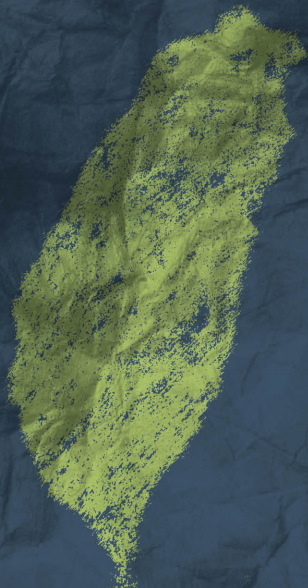


# THE LAST ISLE

Contemporary Film, Culture  
and Trauma in Global Taiwan

Sheng-mei Ma





# The Last Isle

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*Contemporary Film, Culture and  
Trauma in Global Taiwan*

Sheng-mei Ma

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# Introduction

I was made in Taiwan, out of mainland Chinese leftovers, recycled and reformatted by U.S. academe for the global marketplace of ideas. The millennial and middle-age reverse flow shipped me back from my home institution of Michigan State University to Taiwan as Chair Professor of English at Providence University, 2012–2013, the culmination of a three-decade-long gestation to give shape to my last isle. Akin to a trauma, I exited a then-authoritarian Taiwan, only to return to it repeatedly in the mind. Such remembrance of things past stems as much from a personal urge as from a global geopolitical shift. Since the turn of the century, the rise of China has shaped the landscape of globalization, ratcheting up, among other areas, the tension across the Taiwan Strait. This has heightened the island's crisis of identity, prompting nativization and localization<sup>1</sup> against the backdrop of, as Wu Zhuoliu calls his seminal 1946 novel, *Orphan of Asia*; of the February 28 Incident and the ensuing White Terror; of Cold War paranoia and Chiang Kai-shek's autocratic reign; of 1970s diplomatic setbacks which channeled islanders' anxiety into economic pursuit as one of the four mini-dragons; of the lifting of martial laws in 1987; and of democratization and Taiwnization from ex-President Lee Teng-hui to the present. A Taiwanese identity must be forged out of a history of colonial servitude, an ethos of the disenfranchised characterized by sadness and abjection, aptly phrased by Hou Hsiao-hsien's protagonist in *The City of Sadness* (1989): 'We *benshengren* [Taiwanese] are so pitiable. First, the Japanese come, then the Chinese. Everyone eats the Taiwanese, everyone takes advantage of them and nobody loves them.'<sup>2</sup> Hou's character, of course, chooses to begin Taiwanese history with Japanese colonialism in 1895, prior to which, there have come and gone Portuguese, Spanish, British and Chinese masters. The cannibalistic metaphor, already a cliché to postcolonial studies and Marxist critique of capitalism, evokes nonetheless Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' (1918), Gang Yue's *The Mouth That Begs* (1999) and David Wang's *The Monster That Is History* (2004). At a time when fluid, hybrid identity is valorized, as if the upwardly mobile are all omnivores, it is sobering to look up from the bottom that is Taiwan, where a political entity's very existence cannot be taken for granted, let alone a sense of selfhood.

Taiwan has been stigmatized by, to borrow Shu-mei Shih's coinage, its '(in)significance' both in academic circles and in the world at large. Scholars almost feel compelled to defend their concentration on Taiwan from

the outset, resulting in titles such as *Why Taiwan Matters* (2011), *Whither Taiwan and Mainland China* (2010), *Taiwan: Nation-State or Province?* (2009), *Why Taiwan?* (2007) and *Is Taiwan Chinese?* (2004). The prevailing question marks in the titles, including the last title that links the minor to the major player in world politics, suggest that mainstream American social scientists (i.e., non-Taiwanese) are keenly aware of English-speaking readers' reaction of 'What has Taiwan got to do with me or with anything?' Nonetheless, globalization has begun a tilt toward the Pacific Rim; the United States has advocated its foreign policy of 'Asia Pivot'; and the Pacific Rim has grown increasingly contentious, anything but pacifist. In the midst of this, the Taiwan Strait and the Thirty-eighth Parallel are two flash points, perhaps the only two places in the world where two nations with a shared culture and language (China and Taiwan since 1949; North and South Korea since 1953) remain irreconcilably separated through hot and cold wars, neither reunited nor officially divorced, one side democratic, the other totalitarian. These ongoing skirmishes may not have immediate impact on American lives as the Arab Spring and the War on Terror have. Yet Taiwan merits attention for its own sake, as a miniature of the postcolonial, multilingual, postmodern and postindustrial First World so shot through with anxiety that it might disintegrate like sci-fi dystopias.<sup>3</sup> Fear not! Observe the isle from afar, a resigned canary that makes no fuss, an object lesson choking in the global coal mine of superpower exploitation and ideological strife.

The perfect storm of the world's turn to China and internal pressure within the island have made possible the publication of monographs and journal articles on Taiwan's politics, history, social formations, culture, literature and film. Academic publishers devoted to this included Routledge's Taiwan Series, Columbia University Press' ample list on Taiwan, Rowman and Littlefield's series on Asia/Pacific/Perspectives, and Hong Kong University Press. Although the field of Taiwan studies was initiated in reaction to the rise from the East, it came across as sort of a black dot, a minor disturbance, against the overpowering Red Sun of China studies. The most Taiwan studies could marshal seemed to be the claim of 'Taiwan Cool' in the midst of hot blinding sunrays, similar to how femininity and minority have traditionally been defined as lack of masculinity or as deviance from the mainstream. What feminists and minority studies have constructed in terms of their subjectivity and agency inspires Taiwan scholarship in its attempt to capture an amorphous, shape-shifting Taiwan going through an identity crisis that Dafydd Fell calls 'national identity fatigue' (95) for the simple fact that the claim of 'national' for the island nation-cum-renegade province is suspect. As Shelley Rigger puts it in *Why Taiwan Matters*, '[j]ust calling Taiwan a "country" is enough to make some readers drop [her] book in disgust. The word is anathema to the PRC government and most PRC citizens' (4). Thus, it is suspect because China lies at the heart of Taiwan's neurosis; China is

forever Taiwan's cross to bear until such time as it ceases to exist. To play on Guo-Juin Hong original title for his *Taiwan Cinema* (2011), Taiwan is in 'Dire Straits,' literally, because of saber-rattling and imperial crookedness from the dark side of the Strait.

Whether situated in the West or across Asia, these Taiwan experts are indeed 'insiders' in Chinese, Taiwanese, East Asian, and Comparative Literature Departments, giving us unique insights from within their discipline and the field of Taiwan. On the other hand, owing to political and socioeconomic exigencies, a large number of studies belong to political science and social science. Among the handful of books on Taiwan's literature and film, the focus tends to be on the high points from the past. Scholars analyze Modernism and Nativism in the second half of the twentieth century (Yvonne Chang, June Yip, Sylvia Lin); film critics zoom in on Taiwan New Cinema in the 1980s, with recent filmmaking energy siphoned off into documentaries (Lin and Sang, Robert Chi). Harking back to the 1980s, *Island on the Edge* (2005), *Taiwan Film Directors* (2005), and several other film studies collections concentrate on Taiwan's established auteurs, or what I call the Big Three plus one: Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang, plus Ang Lee. Hong's *Taiwan Cinema*, similarly, dissects early cinema in Taiwan, followed by the 'usual suspects' of the Big Three, closing with a nod to three films in the 2000s and 2010s.

To address such lacunae, I open *The Last Isle* from where Taiwan film scholarship has generally left off, interrogating relatively unknown contemporary filmmakers who are not likely to ever make it to the world stage as the Big Three did in Art Cinema or as Ang Lee did in Hollywood. Hong's passing allusions become my focus: I analyze how these commercially successful films of the twenty-first century appeal to the domestic market and yet their local interests or Taiwanization strip them of any purchase in global cinema, a total reversal to Taiwan New Cinema, which was the darling of international art festivals but which was also, as Hong puts it, 'box office poison' (118). That which strikes a chord in Taiwan fails to resonate elsewhere; the buzzword of glocalization is to be replaced by what I term the unglobalizable. While certain features of contemporary Taiwan films reflect the Taiwan condition, they render the films decidedly minor, fraught with non sequiturs, in the eye of global cinema. Being minor, however, does not necessarily mean being trivial, as Deleuze has illustrated in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975).

Therefore, the book first tackles the close proximity of Taiwan and trauma theory, crystallized in the island's foundling self-image. In response to which, Taiwan films gravitate to a range of coping, indeed survival, strategies, often subconsciously involving mobility akin to flight. Melodramas, accordingly, flee the island and embrace it simultaneously by means of Taiwan's favorite pastime—bicycle tours around the coastline, one film riding the mountain bike as far as the soul mountain of

Shangri-La! Serving to comfort the ‘huddled masses’ like the Statue of Liberty, regional Goddess Mazu and Boy-God Nezha provide psychological and emotional succor. While Gods descend from heaven to relieve Taiwanese suffering, yet another tradition—cross-dressing dramaturgy in Taiwanese folk theater—traverses the gender barrier, wedding romance with androgyny. Towering above local film productions and local traditions, Ang Lee of global cinema decides to repress race and ethnicity altogether, perfecting the art of ventriloquy in his Hollywood films. By contrast, Taiwanese dialect films try to laugh it off, working out the quandary of existence with black humor. Linguistically, they deploy the Taiwanese dialect, adroit in code-switching between Mandarin and Taiwanese and numerous other languages. Multilingualism endears the films to Taiwanese audience for that is their everyday reality, a lived experience verging on magic that is totally lost from English subtitles as well as to English speakers. Conceptually, these films stem from Taiwan’s history and psyche of trauma and pathos, which only look melodramatic, bathos-like, and self-pitying to non-Taiwanese. A case in point: the recurring image of Taiwan Nezha, a quintessential rebel in youth films borrowed from China’s fantasy classics and then indigenized, echoes Taiwan’s orphan mentality, yet that Boy-God may simply appear puerile, nonsensical to those unaware of and indifferent to the island’s plight.

*The Last Isle* also brings Taiwan scholarship up close and personal, wrestling like Jacob by the Taiwan Strait, literally during my tenure at Providence University in Shalu, with contemporary cultural practices. After the thick description and analysis of films, my book proceeds to join *Popular Culture in Taiwan* (2011) and *The Minor Arts of Daily Life* (2004) in parsing Taiwan’s popular culture. In situ in a coastal town where Providence University is located, I offer an in-depth study of local conditions of life and death, specifically, reading closely Western-style food labels and indigenous funereal practices. Based in Providence’s English Department, I then turn to grapple with Taiwan’s English education, which would trouble anyone’s sight like a Yeatsian coming of a three-headed monster. Looking beyond Taiwan, I explore accidental Taiwanese or five American artists of Taiwanese descent who invariably revisit identity in their respective medium of literature, graphic novel and radio play. A coda finally returns from the symptoms to the cause of the sense of an ending in *The Last Isle*: China.

By virtue of the fact that Taiwan scholarship comprises a body of scholarly works, their writings are objective, disinterested, even scientific, perhaps in need of the feel of the place and a bit more emotional engagement. This makes perfect sense since academic careers pivot on scholarly publications. Not only do Taiwan or China experts have to sound professional, but they must diplomatically negotiate the treacherous waters in area studies, somewhat ghettoized as to make every single word and action subject to peer scrutiny. An outlier positioned in the

English Department in the American Midwest (comedian Margaret Cho's job at the Midwest) away from Ivy-adorned and/or coastal powerhouses of area studies, and not a career diplomat in the specialized field, so to speak, I can afford to tell it like it is. I have never belonged to that confined universe of area studies, nor will I dive into it any time soon, which would constitute relocating from a larger murky pond to a smaller one. An insider/outsider from that uncanny island, stuck between the second generation ABT (American-born Taiwanese) with native fluency but little attachment to Taiwan, and the typical first generation FOB (Fresh off the Boat) immigrants with emotional ties but not enough English, I come with both a deep bond to that which has long gone and a deep understanding of someone else's language. Hence, this book prefers a clarity of vision uncluttered by certain specialists' myopia and political deliberations. By penning *The Last Isle*, I am reminded of Jonathan Swift who disclaimed, tongue-in-cheek, any personal gain from "A Modest Proposal" since his wife had passed child-bearing age. Just as Swift was driven to write that satire of cannibalism as a result of Irish suffering, I mourn the last isle because I have to.

Taiwan haunts me like a primal wound, in the image of *maoken*, night soil hole or, literally translated, shit pit, into which my family and I used to squat to relieve ourselves. *Maoken* was the term my parents from Northern China used, part of their past carried over in their 1949 exodus to Taiwan along with two million mainlanders, refugees dispatched to hastily constructed military dependents' compounds across Taiwan amidst Taiwanese. Visualize, if you would, concentric circles with the largest one occupied by the defeated Chiang Kai-shek regime in Taiwan, an international pariah, within which is the circle of one such besieged military compound that speaks Mandarin totally unintelligible to surrounding Taiwanese, further within which is the smallest circle of my family's tenement, the shit pit smack in the center—that is the heart of my life's mandala. Hidden in the dark corner of our rundown tenement room (rather than a separate outhouse), it never shows up in the backdrop of any of my family's photographs, a past that we would just as soon forget. Yet that gaping hole with overflowing excrement and squirming white maggots recurs in my nightmare. For a descendant of mainland refugees, the journey to the New World, driven by the stench and the shame, severs ties with the shit pit of childhood and young adulthood. This dark hole of memory is the tip of my repressed Taiwan, with which I now make peace.

As an adult, I did indeed escape to the West and Anglo-American literature, doubly insulated. As I look back, though, almost all six of my single-authored books on Asian Diaspora and Asian American culture contain 'backward glances' at the island reminiscent of repetition compulsion. My books tend to conclude with gestures toward lingering memories of Taiwan, be it a chapter on Ang Lee or two more on Nativist

literature. That I am not quite done with Taiwan manifests itself in my one-year chair professorship there. Slouching toward the last isle to be reborn, I am engaged in a Yeatsian second coming, arguably different from certain Taiwan experts who have never left it intellectually. Discipline-wise, I have travelled far, compared to those whose dissertations and entire careers revolve around who they are and where they come from. Atypical among academics, my trajectory of homebound revisitations, physical and imaginary, does not exactly chart a professional shortcut, a circuitous route mapped out by the foolish heart rather than the wise head. My three-decade-long sojourn in the United States, on the other hand, culminated in *Alienglish: Eastern Diasporas in Anglo-American Tongues* (2014), where English becomes part of my 'forked tongue' that also alienates. Such present condition further propels me to synthesize professional, progressive inquiry with unrequited affect of an impossible return. Given that globalization has rendered all of us world citizens with hybridized identity, perhaps a euphemism for confused personhood, Taiwan serves as a touchstone as it fervently fashions Taiwanese-ness for fear of being nothing, a selfhood perennially in the making, being inscribed and stricken at the same time, not just by the world but also by oneself plagued by angst and doubt.

Where I came from has certainly led to where I am going in this book on the island's film and culture. My expertise on Asian diaspora crystallizes, in fact, in Taiwan, which embodies diaspora, given that the island is 'leased' and 'on borrowed time,' divided within and dismissed without. On that foundation, I reach out for a symmetry of lost versus found, of Taiwan's local conditions vanishing yet reanimated herein in the lingua franca of English, of a small island in East Asia versus the omnipresent language and culture hailing from Great Britain by way of North America. Channeling twin specters—a Taiwan in the shadows and a tongue not my own, I conjure up the last isle, last as in 'just passed' and in 'passing of the last of its kind.' The only state of being capable of conjugating both the past tense and the present participle is ghostly haunting. The last isle is the antecedent to global Taiwan and displaced by it, yet still extant in residual afterimages. The last isle *is* the global Taiwan, which clings onto the last aisle of the world arena from which it was repeatedly evicted, most traumatically by the United Nations in 1971, by Japan in 1972, by the United States in 1979, and by many more. Hence, global Taiwan resides in the threshold between a house of high-tech postmodernity and imminent homelessness, rushing headlong into the future while looking back in tears.<sup>4</sup>

Such phantom images revolve around not only this conjurer's nostalgia for a place demolished and built over by modernization, but also millennial Taiwan's own perennial return of cultural practices to *goza wui* (erstwhile taste/smell/feel in the Taiwanese dialect). Sensations far more primal than vision guide a newborn's rooting instinct through the smell,

the feel, of breasts and nipples. Likewise, a postmodern culture too fast and mindless for its own good seeks sustenance from early memories of the body. My private memories and global Taiwan's collective memories are intertwined, both suffering from phantom self—not just limb—pain. Indeed, to rephrase Catherine's confession in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) to her maid Nelly, "I am global Taiwan," scattered to the four winds like an aerial orchid living off the air rather than the land. Since neither Nelly nor Heathcliff quite grasped Catherine's meaning, I am cognizant of the fact that despite my passion to bring alive *The Last Isle*, its last-ness conveys a good deal of contradiction: both deceased and lasting, both vital to my being and negligible to the world's like a dying or extinct species, neither here nor there to Taiwanese globalism and American ethnocentrism.

Whereas getting personal drives part of this project, a researcher's dispassionate quest for an island's double consciousness brakes and counterpoints the backward plunge. Whereas I write to exorcize this ghost of mine, I am doubly haunted by the master tongue English, which is to free me from my past in Chinese. Entangled threads thus spin into a stylistic crazy quilt of the expository woven with the poetic, analytical reasoning with intuitive feeling. The argument oscillates between the two modes, unable and unwilling to make up its mind over the romantic, elegiac title versus the dissertating subtitle, for humans are more than just the cool head of the proverbially dry, disinterested (social) scientist. Scholarly exegeses elucidate the subject matter, but all the knowledge in the world will not let you touch the place and feel it. For that, come with me in these pages. After a long, draining and disorienting flight that reverses night and day, we stumble out of the Chiang Kai-shek International Airport in Taoyuan, Taiwan. The glass doors open and you smash into a concrete wall of heat. You wade through the streets in ninety-plus degree Fahrenheit when it feels like over one hundred, all the pores panting, shrouding you in sweat and dampness like a newborn with fresh yet nebulous sensations and consciousness. Your body has begun to pickle in the unrelenting sun and humidity, just as Formosa (Portuguese for the beautiful island) has always been an exquisite, bite-size pickle in the briny Pacific for colonists over the centuries to nibble and chuck out. Let us embark now on our journey to a mirage burning on the sea, by a dark continent, in ten chapters and a coda.

## NOTES

1. Shelley Rigger writes in *Why Taiwan Matters* (2011) that after Lee Teng-hui, the Chen Shui-bian administration (2000–2008) 'redoubled its efforts to propagate Taiwanese identity and encourage Taiwanese consciousness so as to fortify islanders against Beijing's enticements as well as its coercive measures' (155).

2. Rosemary Haddon in 'Hou Hsiao Hsien's *City of Sadness*: History and the Dialogic Female Voice' gives this wonderful citation on pages 58–59.

3. In *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation in the Cultural Imaginary* (2004), June Chun Yip agrees that Taiwan is a world laboratory of sorts: '[M]odern Taiwan, with its persistent uncertainty over the issue of national identity, presents a particularly provocative site for examining the complex problematics of the local, the national, and the global' (4).

4. Guo-Juin Hong in the introduction to *Taiwan Cinema* analyzes 'the Historiography of Absence,' which exists in Tsai Ming-liang's Taipei trilogy as well as in Taiwan New Cinema in general. Hong observes the phenomenon of '*homelessness at home*' and '*connectedness by separation*' (10).

# ONE

## Trauma and Taiwan's Melodrama

### *Seven Orphans of Cape No. 7*

Taiwan's colonial masters since the sixteenth century have changed hands a number of times. What the Portuguese called 'Formosa' (beautiful island) has served those passing through from Europe, China and Japan as a way station and the source of raw materials and labour on their way to actual destinations or to regional control. Given its tattered history of exploitation, Taiwan has never been shown to register much in the mind of successive rulers, Taiwan's own collective unconscious, as it were, internalizing such neglect and abjection that it culminates in Wu Zhuoliu's aptly titled *Orphan of Asia* (1946). Originally written in Japanese under Japanese colonial rule of Taiwan, the novel was later revised and translated into Chinese. Both the Japanese and the Chinese titles betray the novel's linguistic uprootedness, hence its orphanacy. The Chinese title *Yaxiya de gu'er* transliterates 'Asia' into three monosyllabic sounds *yaxiya*, an ancient Romanization of 'Asia,' according to *Cihai* (Sea of Words 1936), the comprehensive, near-encyclopedic dictionary of Chinese words and expressions. This Romanization is either based on Phoenician division of the world into 'Acu,' the East where the sun rises, and 'Ereb,' the West where the sun sets, or based on the Roman province of Asia Minor. The first case scenario would have 'Acu' evolve into 'Asia' and 'Ereb' into 'Europe.' Whichever the case, its very name as well as the conceptualization of its existence come from outside itself; Asia is named and defined by others. Wu's orphan not only stands alone in the context of Asia but the context itself derives its meaning from the relationship to the Levantine-Greco-Roman centre of Phoenicians or Romans.

Conceivably, Wu's title implies an ever-expanding concentric circle 'Orphan of Orphan of . . .' Of course, this concentric circle goes in reverse as