subtitle for the China Tour Exhibition of the 62nd Bologna Children's Book Fair in Italy. Cai Gao was invited to write the preface for this exhibition.

Cai Gao is an increasing presence on social media platforms such as WeChat, RedNote and Bilibili where videos and articles about her have been widely shared.



Reports on Cai Gao have been widely shared and recommended on RedNote.



The episode of " But We Still Have Books" on Bilibili, has received over 20 million views.



Xu Zhiyuan's Conversation with Cai Gao: "Seeking Hope in a Complex World".—The Thirteen Questions



CCTV(China Central Television), Guangming Daily,Tencent News and many other media outlets have reported regularly on Cai Gao's work in recent years.

Many of them record more than 100,000+ views.



"76 year old national treasure picture book grandma: Bestow the Best Gifts to Childhood".
—Yitiao Shanghai



9

Foreign Language Editions



Picture book:

Baoer(The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden)

1995 (Japanese)
Kazi Publications Inc, Japan



Baoer(The Fox Spirit in the Abandoned Garden)

(former name: The Fox Ghost in the Abandoned Garden)

2008 (Traditional Chinese version)
Hsin Yi Foundation Hsin Yi Publications Co., Taiwan

2014 (Japanese version)
Kazi Publications Inc, Japan

2014 (Korean version)
Borim Press, South Korea

2025 (Italian version) Italian
Italian World China Publishing House.



Picture book:

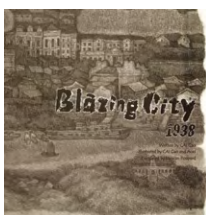
Blazing City 1938

2014 (Korean version) 불타는 옛 성 -1938
Sakyejul Publishing, South Korea



2014 (Japanese version)
Doshinsha Publishing Co., Ltd., Japan.

2014 (English Version)
Shenandoah Publications, Inc., United Kingdom





Illustrated Book:

Violet Nursery School

1992 (Japanese)
Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers, Inc



Illustrated Book:

Chinese Legends

1995 (Japanese)
Cox Publishing Japan



Illustrated Book:

Strange Tales From A Chinese Studio

1997 (Japanese)
Wanami Shoten Publishers, Inc., Japan



Picture book:

The Old Man who Loved Flowers

1998 (Japanese)
Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers, Inc., Japan
2023 republished
2025 (Italian version) Italian
Italian World China Publishing House.



Picture book:

Tao Hua Yuan Ji- The Earthly Paradise

2002 (Japanese version)

Fukuinkan Publishers, Inc., Japan

2006 (Korean version)

Montessori Korea Co., Ltd., South Korea

2009 (simplified Chinese version)

adapted by Tang Yaming

Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House



Illustrated Book:

The Folk Tales of China, Korea and Japan

2004 (Chinese, Japanese & Korean)

The Committee of Children's Fairy Tales Exchange Project. ,
Published in China, Korea and Japan

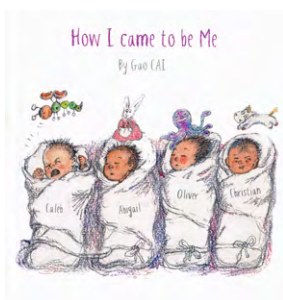


Picture book:

Meng Jiangnv

2012 (Japanese)

Ivanami Shoten Publishers, Japan



Picture book:

How I Come to be Me

2017 (English Version)

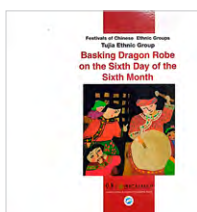
Starfish Bay Publishing, Australia



Beautiful Chinese Folk Tales

2018 (Nepali & English version)

Nepal Tianli Publication & Culture Company Pvt. Ltd.

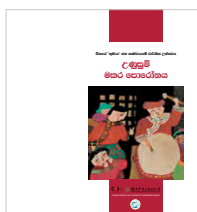


Picture book:

Chinese National Festival Customs and Stories Gallery-The Tujia nationality: The Dragon Robe and the 6th of June Festival

2017 (Sinhalese version & English version)

Neptune Publications, Sri Lanka



2017 (Korean version)

National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, South Korea

2018 & 2021 (Sinhalese version & English version)

Neptune Publications, Sri Lanka

2019 (Vietnamese version)

Chi Culture Joint Stock Company (Chibooks), Vietnam

2025 (Vietnamese version)

Chi Culture Joint Stock Company (Chibooks), Vietnam



NOMINATION FOR THE HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AWARD 2026

ILLUSTRATOR **Cai Gao**

Published by CBBY

Translated by Laurence McKnight, Xiao Aozi, Jiang Yihan

Edited by Application Team

Designed by Xiao Ruizi

Supported by Hunan Juvenile & Children's Publishing House

International Board on Books for Young People China Section (CBBY)

Tel: 86-10-57526096

Email : CBBY@ccppg.com.cn