theories and methodologies

Taiwanese Postcolonial Fiction

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WHEN THE JAPANESE NOBEL LAUREATE IN LITERATURE KENZABURŌ ŌE VISITED TAIWAN FOR A SYMPOSIUM HELD IN HIS HONOR IN DECEMBER 2009, he hardly anticipated the political controversies into which he was thrown. Even before the conference, politicians accused the Academia Sinica, the organizing institution, of kowtowing to China by reducing a trilateral symposium involving Japan, Taiwan, and China to a "cross-strait event" and by replacing the Taiwanese novelist who was to act as Ōe's interlocutor with one more acceptable to China. Aside from the China factor, the underhanded politics tapped into ethnic tensions in Taiwan and the problematic national identity of Taiwan. While the original interlocutor, Li Ang, and her substitute, Zhu Tienwen, are critically acclaimed women novelists just a few years apart in age, Li is of Minnan ancestry and Zhu a second-generation Chinese mainlander whose father fled with the Chinese Nationalist or Kuomintang (KMT) government to Taiwan in 1949 after losing China to the communists. More important, Li is a postcolonial writer, whereas Zhu deploys postmodernism to resist decolonization. In favoring Zhu over Li, Peng Hsiao-yen, the organizing research fellow, pitted Zhu's China-centered view of Taiwan against a strong Taiwanese consciousness that has emerged over the past two decades as a result of political democratization and localization, although in so doing Peng was in tune with the current pro-China KMT government, which won the presidential election in 2008 partly by pretending that it was pro-Taiwan. The controversy over who is a representative Taiwanese writer also harks back to critical debates in 1992 and 1995 about whether *postcolonial* or *postmodern* best describes post-martial-law Taiwan and about competing nationalisms. As Ping-hui Liao puts it, "[T]he central question raised in those debates is whither Taiwan after lifting of martial law: to influence and eventually join PRC as a Chinese model of democratization and consumerism, or to assert its own independence and to become a member of the UN?" ("Postcolonial Studies" 201).[1]

To be sure, Ōe knew little about Taiwanese literature or Taiwanese consciousness. Since "the Japanese Empire has liquidated itself

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without going through the process of decolonization" (Ching, "'Give'" 769), Japan was only beginning in the 2000s to recognize what exactly constituted decolonization. To redeem the war crimes committed by the Japanese against the Chinese during World War II, the leftist humanitarian laureate naively thought he would help join Taiwan and China through his visit to Taiwan, not realizing that Taiwan was no longer ruled by an authoritarian, right-wing government and that most people there do not consider Taiwan part of China. After the lifting of martial law in 1987, President Lee Teng-hui took office in 1988 and launched a "quiet revolution" in Taiwan with a series of intricate constitutional and parliamentary reforms that put an end to pro-China authoritarian rule. Moreover, widespread "language and memory reclamation projects" implemented as a result of the localization movement have succeeded in decolonizing the Chinese consciousness that was instilled by the KMT since it took over Taiwan in 1945 and that remained especially powerful under martial law from 1949 to 1987. In fact, in the rise of Taiwanese consciousness, the Japanese colonial legacy has even been wielded by Taiwanese nationalists as a lever to resist the KMT internal colonization. Taiwanese postcolonial fiction critiques the KMT's colonization of Taiwan, contests its official account of Taiwan's history, and addresses issues such as gender, race, and class in relation to Taiwanese identity and Taiwan's colonial past. Given the limitations of space, only a few representative works can be discussed here, but let me first give a brief account of Taiwan's history.

[I]

Historically, aborigines' presence in Taiwan dates back eight thousand years or even more. Minnan and Hakka settlers from China poured into Taiwan nearly four hundred years ago and became the dominant groups by seizing the lands of aborigines. Taiwan has undergone waves of colonization by imperial powers since the seventeenth century. The Dutch rule of southern Taiwan (1624–62) paralleled the Spanish rule of northern Taiwan (1626–42). The Ming loyalists defeated the Dutch, taking control of the island in 1662, but were defeated in 1683 by the Qing, which in turn ruled Taiwan for 211 years but ceded it to Japan in 1895 after losing a war. The Qing treated Taiwan as a frontier settlement not to be taken seriously, but Taiwanese intellectuals forged strong ties with China to resist Japanese domination, wavering between Chinese and Japanese identities to carve out their own space (Liao, "Taiwan" 2). Decolonization did not happen in 1945, however, when Japan's defeat in World War II led to Taiwan's handover to Nationalist China. Many Taiwanese were disappointed to find that the KMT government was just another colonial power, for it soon enforced Chinese in place of Japanese and Taiwanese in the public sphere, thereby ousting Taiwanese from political and cultural institutions. Native languages and many indigenous cultural practices were disdained as backward. Moreover, cultural friction arose between the Taiwanese people and the newly arrived mainlanders and KMT takeover army, since the Japanese colonial legacy proved enduring for the Taiwanese whereas the KMT's anger toward Japanese war atrocities remained unresolved. Discrimination against Taiwanese, economic collapse, and corruption as well as Chinese political and cultural hegemony led to Taiwanese discontent, which culminated on 28 February 1947 in the 2/28 Incident.

On the evening of 27 February 1947, the police arrest and beating of a Taiwanese female cigarette vendor in Taipei sparked a series of protests, which escalated overnight into island-wide violence and demands for self-government. Serving as mediators, Taiwanese elites in many cities petitioned the government for political reform. Troops sent from China by Chiang Kai-shek then massacred

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many elites, insurgents, and innocent civilians. The crackdown not only ended the emergent civil society but marked a tragic beginning for KMT rule in Taiwan. The imposition of martial law in 1949 and the relocation of the defeated KMT government from China to Taiwan in the same year subjected Taiwanese to the White Terror and a Chinese recolonizing policy in the next decades. During the White Terror from the 1950s to the 1980s, the KMT forbade mentioning of the 2/28 Incident and alleged that all those killed or imprisoned as a result of it were communists. The incident became a taboo subject, a reminder of ethnic clash, and a symbol of colonial brutality and state power that threaten dissidents with death. As I have argued, "There are at least two motives for repressing the 2/28 historical memories and truth: first, to consolidate KMT rule by suppressing democratic reform and, second, to consolidate the mainlanders' hegemony" (241).[2] Michael Berry also points out that "February 28th was arguably *the* defining incident in Taiwan's modern history and the direct catalyst for the White Terror, a long period of political repression and human rights violation taking place under the smokescreen of martial law" (184). It was not until 1987, just a few months before the lifting of martial law, that the opposition party (the Democratic Progressive Party, founded in 1986) initiated a 2/28 history reclamation project.[3] For Taiwanese intellectuals, the project was pivotal to raising Taiwanese consciousness, although to this day the KMT keeps crucial historical material concerning the incident from the public.

[II]

Despite the imposed silence, "the number of literary works on February 28th far surpasses [the number of] those on the Nanjing Massacre" (Berry 184).[4] The lifting of martial law in 1987 triggered many narratives that re-member the 2/28 Incident and link it to Taiwanese nationalism. Li Ang's novel *Labyrinthine Garden* (1991) portrays the dark, turbulent period through the trauma of the Taiwanese intellectual Zhu Zuyan and his daughter, Zhu Yinghong, the heroine. Traumatized by what he went through and silenced by the White Terror, Zhu Zuyan is able to tell his daughter his horrific experiences only in bits and pieces. Whereas he resisted Japanese colonial rule by speaking only Taiwanese at home, he was soon disillusioned with the KMT government because of his victimization in the 2/28 Incident. Tortured in prison and put under house arrest for many years after being released, he refutes the charge that he is a communist, lamenting that the KMT was even more brutal than the Japanese, for it nearly wiped out a generation of Taiwanese intellectuals. His daughter is traumatized by the childhood loss of her father. Haunted by memories of seeing him taken away by the military police and returned barely alive, she is later captivated by a handsome, powerful parvenu, whom she mistakenly identifies as a paternal figure.

Set in the late 1970s, the novel looks back on the cataclysmic incident mainly from a woman's point of view. It seeks to reconstruct Taiwan's national identity from a perspective empowered by Taiwan's economic boom in the late 1970s. It also depicts the heroine's quest for self in a labyrinth of sexual relations based on dominance and submission, including the pleasure and degradation of sadomasochism, suggesting that her sexual desire is inextricably connected with Taiwanese historical trauma and gender domination. In her subconscious wish to compensate for the emasculation of Taiwanese elites like her father, Zhu Yinghong becomes infatuated with Lin Xigung, a Taiwanese real estate tycoon, seeing him as an embodiment of Taiwanese capitalism that subverts the dominant American capitalism, making way for Taiwanese nationalism. Undergoing a painful awakening from betrayals and masochistic humiliations, she realizes that just as Lin will remain

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promiscuous despite their marriage, so his excessive capitalism may lead to the destruction of Taiwan's cultural and historical legacy, cherished by her father. She decides to carry on her father's work by donating the Lotus Garden, a verdant site her family owns, to the people of Taiwan. Celebrating her father as a restorer of the historical site and an intellectual who not only resists colonialism but also absorbs diverse elements of foreign culture, she participates in Taiwan's nation building herself. Alternating between her monologue and a third-person narration and shifting back and forth between past and present, the novel has a haunting, modernist quality that shows the rupture and confusion resulting from multiple traumas.

To counter the national amnesia about the 2/28 Incident, in 1996 the Taipei municipal government decided to convert the city's New Park into the 2/28 Memorial Park. The decision led to an unfortunate clash between Taiwanese nationalists and the gay-lesbian-queer movement. The renaming represented a belated official recognition of the incident, but it also erased the memories of the park as a space of male homosexual public sex. Inspired by this conflict, Li Ang's story "Rouged Sacrifice" (1997) presents a remorseful Mama Wang, a 2/28 victim's wife who has been a staunch supporter of the opposition movement. She is dressing her dead son as a woman for a private funeral in atonement for having abandoned him because he was gay. The dialectic between truth and masking throughout the story concerns not only the KMT's covering up the 2/28 Incident but also the closeting of a gay man. On this day, when the first-ever public memorial of the incident is held, the narrator juxtaposes the general indifference to the event with rumors about the unearthing of photographs of mutilated corpses from the incident. An accidental fire claiming several lives later that day is believed to be caused by the spiteful ghosts of those killed in the incident, who demand recognition and deliverance. Before committing suicide in atonement for her homophobia, Mama Wang puts into the river a lotus lantern boat that carries all the names of the family members who died without social recognition, thus symbolically connecting gay men and victims of 2/28 and the White Terror.

In *Labyrinthine Garden* and "Rouged Sacrifice," Li revisits historical trauma by engaging it with Taiwanese capitalism in the late 1970s and Taiwan's opposition movement in the 1990s, respectively. She shows how the present is haunted by the past and deals with the complicated relation between Taiwanese nationalism and gender, suggesting that the subjectivity of women and queers can be aligned with Taiwanese subjectivity.

[III]

Cultural revitalization, including language and history reclamation, is vital to Taiwanese aborigines. The aborigines are Austronesian, genetically and linguistically related to other Austronesian ethnic groups: peoples of the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Oceania (Hill et al.). Colonized successively by imperial powers since the seventeenth century, Taiwanese aborigines were victimized by Christian, Chinese, Japanese, and nationalist "civilizing" projects, with the result that they were losing their cultures, languages, and beliefs. The fourteen recognized tribes, who constitute only two percent of Taiwan's population,[5] have been so marginalized by the Han that their "concern for cultural autonomy has almost never been addressed in the mainstream nationalism or postcolonialism talks put forth by the Han scholars" (Liao, "Postcolonial Studies" 200). Following in the footsteps of the opposition movement and in accord with the global aboriginal movement, Taiwan's aboriginal people's movement was launched in 1984 to highlight the deprivation of aborigines' land rights, economic rights, and naming rights. Whereas the Puyuma

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intellectual Sun Dachuan laments that Taiwanese aborigines are "peoples that belong to the dusk" (118), the Atayal activist Walis Nogang contends that violence by state apparatuses and dominant groups led to that sad plight. Asserting that there is an aboriginal subjectivity, he argues that Taiwanese aboriginal literature should be autonomous, not incorporated into Taiwan literature (112). Other aboriginal writers echo the decolonizing strain. The Bunun writer Tian Yage's short stories "Tuobasi Tamapima" and "The Last Hunter" (both 1987) portray how differently traditional Bunun tribespeople and the dominant society understand the Bunun customs of hunting and cutting wood, as the KMT carry further Japanese land and forestation policies, taking land away from the aborigines for development projects and banning hunting and wood cutting. The narrator of "Tuobasi Tamapima," a medical student returning to visit his mother in his aboriginal village, feels guilty about his sinicization and complicity in colonial modernity. The mainlander police officer in "The Last Hunter" embodies coercive state power and Chinese colonization. Focusing mostly on rituals and conversations during the wake held after a dead soldier's funeral, Tian Yage's short story "The Wake" (1992) is a tour de force in the oral tradition, while it also depicts signs of cultural decline caused by young men's assimilation. The form of the story reproduces oral culture by not only transcribing speeches of different people but also showing how stories invite stories and legends invite legends in an ongoing development.

The Atayal activist Walis Nogang's concern with aboriginal subjectivity should be juxtaposed with the numerous historical and fictional discourses on the Musha (or Wushe) Incident, the biggest uprising that ever took place against Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan. During an annual sports event in 1930, held at an elementary school in Musha, a remote town in the mountain region in central Taiwan, the Atayal chieftain Mono Rudao led his tribesmen in a headhunting raid that killed 134 Japanese. Since these tribesmen were from the aboriginal reservation considered the most enlightened and compliant, the revolt shook the Japanese colonial power. In retaliation the Japanese government brutally punished the rebels. Six months later, a second clash, little known even now, happened when a pro-Japanese Atayal subtribe, instigated by the Japanese, attacked the detention centers where the surviving rebels were interned, killing half of them. The Musha Incident has been intensely contested in historical narratives and repeatedly interpreted in fiction. The incident has been framed variously as a Japanese, Chinese, or Taiwanese trauma, depending on the interpreter's political agenda, but the indigenous voice has been scarce (Berry 53–107; Ching, *Becoming* 133–53, 168–73). Though narrated by a Han Taiwanese, Wu He's novel *Remains of Life* (1999) brings out diverse views in the Atayal community on the origin and the aftermath of the Musha Incident. Ignoring the second massacre, the KMT used to celebrate the Musha Incident as an example of anti-Japanese resistance in Taiwan, but the narrator's fieldwork reveals a more complicated picture. Because there was not only a massacre of Atayal tribespeople by the Japanese but also a massacre of surrendered Atayal by rival Atayal who fought on the Japanese side, the schism in the Atayal community comes into relief. The community remains haunted by the memories of the intraracial killing and the relocation and stricter surveillance of rebel survivors by the Japanese. The schism is perpetuated by the descendants' divided interpretations of the event: the pro-Japanese camp sees the rebellion as meaningless; for the anti-Japanese camp, it was the internal schism and intraracial killing that led to defeat. Thus, the event was both a glorious insurrection and a traumatic shame for Atayal. Using the stream-of-consciousness technique and an uninterrupted narrative to

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create unity in the novel, the narrator underlines the entanglements between present difficulty and historical absurdity.

The assertion of aboriginal identity entails critiquing sexism and Han-centrism. As the KMT persisted in social and economic discrimination against and exploitation of the aborigines, many Atayal girls and women became prostitutes in the cities in the 1970s and 1980s. In *Remains of Life*, Girl, an ex-prostitute who returns to her aboriginal village to reconnect with the Atayal community, criticizes Han male hegemony and Atayal patriarchy. The narrator becomes aware of the need for self-critique after an intellectual Atayal woman challenges his authority to investigate the Atayal and tells him that the Han should be studied first. He realizes that just as the Atayal have lived in the aftermath of the Musha Incident, so the Han have lived in the aftermath of World War II, the 2/28 Incident, and the White Terror. The narrator then declares that he is a "Plains Siraya Han," meaning that he has both aboriginal and Han ancestors (133). Many Taiwanese have maternal aboriginal ancestry. Since Chinese immigrants were not allowed to take their families to Taiwan during most of the Qing rule, a good number of them married aboriginal women. Recognizing the aboriginal foremother obliges Taiwanese to respect ethnic difference and acknowledge matrilineal heritage.

[IV]

Finally, Taiwanese postcolonial fiction addresses neocolonialism, such as United States cultural imperialism, as well as old colonialisms, by portraying colonial trauma and mimicry and other aspects of the colonial legacy. Shih Shu-ching's novel *Tipsy* (1999), which satirizes a late-1990s Taiwan dominated by fads such as red wine, cosmetics, and fashion, created by the media and multinational capitalism under globalization, depicts commodity fetishism as influenced by neocolonialism. While advertisements and news reports produce evanescent postmodern spectacles as simulacra, the narration uses literary montage to retrieve memory by presenting characters' lives in the context of local history. Hong Jiuchang, a merchant of red wine, is traumatized by his experiences growing up in the red-light district in Kaoshiung, where his aunt served as a bar girl for American GIs from the Vietnam War. Qiu Chaochuan, another red wine merchant, who washed American GIs' cars for a living when he was young, plans to open his wine bar near the place where the United States Military Assistance Advisory Group was stationed in Taipei, to commemorate his youthful years of poverty. The narrator recounts the withdrawal of the United States troops at the end of the 1970s when the United States broke diplomatic relations with Taiwan. He shifts to the perspective of Tang Ren, a retired diplomat who regrets that Taiwan has lost its international claim to represent China and that localization has taken place as a consequence. A cosmopolitan and a first-generation mainlander, Tang Ren is attracted by the wealth of southern Taiwanese but appalled by their taste. The novel subtly satirizes the valorization of cosmopolitanism over Taiwan, the north over the south, when the merchants plan to produce fake native red wine in compliance with local taste, which prefers what used to be a paltry imitation of imported red wine.

Memory retrieval, an important theme in Taiwanese postcolonial fiction, is often deployed to critique colonialisms and to envision Taiwan as an independent nation that has appropriated diverse colonial legacies and incorporated the cultures of waves of immigrants. In addition to the narratives already discussed, Li Qiao's novel *Burying Injustice: 1947: Burying Injustice* (1995), Chen Ye's novel *Muddy River* (1989), Wu He's collection of short stories *Sorrow* (2001), Yang Zhao's

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novel *A Dark Alley on a Misty Night* (1994), Shih Shu-ching's ambitious Taiwan trilogy (2003, 2008, 2010), Li Ang's collection of short stories *Invisible Ghosts* (2004), Chen Yuhui's novel *Mazu's Bodyguards* (2004), and Lai Xiangyin's collection of short stories *Island* (2000) all demonstrate how rewriting the historical memories of Taiwan is also a reconstruction of Taiwan as a postcolonial nation.

Notes

1. See Liao's in-depth discussion of the debates ("Postcolonial Studies").

2. Unattributed translations are mine.

3. The establishment of the party was the fruit of the political opposition movement called Tangwai, which started in 1977. Calling for the lifting of martial law, Taiwan independence, and a thorough parliamentary reform, the movement was the force behind democratization in Taiwan over the past three decades.

4. See ch. 3 of Berry's book for his survey of 2/28 narratives that span several decades.

5. The tribes are Amis, Atayal, Bunun, Kavalan, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiyat, Sakizaya, Seediq, Tao, Thao, Tsou, and Truku.

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