



'An Account of Contradictions'



Niu Bizi and other Cartoons - Huang Yao's Legacy

Huang Yao was born in Shanghai, China, and became well-known for his creation of the popular Niu Bizi cartoons in the 1930s. He became art editor-and-journalist of the Shanghai News in 1933, where he published his cartoon character, Niu Bizi. During the war between Japan and China, Huang Yao produced anti-Japanese cartoons that were adopted as anti-Japanese propaganda material throughout China. He travelled through China and Vietnam, and continued to express himself in his cartoon paintings; finally settling in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

In 1956, seventy thousand visitors attended the three-day "Niu Bizi Cartoon Exhibition" in Kuala Lumpur. The high attendance was due to Niu Bizi (or Ox-Nose)'s incredible popularity. The cartoons were published simultaneously in over forty newspapers, magazines and books all over China.



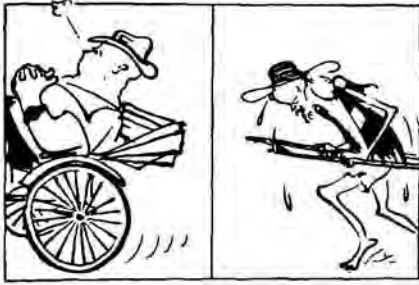
Huang Yao (1917-1987)

To counter the prevailing misconception of “China as the sick man of Asia”, Huang Yao created Niu Bizi in 1934 when he was only seventeen. It became an instant success. This cartoon character began as an amusing Chinese gentleman but later appeared as male or female, current or historical, literary or mythological figures to mock the existing social and political situations in China. By 1936, Huang Yao was selected along with other renowned cartoonists for the First National Cartoon Exhibition in Shanghai.



His book, “Ten Talks on Niu Bizi” was used in schools, and when children were called to contribute to Niu Bizi’s war resistance cartoons, there were over one hundred thousand responses. The Japanese plagiarized Niu Bizi in Japan, and later in Beijing as part of their war propaganda. Many significant cartoonists, including Zunzi of Hong Kong and Niu Ge of Taiwan have acknowledged being influenced by Niu Bizi.

During the war (1938–1945), Huang Yao was active in Chongqing and the interior of China, encouraging resistance to the Japanese aggression, exposing injustice in society and writing about his travels. Many of the books were in both Chinese and English (for international readers). One of these books, “Chinese People in War Time” (1943), had flags of the Nationalist China, Communist China, America, and Britain on its cover. For the less literate population, there were woodblock prints of Niu Bizi as “The Military Door Gods”, “Zhongkui at War” and comics of war stories. However, because of the war, only three out of over



twenty books of Huang Yao's cartoons reached readers in Shanghai. The family has been able to recover most of these books in libraries where he had once published his works, but not the major libraries in Shanghai or Beijing.

From 1945 onwards, Huang Yao spent most of his life in Southeast Asia. He once commented that it was easy to get into trouble with cartoons. Obviously, his cartoons had offended some important people in China. Since he was not a citizen of the countries he later resided in, he decided to restrain himself. Niu Bizi never appeared in any political cartoons again.

Upon leaving China, Niu Bizi gave up its multiple roles and continued as only a simple Chinese gentleman. In Hong Kong, an older looking Niu Bizi was a comical new immigrant, wearing his Chinese clothing but his feet no longer turned inwards like a country bumpkin. In Singapore,



the "Malay Niu Bizi" was a set of colour paintings of Niu Bizi wearing the Malay costume, and sportingly participating in the local customs. In Malaysia, Niu Bizi matured into a middle-age gentleman in Western attire, guiding a young boy called "Xiao Niu". The Niu Bizi educational cartoons appeared regularly in newspapers, magazines and books for over a decade, with the final cartoon, "Niu Bizi's Visit to Wulai", presented

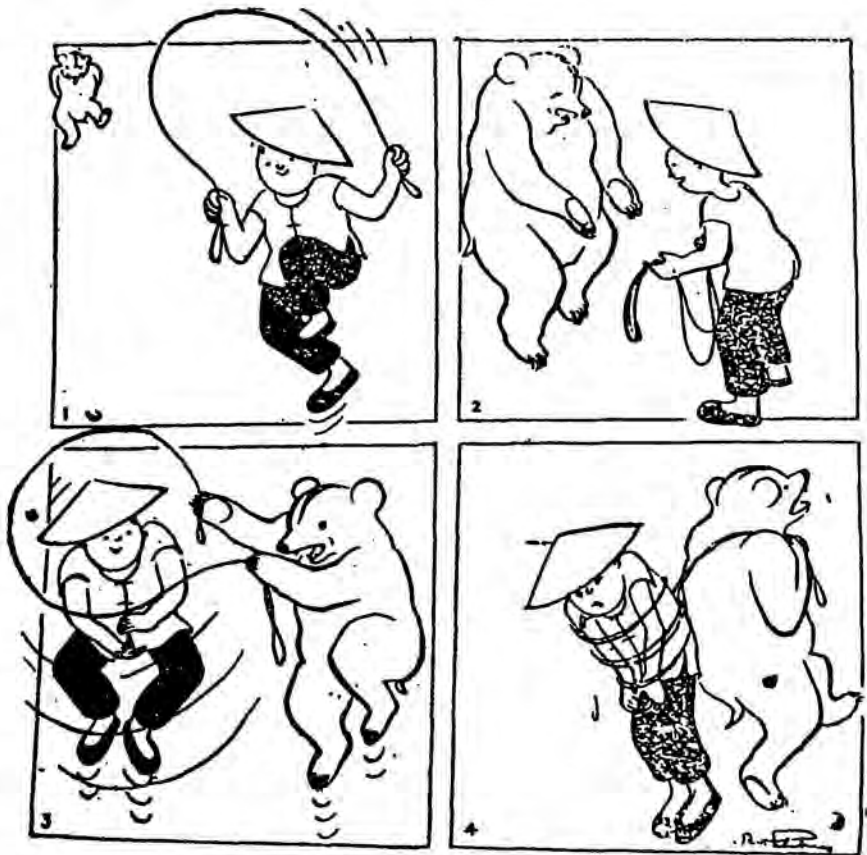
as a gift for an old friend, commemorating Huang Yao's visit to Taiwan in 1980 (here, Niu Bizi was smoking an indigenous pipe, and wearing his Chinese clothing again!).

Besides Niu Bizi, Huang Yao produced many other cartoons. An important set, "An Account of Contradictions", depicted the many inequalities in the society under the Nationalist government. The candid cartoons were coloured paintings, and were exhibited in Kunming and Guangzhou in 1947, incurring the displeasure of the authorities but Huang Yao was leaving China at that time, to which he never returned.

In Hong Kong, his cartoons, reflecting the society in post-war years, were published in the newspapers. His work there included the set, "Words of a Child", which illustrates a child's view of his family. In Thailand, he drew his last political cartoons, "Ah Tang", a simple Chinese farmer protecting a small lamb which represents the next generation. The farmer was often taken advantage of by a bear and a Lenin-looking character (was he hinting at his reason for not returning to China?).

He did three other cartoons: a schoolboy in Thailand, a non-Chinese man, "Mr. Fluke", and "The Education of a Son". His last set of cartoons was completed in the early 1970s. In "Eve and Adam", he expressed his views on the creation of paintings, the world beyond art and the relationship between the two sexes.

Some of the likely reasons for Huang Yao's success in cartooning were his early solid foundation in literati studies, including Chinese calligraphy, painting and the classics; his keen observations as a journalist; his patriotism and his love of Chinese culture. His cartoons were fine line drawings using the Chinese brush. All the titles of



'Ah Tang'

the cartoons were written upside down to look like children's writing consistent with the innocent humour of the plain speaking Niu Bizi. Huang Yao was unique in his ability to write Chinese calligraphy upside down and fluently.

In his years in Southeast Asia, he spent his time on education. He was invited in 1956 by Tun Razak (who was then the Malaysian Education Minister and later Prime Minister) to visit Malaysia, and help establish education policies. He also spent some years teaching, and was the principal of a high school. Huang Yao spent ten years of his spare time to research and publish "The History of the Chinese in Malaya and Singapore".

Huang Yao became well-known as an artist, and his paintings ranged from traditional to modern abstract and innovative paintings of Chinese pictographs. After a minor stroke in 1981, he wrote about his life in China, calligraphy, paintings and cartoons, including one specifically on Niu Bizi, laying down clues to his life work. He passed away in January of 1987.

When his wife, Madam Huang, passed away in 1998, his family discovered an intact collection of over forty years of his works, from paintings, drafts, articles, and sketches. The Huang Yao Foundation was eventually set up to find, preserve and conduct research on his works, and disseminate information on his contributions in cartoon and art. Huang Yao's paintings have been acquired by renowned museums, such as the National Palace Museum, the British Museum, and Singapore Art Museum.

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Images provided by author. For more information, please visit www.huangyao.org or contact carolywong@mac.com.

Carolyn Wong is the granddaughter of the late Huang Yao, one of the pioneering greats in Chinese cartooning. She used to be a fund manager before devoting full-time to preserve and promote her grandfather's legacy.