

Negotiating colonialism: Taiwanese literature during the Japanese occupation

Research on the Japanese colonial period in Taiwan (1895-1945) has been booming in recent years, especially since the lifting of martial law in 1987. Scholarship on the period's literary production, however, focuses on works containing explicit anti-colonial stances to such an extent that writings in other styles and those less critical of colonial rule have been disregarded.

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The first two decades of Taiwan's Japanese period were marked by armed anti-colonial movements that ultimately failed. The Japanese colonisers' brutal suppression made the Taiwanese intelligentsia turn to cultural movements to remodel the nation's thinking as an alternative way to flight against colonialism. In 1921, the Taiwan Cultural Association (Taiwan bunka kyōkai) was established, launching an island-wide cultural reform programme to educate people. To accommodate this call for cultural enlightenment, a new strand of literature written in the style of vernacular Chinese emerged in the early 1920s. Usually referred to as the Taiwan New Literature movement, it played a vital part in Taiwanese people's anti-colonial resistance.

Taiwan New Literature

Owing to the colonial context, the Taiwan new literature movement was from the very beginning multi-lingual and socio-politically engaged. In addition to works written in Chinese, there were works written in Japanese and Taiwanese. The key figures in the first stage of the movement, such as Lai He, hailed as the 'father of Taiwan New Literature', Chen Xugu, and Cai Qiutong, were all active members of the Association. With left-wing ideas ascendant in the 1920s, writers in this early stage of Taiwan New Literature produced works containing strong nationalistic sentiments and humanitarian concerns. Lai He's short story *A Scale* (1926) for instance portrays colonial exploitation and the longing for a fair society. Qin Decan, the protagonist of *A Scale*, is a farmer who maintains himself by selling vegetables. To please his customer, a Japanese police officer, Qin deliberately underestimates their weight. Unfortunately, the police officer does not feel grateful at all, and Qin is charged for violating the rules of weights and measures. Unable to pay bail, Qin kills the policeman and then commits

suicide, highlighting the predicament of the proletariat in colonial Taiwan.

In 1931, the left-leaning Taiwan People's Party was dismissed and its leader Jiang Weishui passed away; many leftwing Taiwanese intellectuals were apprehended. These factors led to the decline of socio-political movements in Taiwan; writers turned to literary movements and devoted themselves to writing. This ironically heralded a period of maturation for Taiwan New Literature. In this second stage, numerous literary societies were established, and literary journals launched. Writers began to explore new artistic trends and tackle a wider range of themes. Yang Kui's *Newspaper Boy* (1934), Weng Nao's *Remaining Snow* (1935) and Long Yingzong's *A Small Town with Papaya Trees* (1937) are three distinctive pieces written in Japanese from the second stage of Taiwan New Literature.

Inspired by Lai He's leftwing thinking, Yang Kui went further by bringing class analysis and internationalism to his writing. His award-winning *Newspaper Boy* is an account of a foreign student's exploitation by his boss, and his later support of unions as a means of fighting back. Set in a period of economic recession in Japan, the student leads a poverty-stricken life. When he is about to give up, a Japanese worker, Tanaka, offers his help. Contrasting the exploitative boss and the generous Tanaka, the story emphasises opposition between capitalists and labourers rather than between Japanese and Taiwanese. In fact, Yang does not divulge until the second half of the story that the student is from Taiwan. *Newspaper Boy* ends with the Taiwanese student identifying with Japanese labourers and joining the union movement, embracing a universal and humanitarian compassion for the proletariat instead of a provincial nationalism.

Written in the third person, *Remaining Snow* recounts Lin Chunsheng's fash-

ionable student life in 1930s Tokyo. Caught between his Japanese lover Kimiko and his old Taiwanese love Yuzhi, Lin ultimately realises that he is not in love with either and decides to stay in Tokyo to pursue his dream of becoming an actor. Lin's idle strolling into Shinjuku coffee shops, and his taste for western classical music and foreign plays conveys the modernist temperament of the work. Lin's ideas of love are likewise modern; he is a *flâneur* constantly seeking his next object of desire. Caught between two competing love relationships (cultural identities), Lin refuses a fixed identity and chooses an ever-changing aesthetic, urban lifestyle. The emphasis on individual perceptions opens new possibilities for Taiwanese literature, free of the tangled question of nationalism.

Long's *A Small Town with Papaya Trees* recounts the pessimism of Taiwanese intellectuals. Living in a suffocating small town, the protagonist resents Taiwanese-Japanese inequality and the arranged marriage into which his lover is forced. Its gloomy closing, where the protagonist abandons himself to alcohol, signifies the no-way-out plight of the colonised. In contrast to Lai He and Yang Kui's spirited resistance, and unlike Weng Nao's modernist disposition, Long's portrait of weak and hollow Taiwanese bourgeois intellectuals is in itself a sad caricature of Japanese colonialism.

Imperial subjects?

During the eight-year Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), the Japanese propagated the Imperial-Subject Movement (*kōminka undō*), a series of assimilation campaigns to mold Taiwanese people's unquestioning loyalty to Japan, which included the establishment of the Imperial-Subject Public Service Association (*kōmin hōkōkai*) in 1941. Taiwanese writers were requested to eulogise the Japanese national spirit and produce a masculine, optimistic literature to assist in the war

effort, leading to the so-called imperial-subject literature addressing Taiwanese people's spiritual distress throughout the process of imperialisation and the promotion of Japan-Taiwan amity. In the works of Chen Huoquan and Zhou Jinbo, prominent themes were the yearning for the modern, urban, progressive Japanese civilisation and the urgency to reform the vulgar Taiwanese culture through imperialisation.

The support of colonial policy and apparent pro-Japan stance in these works stirred controversies in post-1987 Taiwan. Scholars held different viewpoints towards the imperial-subject literature. Some were understanding: Zhang Liangze called for reading imperial-subject literature with 'a serious attitude of love and sympathy' (Zhang, 1998), while Ye Shitao declared 'there is no imperial-subject literature. All are protest literature'. (Ye, 1990: 112). Others moralised: Chen Yingzhen considered imperial-subject literature an accomplice of Japanese colonialism (Chen, 1998:13) while Lin Ruiming, though not as radical as Chen, firmly stressed that (imperial-subject) writers should not 'shirk their responsibility'. (Lin, 1996: 322). These debates showed nationalist and moralistic literary standards still being applied to the reception of imperial-subject works; the imperial-subject writers were so pressured that some of them felt the need to justify themselves. When invited to translate his *The Way* (1943) into Chinese, Chen Huoquan, for instance, not only made amendments to the work but also added a passage stating that he was forced by the times and circumstances to write pro-Japan messages. Yet in recent years, scholars have attempted to move away from the dichotomy of imperial-subject and protest literature. Their call for a contextual analysis indicates a more open attitude towards Taiwan's colonial past. This can be seen from the growing interests in Yang Chichang's surrealist poetics and popular literature, the two scarcely studied dimensions in Taiwanese literature under Japanese rule.

Similar to Weng Nao's cautionary attitude towards embracing national/cultural identity, Yang Chichang declared that Taiwanese literature should abandon its political stance as early as 1936. Rather than narrating external reality, Yang concentrated on the distorted internal violence brought by Japanese colonialism. His poems showed his attempt to disconnect himself from reality, and are full of non-linear ways of thinking, fragmentary images as well as symbolic lexicons - all of them skilfully capture the highly censored life the Taiwanese people suffered. As for the rich heritage of popular literature, it added an important contribution to the development of Chinese literature especially after the usage of Chinese was banned in 1937. These popular novels are extremely significant as they fill the gap left by the intellectual-centred call for a

new literature. Although these works are mainly love stories, the themes encouraging freedom of love reflect the thinking on male/female relationship of urbanites in the 1930s and 1940s. The quasi pro-Japan messages in some of these works expanded the horizons of imperial-subject literature which was no longer necessarily written in the coloniser's tongue.

With Japan's surrender and Taiwan's 'return' to China in 1945, the evolution of Taiwan New Literature was brought to an end. Some writers halted their creative activities, while others took pains to learn Chinese and continued to write; the legacy of literature under Japanese rule was marginalised with only few works such as Wu Zhouliu's *The Orphan of Asia* being published. Only in the nativist literary debate of the 1970s did attempts to excavate works of the Japanese colonial period begin.

With the lifting of martial law and the prevalence of nativist movements over the past three decades, the importance of literature from colonial Taiwan continues to grow. Begun as part of the anti-Japanese resistance, it departed from classical Chinese tradition and underwent its own development and maturation. This opulent literary legacy illustrates the painful process of these writers' constructions of selfhood and negotiation with the colonial condition, providing us with a complex picture of the workings of colonialism. <

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