

Treacherous Translation: Taiwanese Tactics of Intervention in Transnational Cultural Flows*

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Abstract

If transcultural borrowings and translations are common practices in modern times, these translational practices have never ceased to worry postcolonial historiographers. Historically, two modes of historical narrative are often evoked in the discussion of cultural translation from the West to the East: the narrative of transition and the narrative of confrontation. While the former is predicated on a Westerncentric conception of linear time which converts cultural differences into a temporal hierarchy with the West occupying the top, “advanced” position, the latter tends to define the encounter between the East and the West in confrontational terms.

This paper proposes to theorize the problem of cultural translation in terms other than those of transition or confrontation. Taking Taiwan modernism as an example, I argue how “betrayal” and “simulation” operate as tactics of intervention that open up the possibility of agency for Taiwan modernist writers in the practice of cultural translation. I discuss the historical materiality that shaped these treacherous translational practices and finally relate the issue of cultural translation to the issue of the constitution of identity category.

Keywords

translation, Taiwan literature, the narrative of transition, the narrative of confrontation, belated modernity, alternative modernity, the other, modernism

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Time, Space and “Border Historiography”

Writing at the height of postcolonial studies in the late 1980s, G. C. Spivak adeptly encapsulated two dominant modes of historiography in India: the mode of transition and the mode of confrontation. While the former mode of historical narrative theorizes the trajectory of Indian history as a movement from semi-feudalism to capitalism, the latter tries to redefine the encounter of India with Western civilization (and its consequent forced insertion into colonialism) as confrontation (197). Since what marks the latter mode of historiography is the identification of the subaltern as the agency of change, the focus of Spivak’s essay is placed on the problem of subaltern consciousness and the politics of representation that ensues. But the significance of the difference between these two modes of historiography can be examined from other angles. The two modes of narrative represent two different ways of conceptualizing history: in the narrative of transition, history is represented as a linear development, whereas the narrative of confrontation conceives history as a spatialized structure of conflicting forces. The reason why postcolonial historiography should favor the spatial conceptualization of colonial history is easy to understand, for, if colonial history is understood as a *temporal* transition from feudalism to capitalism (or from the pre-modern to the modern), the question of belated modernity is forever there to stay. In other words, once interpreted in temporal terms, cultural differences are converted into temporal hierarchy with the West occupying the top, “advanced” position. The narrative of transition in fact plays into the hands of Westerncentrism, and inevitably yields historical time to the plague of “advanced/backward” tropes. It is in this context that the narrative of confrontation is often seen as a better option for postcolonial historiographers.

The interpretation of history as chronological evolution is in fact relatively new and coincides with the rise of the hegemonic Western interpretation of world history. Walter Mignolo points out that a new epistemological relocation of human differences took place in the late nineteenth century. Before that, humanity was believed to stretch as far as the geographical boundary. What lay beyond the geographical boundary was defined as the “barbarian zone” populated by savages. But “at the end of the nineteenth century, savages in space were converted into primitives and exotic Orientals in time” (35). Mignolo does not specify in detail how “savages” were perceived in the scheme of cultural hierarchy, though the terms “savages” and “cannibals” imply a low position.

I would like to suggest, however, that if the limits of Western civilization were taken to coincide with the limits of Western geography, the other beyond the geographical space was not necessarily always represented as an inferior being. It is likely that others, especially those possessing an ancient civilization, were regarded as inscrutable and ungovernable by the laws of (Western) civilization rather than as inferior “savages” or “cannibals.” The “other,” unlike the more pejorative terms like “savage” or “cannibal,” often signified what was beyond the Western geographical boundary and, therefore, beyond imagination and understanding. The portrayal of the Chinese in famous Western travel accounts such as *The Travels of Marco Polo* is a good case in point. However, as Mignolo argues, when spatial boundaries were transformed into chronological ones, cultural differences were also converted into a cultural hierarchy with the West occupying the top position. The question was “no longer whether primitives or Orientals were human but, rather, how far removed from the present and civilized stage of humanity they were” (35). Apparently it was the nineteenth-century enthusiasm over Darwinian theories of social evolution that gave the impetus to this new conception of the other. With geographical space relocated as stages of evolutionist human time, non-Western countries are condemned to an irredeemable “time lag” (Shu-mei Shih 18).

Such a chronological interpretation of human history certainly is problematic. A very interesting counter-argument is proposed by Anthony King. King argues that if modernity is defined basically as “an ideology of beginning” with an emphasis on “the new” and a large-scale rupture with the past, then the site of the first historical occurrence of modernity took place in the colonial space rather than in Western metropolitan cities (114). The intrusion of the colonial power upon the colony enacted a violent disjunction with the time past, and marked not only the beginning of a “new” time but a new epistemological break. Modernity occurred in colonies before it began to develop in Western metropolises. In this sense, it is the West rather than the colonies that suffer “time lag.” To push the point further, King points out that

the Eurocentrically defined cultural conditions of a so-called post-modernity—irony, pastiche, the mixing of different histories, inter-textuality, schizophrenia, cultural chasms, fragmentation, incoherence, disjunction of supposedly modern and pre-modern cultures were characteristic of colonial societies, cultures and environments on the global periphery decades before they appeared in Europe or the USA. (121)

In this conception of history, the emergence of “the postmodern culture” in colonial societies predated its appearance in the metropolitan West. Westerncentric narrative of transition is hereby called into question.

Unlike the narrative of transition that highlights temporality in history, the narrative of confrontation emphasizes the idea of border, and thus the importance of conceptualizing history in spatial terms. Border, like frontier, is not simply a geographical concept; it has epistemologic implications as well. But whereas the frontier implies the demarcation between civilization and barbarism, border signifies the meeting place of two different cultures. In Mignolo’s view, border is the location where he calls the “border gnosis”—a new consciousness, “a denial of the denial of ‘barbarism’”—emerges to challenge the Eurocentric definition of culture (45). Understandably, for many non-Western intellectuals, the narrative of confrontation seems to be a better option than the narrative of transition as the latter often implies the others “bending and entering (Western) civilization” (Mignolo 45).

It is in this context that we may understand why the employment of the narrative of confrontation is a distinctive feature of modern Chinese historiography. Rey Chow points out that an investment in suffering that aims at exposing social injustice runs through modern Chinese literary history: from the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly popular romance in the 1910s, through the socialist May Fourth literature, down to the “literature of the wounded” of the post-Cultural Revolution period (*Writing Diaspora* 102). The history of modern Chinese literature is thus pictured as a history of the literary embodiments of class confrontations. This is basically an “inward” version of the narrative of confrontation. Projected outward, the trope of confrontation also figures strongly in the narrative of China’s encounter with the West in modern times. On the surface, the series of cultural revolutions that took place from the late nineteenth century to the May Fourth period, with their strong emphasis on “the new” and a determined “pursuit of modernity,” yield the impression that the history of modern China reads very much like a narrative of transition. Beginning from the late nineteenth century, various projects of modernizing China were set in motion to usher China into modernity and to transpose the ancient civilization from the pre-modern time to the “new” time—i.e., the time of the West, the time of modernity. However, it is noteworthy that this fixated, in fact traumatic, preoccupation with the West, manifested in the eager “pursuit of modernity,” is actually driven by a desperate patriotic aspiration for a new, powerful China (Lee 287). The ultimate goal is to rejuvenate the Chinese civilization and enable China to face up to the West in the global

power game. For Chinese intellectuals, modernity is not the end but the means to achieve a high competitiveness that would set China on a par with the Western civilization. What really fuels the determined Chinese pursuit of modernity, seen in this light, is a perception of history as confrontation rather than as transition.

The Taiwanese “Betrayal”

It is because of its betrayal of the Chinese narrative tradition of confrontation rhetoric that Taiwan’s modernist fiction has come under fire since it made its appearance around 1960 in Taiwan.¹ Taiwan’s modernist writers turned toward Western modernism for inspiration and sought to appropriate important Western modernist literary features—e.g., the interest in linguistic and formal experiments, fascination with psychic workings, and emphasis on the aesthetic rather than the social value of creative writings (Chang 50-87). As works by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, and others were translated into Chinese and published in “Modern Literature,” this magazine served as a base for the movement.² In a manifesto published in the first issue of *Modern Literature*, the core members of the movement stated bluntly that they were drawing upon elements in Western modernism to make a change in Taiwan’s literary scene, giving it a “modern” shape-up. “Modern,” “progressive,” and “the West” were in this context interchangeable. It is not without reason that the movement was labeled pejoratively as a cultural project of “Westernization.”

For critics, Taiwan’s modernism commits a double “betrayal.” On the one hand, it betrays the tradition of Chinese cultural reformations in which any “Westernization” project needs to be motivated by a socialist (and nationalist) vision aiming at empowering China for it to have any constructive meaning at all. It is due to this lack of the manifestation of any socialist concern and nationalist rhetoric that Taiwan’s

¹ After losing the Chinese mainland to the Communists, the KMT party claimed to be the only legitimate representative of China, safeguarding the “real” Chinese culture. The Chinese cultural tradition was to be reproduced and carefully preserved in Taiwan.

² The publication of the literary magazine *Modern Literature* (現代文學 *Xiandai wenxue*) in 1960 is usually taken to be the event that set off the modernist trend in Taiwan’s fiction. However, the modernist movement in poetry began in mid-1950s and thus can be said to pave the way for the rise of the modernist fiction in Taiwan.

modernism is rejected as an unworthy heir to the Chinese May Fourth movement—the most important Chinese cultural revolution in the early twentieth century that embraced Westernization (Lü 10). Taiwan modernist writers' individualistic proclivity and their interest in the aesthetic aspect, rather than in the socialist implication, of creative writing bespeak the “rootlessness” of the movement. In the eyes of its critics, the modernist movement is a shallow “Westernization” project that turns its back on the Chinese culture, for Taiwan's modernists' unquestioning acceptance and attempted appropriation of Western modernist aesthetics betray a belief in the narrative of transition. What the critique in this vein reveals is a perception of Taiwan's modernism as a failure of translation: Taiwan's modernists fail to translate the nationalist rhetoric of the Chinese May Fourth movement into the Taiwanese context. Thus, even though both movements seek to build “Westernization” into their literary/cultural projects, Taiwan's modernism is, after all, a bad copy of the Chinese May Fourth.

Interestingly, Taiwan's modernism is also taken to be a betrayal of Western modernism, for, it is thus argued, Taiwan's modernism is a degenerate copy of the original. Taiwan's modernist writing, slavishly imitating Western modernism, is nothing but a bad translation of Western modernism. It is said that the Taiwan modernist writers, whether in terms of language proficiency or in terms of the breadth of their understanding of the Western societies that fostered the development of the movement, simply could not understand the complex cultural phenomenon of Western modernism, let alone the complicated development of the movement in the West.³ All in all, the modernist enthusiasm in Taiwan is often interpreted as simply a non-resistant subservience to Western (read: the U.S.) cultural imperialism that reflects the subordinated status of Taiwan in the cold war structure (Chen 5; Yu 7). To place the issue in the context of our discussion of narratives, Taiwan's modernist movement is faulted because it seems to abandon the narrative of confrontation for the narrative of transition which upholds Western modernity as the model for emulation. To make the scenario worse, the attempt is doomed to fail, for the translated modernism and the translated modernity can only be a bad copy of the original.

³ For a discussion of the trajectory of Modernism as it developed in the West, see David Harvey, particularly parts I-II.

The Question of “Time Lag” in Cultural Translation

A deconstructive interpretation, à la Judith Butler, of the whole issue of original/copy in regard to the relationship of Taiwan’s modernism with its Western counterparts certainly would advance the reading in an interesting direction (“Imitation” 22). But instead of launching on such a radical project, I would simply stay within the terms circumscribed by extant criticism of Taiwan’s modernism to bear my argument out. The ideas of derivation, “copy,” or “bad translation” involve the question of sequence in time. The critique of Taiwan’s modernism as a bad, slavish copy of Western modernism is grounded chiefly on two reasons. First of all, it is argued that Taiwan society at that time simply had not reached the stage of modernity that could have made the rise of modernism possible. Secondly, Taiwan’s modernism suffers from the problem of “time lag”: between Taiwan’s modernism and its Western counterparts, there is a time lag of about fifty years. “Time lag” is made an issue here, and the charge appears quite sensible. But it is exactly the “sensibleness” of the question that begs careful examination. It is worth recalling that Western modernism, especially in the realm of painting, borrowed profusely from non-Western arts. It is well-known that Western artists like Claude Monet, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Gauguin, Auguste Rodin, and Pablo Picasso turned to African sculptures, Egyptian painting, or Oriental art for inspiration, and appropriated the elements they found in non-Western art forms for their own use (Hamilton 34, 51, 68, 114, 164). But no matter how the Western artists flaunted their borrowings, they provoked little criticism. Why is it that “time lag” is always made an issue for non-Western artists, but has never been posed as a problem for Western artists borrowing from non-Western cultures? Now, if we consider the point made by Arjun Appadurai that the landscape of modernity is criss-crossed by incessant flows (33), transcultural borrowings and translations are surely common practices in modern times. If “time-lag” is a problem exclusively reserved for non-Western artists, what does this discrepancy in the attitudes toward cultural borrowings signify?

That Western artists are not obligated to justify their act of borrowing from non-Western countries may reveal how firmly the narrative of transition has taken hold of Western imagination. As Shu-mei Shih points out, the third world is often unconsciously relocated in time as the past of the first world. The turn toward the third world for what is missing in the first world reveals a nostalgia that seeks to address the

problems of the West through a rediscovery of the so-called “romance of the residual” (21). When Western intellectuals or artists borrow from non-Western cultures, they are simply, in a sense, moving down the time scale to resurrect things from the time past. Since the West is believed to be more advanced than the East in the temporal hierarchy, “time lag” is certainly not a problem for Western artists. For non-Western artists or intellectuals, inter-cultural borrowing is another story. Another interesting point needs to be registered here. If Western artists/intellectuals do not render a faithful reproduction of non-Western cultural elements in their works, the imprecise production is often taken to be a refashioning or recontextualization (often in a positive sense) of the foreign elements. But a non-Western unfaithful reproduction of Western culture can only be the unfortunate result of a deficiency or failure of inept translation. What sustains this peculiar interpretation of inter-cultural borrowings if not a narrative of transition that subjects cultural differences to cultural evolutionism? Only “advanced” cultures can enact a positive transformation of elements from “backward” cultures, but not vice versa.

But it is not only the narrative of transition that tends to downgrade non-Western translation of Western culture. Advocates of the narrative of confrontation also eye such translation attempts with suspicion. As argued above, unless non-Western translations and borrowings of Western elements are ultimately returned to the nationalist aspiration for competition with the West, they are often dubbed “Westernization” with the negative connotation of betraying one’s own culture. In other words, the enactment of cultural flows from the West always has to be accompanied by a firm affirmation of the narrative of confrontation. It was Taiwan modernist writers’ failure to couch their literary project in the terminology of confrontation that touches a sensitive spot in the Chinese sentiment.

Taiwanese Modernity and Taiwan’s Modernism

That Taiwan’s modernists generally shunned politics and thus, in the eyes of their critics, failed to inject a political agenda into their literary project has to be understood in terms of the historical context of Taiwan in the early 1960s. Several factors contributed to the young modernists’ de-politicizing inclination and their manifested interest in Western modernist aesthetic theory at the expense of social concerns. First

of all, throughout the 1950s Taiwan's literary scene was dominated by the so-called anti-Communist literature promoted by the KMT government after it fled to Taiwan in 1949. By 1960, the ten-year span of much politicized "literary" writing had strained the literary sentiment to the point of "politics fatigue." Young writers simply had to find a new way to vent their creative energy. Paradoxically, though state policy urged writers to exploit the political function of literature, the writers often found themselves treading on dangerous ground in getting involved with politics. Bai Xian-yong, a celebrated writer who began his writing career in the modernist period, once remarked that Taiwan modernists' manifested interest in human consciousness was, in part, a product of strict censorship at that time ("The Diasporic Chinese" 110). It was not uncommon that writers went to jail and editors were forced to step down either because they published something politically sensitive or simply because they clandestinely gained access to banned works by Communist writers (Ying 344-45; Bai, "A Chronicle of Taiwan's Literary Circle" 49-74). Fed up with the practice of propagandist, anti-Communist literature that had dominated Taiwan's literary scene since 1949 and (yet was) unable to engage productively with problems of Taiwan society in their writings, modernist writers, understandably, turned away from politics to aesthetics to open up a new space of creative writing.⁴ But the young artists' strategic position-taking, in Bourdieu's terms, in the field of literary production at that time and the repressive political climate in the period of Martial Law tell only part of the story. One should not discount the mighty influence of the U.S. in the 1960s Taiwan. The involvement of the U.S. in the Korean War inadvertently upgraded the military strategic importance of Taiwan for the U.S. in the cold war structure. The U.S. government decided then to help KMT rebuild the post-war Taiwan so that the island could serve as a useful base for the U.S. in Asia (Zhong-xiong Lin 40). Thus, from 1950 to 1965, the U.S. offered Taiwan generous financial aid and the impact of the American presence in Taiwan was felt not only financially but also culturally. It may not be far-fetched to say that Taiwan's modernists took up the depoliticizing penchant of American modernism in the cold war struggle, for, after all, international modernism was rather political in the 1930s and the depoliticized version that emerged with the

⁴ This does not mean that all writers at that time chose depoliticized aesthetics. It is noteworthy that the nativist-socialist literature that came to challenge modernist literature in the 1970s also took shape in the 1960s. Some writers started as modernist writers but quickly turned away from depoliticized modernist writing to explore ways of commenting on social problems in their literary creation. The writer Chen Ying-zhen is one of the most renowned examples. For a discussion of the rise of the nativist-socialist literature in the 1960s, see Rui-min Lin.

rise of abstract expressionism only fully flowered in the U.S. in the 1950s (Harvey 37).

So far, I have given a rather common account of the rise of Taiwan modernism. Although this sketch offers a more sympathetic interpretation of the rise of the movement and seeks to justify its development in the 1960s, it does not really answer the charge that Taiwan's modernism is a bad copy of Western modernism. To do that, we have to undertake at least two tasks: first, to engage the question of Taiwanese modernity in the 1960s if we accept the premise that modernism can only rise in a condition characterized as "modernity"; second, to examine the prominent features of Taiwan's modernist works and relate them on the one hand to Taiwanese modernity, if there were such a thing, and on the other hand, to international modernism.

I. The Trajectory of Taiwanese Modernity

How could modernism happen in a semi-agricultural society? Western modernism, as a complex cultural response to the condition of modernity, took place in well-developed, modernized metropolises where life experience was characterized by a sense of rupture, change, disorientation, and fragmentation (Harvey 10-12). In Marshall Berman's well-known definition, "[modernity] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air'" (15). It seems that Taipei in the 1960s, with ox-carts often strolling leisurely down the streets, hardly matches this definition of modernity. Without a comparable condition of modernity to serve as the cradle of modernism, Taiwan's modernism can only be interpreted as a blind attempt to transplant Western modernism to infertile soil. But this argument stands only insofar as we accept a Westerncentric definition of modernity. What if we refuse to be bound by this definition of modernity? As King argues, contemporary cultural modernity is comprehensible only if it conceptualizes "the modern" in global terms and refuses to stick to Eurocentric and Westerncentric criteria which "link 'the modern' to the distinctive Western notion of industrialization, urbanization and the rest, as well as Williams' notion of the modern as evaluative and positive" (119). This should not be understood as a call for a total abandonment of the familiar definition of modernity; neither should it be taken as a move to stretch the idea of modernity to the point of "everything goes." The point is to re-define modernity so as to accommodate varied versions of geo-modernity.

Now, if the condition of modernity is a pre-requisite for the rise of modernism,

what were the circumstances in the 1960s Taipei that made it a city of modernity? When discussing the metropolitan character of modernism, Raymond Williams calls our attention to the fact that themes of response to the city—e.g., the impenetrability of the city, isolated and lonely individuals in an alienating city, the liberating diversity and mobility of the city, etc.—do not really count as distinctive features of modernist writing, for they can also be found in relatively traditional forms of art. What really defines modernism as “modern” art, according to Williams, is its breaks in form. This interest in “new” forms arose from a changing social and cultural milieu in which people constantly experienced visual and linguistic strangeness. From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the world witnessed a profound revolution in media communication as the inventions of photography, cinema, radio, television, reproduction and recording processed and reproduced images and sound in ways that had no precedents. In addition to technological inventions, the two World Wars forced people to constantly relocate themselves, often to totally new linguistic and cultural environments (Williams 33-46). The metropolis was the locus where large flows of people and media information converged. The bafflement, uncertainty, and the forced break with whatever one had been accustomed to linguistically and culturally gave rise to a crisis in representation. It was in this climate that modernist formal experiments gained their motive force.

To come back to the question of Taiwanese modernity: in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Taipei was far from a fully modernized metropolis in the Western sense. It was, moreover, under strict political surveillance and denied free flows of information. As Shih Shu recalled, intellectuals in Taiwan often nervously scratched around for information about the outside world that escaped the government’s tight information control, and tried to get a taste of the drugs, Zen and whatever else was hip in the U.S., in cafes playing the music of Beatles and Bob Dylan (305-6). Taiwan in the 1960s, in Shih Shu’s words, was a hysterical, voyeuristic society. This is the picture of Taiwan painted from the perspective of intellectuals, and it presents Taipei as a city where energy was repressed and vitality was missing. But if we zoom in from another angle, we get a very different picture of Taipei. And it was a Taipei overwhelmed by exotic elements and foreign accents: American GIs on vacation from the Vietnam War, Chinese migrants speaking Mandarin or different Chinese dialects, older-generation Taiwanese communicating in Japanese—a legacy of 50 years’ Japanese rule of Taiwan, and the younger generation speaking Mandarin or indigenous languages. The vital exchanges of Chinese, indigenous languages, American, and Japanese cultures in

people's daily activities generated an unprecedented visual and linguistic impact. Juggling all these languages, Taipei appeared to be a site where people were constantly engaged in multicultural negotiations.

What was happening in the realm of popular entertainments at that time confirms this picture of Taipei as a location of vital multicultural exchanges in the 1960s. An amazing flowering of the film industry was taking place. It should be noted that an important aspect of film entertainment at that time was the exposure to a great variety of languages. Films in Taiwanese began to appear in the late 1950s and quickly became a fad. But even though the 1960s was the golden age for films in Taiwanese, films of various types in Chinese were also produced in Taiwan or imported from Hong Kong, and these films were just as popular as those in Taiwanese. In addition, Japanese and American Hollywood movies also found their ways into the realm of popular entertainments. If we also take into account the appearance of the first TV station in 1962, the mediascape in Taipei, to use Appadurai's term, was undergoing a tremendous transformation that totally changed people's perception of life and their relation to the world. At the same time, industrialization was gathering speed. Taiwan was beginning to embark on its trip to the so-called "Asian economic miracle" that surprised the world in the next decade. It is not difficult to imagine the mixture of unease, disorientation, and excitement that people at that time experienced in witnessing the transformation of their society and the ruptures of all aspects with what they had been used to.

If to live in modernity means to live in a maelstrom of change, to experience time and space compression, and to develop a reflexivity that constantly examines and reforms social practices in the light of incoming information (Giddens 1-45; Harvey 261; Appadurai 52-56), it is arguable then that modernity was burgeoning on the Taiwanese scene. This necessitates a revision of the Western view of modernity as predicated on industrialization and urbanization. Liao Ping-hui, one of the most distinguished scholars of cultural criticism in Taiwan, suggests that to understand the complexity of Taiwanese modernity, we need to examine how four modes of modernity are intersected at different historical moments in Taiwan. These modes of modernity are, namely, singular modernity, alternative modernity, multiple modernities, and repressive modernity. Singular modernity is defined by Liao as the upholding of a certain version of modernity as the one and only legitimate trajectory of modernity. Alternative modernity involves the enactment of an unfaithful reproduction of the dominant discourse of modernity. For Taiwan, this means a departure from the

trajectory of Western modernity or that of Chinese modernity. Multiple modernities are generated by the conjuncture of different strands of cultural flows, whereas repressive modernity is often practiced by the authoritarian state to suppress dissident voices (29-30).⁵ Although, as I have argued elsewhere, the complex simultaneous operation of these four modes of modernity is not unique to Taiwan, Liao's caution against an uncritical application of Westerncentric notion of modernity is well taken. Taiwanese modernity took a trajectory quite different from what happened in the West. Though, in due time, industrialization, urbanization, and advanced technology would come to play important roles in Taiwanese modernity, they probably were not the major players to set the scene of modernity in Taiwan in the 1960s. In addition to the take-off of industrialization and capitalist economic development, the unexpected involvement of Taiwan in the wake of the Chinese civil war that brought about two million "mainlanders" to the island, Taiwan's entanglement with the U.S. in the cold war structure, and the legacy of the Japanese colonial rule all contributed to the shaping of a distinctive Taiwanese modernity. Take the issue of time and space compression for example: as a marked feature of modernity, the compression of time and space in the Taiwanese context at issue here was certainly occasioned less by the advancement of new technology than by the interplay of the native culture, the state-sanctioned imposition of the Chinese culture and language on the island, American imperialism, and the residual of the Japanese colonial influences.

Such an understanding of Taiwanese (alternative) modernity has at least two-fold significance. First of all, the specific constitution of Taiwanese modernity discredits the narrative of transition and exposes it as a myth. Secondly, it gives us reasons to believe that the modernist penchant for formal experiments in Taiwan was more than a slavish imitation of Western modernism. When the writers proclaimed in the modernist manifesto that "we decide to go for new artistic forms because we realize that the old modes and styles of literary creation are no longer adequate to represent modern artistic sentiments," the words should be taken seriously rather than simply as a mindless repetition of Western modernist aesthetic principles. It makes good sense to say that the new ethnoscape and mediascape as described above gave a strong impetus

⁵ Liao Ping-hui suggests in his essay that the subjection of Taiwan to colonial or neo-colonial rules by various foreign forces makes it an interesting case for the study of the intersection of the four modes of modernity. I believe that Taiwan is not unique in having the co-existence of the four modes of modernity; minority groups in the first world may also experience similar operations of complex modernity. See Liao Ping-hui, "Memories of Other Worlds and Alternative Modernity: A Reading of Wu Zhuo-liu's *Notes on Nanking*," *Alternative Modernity* 10-41.

to the modernist search for new forms and new possibilities of representation. As Taiwanese modernity departs from the trajectory of Western modernity, Taiwan's modernist writing, responding to specific conditions of modernity in Taiwan in the 1960s, certainly exhibits its own peculiarities. It is by examining these peculiarities that we may gain a glimpse of the "Taiwaneseness" of Taiwan modernist literature no matter how it *appears* to emulate Western models.

II. The Question of "Taiwaneseness" in Taiwanese Modernism

To emphasize the "Taiwaneseness" of Taiwan modernist works is to question the concept of linear time and the temporal hierarchy that Taiwan's modernism seems to espouse. Indeed, the very concept of linear time is called into question in a lot of Taiwan's modernist writings.⁶ I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere that a peculiar feature of Taiwan's modernist fiction is its fascination with the incomprehensible or the unknown (Chiu 103). Very often the stories portray the protagonist's unexpected intrusion into an unfamiliar world or a bewildering domain of local cultural tradition, which opens up in a flash the vision of a fascinating and yet intimidating world not governed by the laws of the modern society. As the text oscillates between the rational world and the incomprehensible or irrational realm, there emerges a curious tension between different temporalities, and the linear progression of time is disrupted. In other words, the juxtaposition of different temporalities (either those of the rational world and the irrational, or of the modern world with a space beyond the regulation of modern, rational laws) pictures time as a complex structure rather than as moving in a linear development.

With traditional time or irrational time superimposed on the modern, rationalized time, time can no longer be imagined as moving in a linear direction. But the persistent presence of something often at odds with the modern world has other implications. It is noteworthy that a very prominent feature of Taiwan's modernist fiction is a marked interest in traditional cultural elements. Writers like Bai Xian-yong, Li Yong-ping, Wang Zhen-he, Li Ang, Shi Su-qing, to name only a few, are all found to be fascinated with traditional cultural elements, and often portray the characters straddling the modern world and the world still regulated by the traditional time.⁷ The elements of

⁶ It is well-known that Western modernist masters such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner also seek to question the linearity of time in their works. However, as I hope to show in the discussion below, the undermining of linear time in Taiwan modernist writing has implications quite different from those associated with Western modernist works.

⁷ Although the Western calendar is used to regulate time in the official realm, the Chinese lunar

cultural traditions, contrary to what most people would think, are not erased in Taiwan's modernist fiction. Instead, their potent presence reveals a curious interweaving of the traditional time and the modern time, which constitutes a very important part of "Taiwanese alternative modernity." But this persistent gesture towards traditional cultural elements should not be understood as a simplistic, romantic nostalgia that harks back to the past for redemption. What we have in a lot of Taiwan's modernist writing, instead, is a rather ambivalent attitude toward these elements which are often presented as sinister and yet capable of offering a liberating vision that exposes the limitations of modern life. In this sense, what the modernist seeks to perform with the traditional cultural elements is quite different from that found in the so-called nativist literature in the 1970s with its realist and socialist inclination.

But in stressing the significance of traditional cultural elements in Taiwan's modernist writing and presenting the juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern as a peculiar feature of Taiwan's modernist fiction, I am not suggesting that "Taiwanese-ness" is only located in, and hence defined by, the so-called cultural tradition. Such a conception of "Taiwanese-ness," to be sure, is subject to the charge of essentialism. Moreover, to locate "Taiwanese-ness" exclusively in the repertoire of traditional cultural elements or signs is to run the risk of circumscribing and stereotyping Taiwanese literature/culture; at its worst, this excursion is likely to simplify the complexity of the culture/literature at issue and play into the hands of Orientalism.⁸ Instead of proposing that traditional cultural elements are what *really* defines the "Taiwanese-ness" of Taiwan modernist writing, I want to argue that the use of traditional cultural elements is only one of the ways of "performing" "Taiwanese-ness," which should be understood not so much as a product of "strategic essentialism" but as a "strategic provisionality"—a notion proposed by Judith Butler in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (19). Gender identity, according to Butler, is performatively constituted and "is always a doing" rather than a being (*Gender Trouble* 25). Likewise, "Taiwanese-ness" as an identity category can also be understood as constituted by a series of doings that have no "being" or essence behind them.⁹ In other words, "Taiwanese-ness" cannot be

calendar continues to play an important role in people's daily life. Time operating according to the lunar calendar still observes traditional rituals and customs.

⁸ Contemporary discussions on the notion of "Chineseness" have a lot of bearing on our discussion of "Taiwanese-ness." The dangers of essentialism and neo-racism in the construction of any "-ness" certainly should be carefully examined. For some useful discussions on this issue, see Chow, "Introduction"; Michele Yeh; and Ien Ang.

⁹ I am indebted to Liao Chao-yang for his insightful application of Butler's theory to the discussion of Taiwanese identity. Liao's ingenious employment of Butler's theory in the identity debate that

pinned down to certain fixed characteristic traits, for if “Taiwaneseness” can be regarded as an identity sign, then the sign should always be used with a consciousness of its temporal contingency. In discussing the lesbian “I” as an identity category, Butler stresses the provisionality of any identity constitution:

What “performs” does not exhaust the “I”; it does not lay out in visible terms the comprehensive content of that “I,” for if the performance is “repeated,” there is always the question of what differentiates from each other the moments of identity that are repeated. And if the “I” is the effect of a certain repetition, on which produces the semblance of a continuity or coherence, then there is no “I” that precedes the gender that it is said to perform; the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of that “I.” (“Imitation” 18)

To say that “Taiwaneseness” is performative means that “Taiwaneseness,” to appropriate Butler’s theory of performativity, gets established through a repetition of play that sustains and yet always runs the risk of displacing that very identity through a failure to repeat. Moreover, what “performs” does not exhaust “Taiwaneseness” and does not lay out the comprehensive content of the very identity.

Understood in this way, the use of traditional cultural elements is only one of the ways “Taiwaneseness” gets “performed” in Taiwan modernist writing. What is repeatedly “performed” and re-signified in Taiwan modernist writing, which constitutes the precarious notion of “Taiwaneseness,” is not so much the persistent presence of the tradition within the modern world as an uneasy conjunction of different temporalities that generates a sense of uncertainty, discomfort, and, curiously speaking, excitement. Ultimately, I want to argue that it is often the encounter with the other, variously embodied as the uncanny, the alien, the irrational, or the inscrutable, which is repeatedly acted out in modernist writings.¹⁰ And this preoccupation with the other

involved several scholars in Taiwan in 1995 opens up the possibility of theorizing Taiwaneseness in a non-essentialist way. See Liao Chao-yang. While agreeing with Liao on the performative and provisional aspect of the Taiwanese identity, I nevertheless see the performativity and provisionality of the Taiwanese identity as constrained by the specific historical materiality of Taiwan. The excursion I undertake in this essay aims to provide an example of this point.

¹⁰ In Taiwan modernist writing, traditional cultural elements often embody the “other” as modernization enacts a transformation of the cultural landscape and generates an estrangement from one’s cultural tradition.

may reflect a growing bafflement at and interest in how the flux of cultural inputs from different sources was bearing upon the life of the people in Taiwan. The “Taiwanese-ness” in Taiwan modernist writing, then, does not point to fixed and unchangeable essence (e.g., cultural essence or fixed traditional elements); rather, it is constituted by a series of performative inscriptions generated out of the encounter with (strange) others.

This understanding of the entanglement of “Taiwanese-ness” with the interest in (strange) others might shed new light on the problem of “Westernization” in Taiwan modernist writing. Take the writer Qi Deng-sheng as an example. Like Wang Wen-xing, Qi has often been criticized for corrupting the literary production in Taiwan with “Westernized,” convoluted language. For readers who tend to view his works in a disparaging way, Qi’s works unmistakably show the pernicious effects of “Westernization.” Marked by convoluted sentences and the confounding obscurity of the plot, Qi’s works are often taken to task by his critics as unsuccessful emulation of Western style literary creation in Chinese (Zhang 12). I would like to point out, however, that what is being performed in Qi’s writing is not “translation” but alienation effects generated by “simulated translation.” As a critic has remarked, the structure of Qi’s convoluted language has no equivalent in English and is definitely not a product of translation (Liu 41). In terms of plot, Qi’s modernist works very often deal with the unexpected encounter with something that defies rational understanding. A space not governed by rules operating in the normal world is opened up. The most celebrated story “I Love Black Eyes” is a case in point, but other stories such as “The Poker Game,” “The Cat,” “The Grey Bird,” “Mystique in the Style of He-so,” and other numerous stories all depict the superimposition of an inscrutable and alien space on what we (and the characters) take as a normal world regulated by rational laws. It is arguable that Qi’s peculiar “Westernized” style of writing is in fact an interventional tactic of “de-familiarization”—an effect produced by calculated convolution of sentence structure and obscurity of plot to signify the sense of disorientation and bewilderment in encountering the other. What the other represents cannot be “translated” into the signifying system to which we are used; the foreign remains as foreign as it can be in the text and defies being domesticated or blending in with what we are familiar with. Qi’s works are often criticized for being too “Westernized.” But it is noteworthy that while they deliberately “pose” as “translations,” they also point to the impossibility of translation. In this air of “simulated translation” we may detect traces

of Taiwan modernists' fascination with the other.¹¹

The Other, the New Historiography, and Globalization

What the other signifies in Taiwan's modernist fiction ranges from the de-familiarized traditional culture, the irrational force from indefinite source, the unconscious, to foreign cultures. The exposure to the presence of the other often opens up a vision of a world not totally comprehensible to the characters. Significantly, the other is seldom represented as something to be rejected or totally embraced. More often than not, the other, disrupting the regular operation of the character's world, is portrayed as intimidating and yet liberating. The other is neither evil nor the harbinger of total blessing. Given this intriguing ambivalence toward the other, the engagement with the other is not conducted in terms of confrontation. Nor does the other signify unquestionably an advanced stage of culture and is thus employed to envision a narrative of transition. What is required, as the texts seem to suggest, is a vigorous negotiation with the other. It seems that we are urged to constantly expand our cultural horizon delimited by what we have taken for granted and, at the same time, not to overlook the risks and the uncertain consequences that such adventures may entail.

In its explicit rejection of the narrative of confrontation and the implicit undermining of the narrative of transition, Taiwan's modernism may anticipate the emergence of a more sophisticated historiography in delineating the complicated negotiations with the alien other as well as one's cultural tradition. This new historiography can be taken as a kind of border historiography in the sense that it does not espouse the linearity of time that informs the narrative of transition. If it is by successfully translating what has happened in Western countries that non-Western countries enter the trajectory of transition, then the vision of the other as something that cannot be completely domesticated and assimilated into one's cultural signifying

¹¹ I want to point out that if the "Taiwaneseness" in Taiwan's modernist writing is closely associated with the interest in (strange) others in the specific historical milieu of Taiwan from the late 1950s to late 1960s, this fascination with the other is not sustained throughout the history of Taiwan literature. "Homeland," rather than the other, dominated the literary imagination in the 1970s when the vernacular literature succeeded modernist literature as the literary trend. The emergence of the nativist consciousness that fueled vernacular writings was occasioned partly by Taiwan's diplomatic setbacks at that time.

system rejects the narrative of transition predicated on faithful reproduction. On the other hand, the portrayal of the other as both fascinating and intimidating refuses to use the vocabulary of confrontation to set the terms of engaging the other.

To recast the debate on Taiwan modernism in this way certainly is not politically innocent. The modernists probably were not aware of the implications of their literary production in relation to the historiographical reflection under discussion here. If this paper proposes to discuss Taiwan modernism in terms other than transition or confrontation, such a reinterpretation of Taiwan modernism comes at a time when a new historical imaginary is gaining currency in Taiwan. In contrast to the historiography which imagines Taiwan always in terms of its connection with the Chinese mainland, the new historical imaginary defines Taiwan as a “country of the ocean” and the visual image of Taiwan has taken up the shape of a whale in the sea to replace the traditional image of Taiwan as a “small potato” on the margin of the Chinese territory. This new discursive construction of “Taiwan” apparently seeks to evoke an oceanic imagination and calls for a more positive attitude toward cultural exchanges. Historically, Taiwan had been a colony subjected to the rules of the Dutch, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese before it was taken over by the KMT party and became deeply entrenched in the American bid for world power in the cold war structure. Incessant exposures, forced or voluntary, to “foreign” cultures have become an important constituent of Taiwan’s history. How to interpret encounters with others has always been an important theme in Taiwanese historiography.

A dominant trend of critical discourse after Martial Law was lifted in 1987 tends to portray Taiwan as a victim, compelled against its will to negotiate with cultural forces from the outside at various moments of history. This vein of argument is particularly adept at dealing with problems associated with colonialism and cultural imperialism, but is increasingly found inadequate in facing the challenges of globalization. Arif Dirlik points out that in the age of globalization, the most urgent question is no longer colonization but marginalization (351). But for people in Taiwan living in the shadow of ceaseless military threats from China, marginalization and (re)colonization are intertwined, for the security of Taiwan depends pretty much on international intervention. Under such circumstances, a new discursive vocabulary other than that of confrontation needs to be invented to re-position Taiwan’s relationship with the outside world. Since it is by maintaining the possibilities of negotiating with others that Taiwan may secure its precarious identity, an important task of the new cultural and historical imaginary is to address the complexity of the encounters with multi-faceted

others. As Taiwan's modernism is the most renowned case in the history of Taiwan literature that dramatizes the interest in and the impact by the (strange) other, this paper is a modest attempt to intervene in the controversy raised by the movement in light of the emerging new historical imaginary.

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