

Taiwan, China, and Yang Mu's Alternative to National Narratives

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**Lisa L.M. Wong,**

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Taiwan, China, and Yang Mu's Alternative to National Narratives," Lisa L.M. Wong examines the ways Yang Mu's poetry acts as an echo and a dissent to the mainstream national narratives in Taiwan between the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this decade, identity discourse has developed from othering Westernism to preserve Chinese cultural-national integrity to espousing a native Taiwanese identity against the Chinese one. Each of Yang's poems in Wong's analysis is a field of contention, peopled by different subjects such as the colonizers, the native Taiwanese, the female, and the diasporant, who articulate contested stories of a historical event or a historical site. The "lived" experiences of the texts' participants rupture the orthodox narratives, whether it is the Dutch imperialist conquest, the Ming glory of national recovery, or the place-based cultural imaginary of Chang-an. If, as John Berger says, fear of the present leads to mystification of the past, perhaps, hope for the future lies in demystification of the past and the present. Yang's poems are attempts of demystification as well as political critique, they are history plays in which disparate histories play against each other, letting open a myriad of alternatives for addressing national-cultural narratives in post-colonial Taiwan and in contemporary China.

**Lisa L.M. WONG**

### **Taiwan, China, and Yang Mu's Alternative to National Narratives**

For every nation, history writing has often been monologic since the legitimization of the ruling party necessitates a singular, unitary narrative. The rise of the post-colonial discourse does little to put the monologic practice of history writing into question. On the contrary, the change of position of enunciation and the urge for decolonization facilitate the same singular, essentialist approach to the past. Writing projects of "recovery" rely heavily on testimonies from the minority position alone. This table-turning strategy common in literature of resistance is still trapped within an oppositional imagination. As manifestation of decolonization, history writing blooms during the early period of national independence. The rescue of the suppressed past articulates native resistance and persistence in different media. The historiographical use of literature for nation building and identity construction is almost as old as literature itself. The intentionalist hermeneutics of "poetry verbalizes intent" in the Chinese literary tradition has fostered a biographical-historical criticism that deciphers invariably a poem in terms of a personal-national narrative. Given this history writing imperative, poets as well as critics have contributed in different degrees to the production of a coherent, monologic narration, which more often than not, complies with the dominant narrative of the time. In this regard, the history writing in Taiwan literature during the last three decades of the twentieth century is an interesting locus for critical inquiry. Much of Taiwan's past has been decided by external powers. People there had been under the rule of the Dutch in the early seventeenth century until 1662 and Taiwan had been a Japanese colony from 1895 to the end of the Second World War. At the Potsdam conference of 1945, Japan surrendered the control of the island to the Republic of China represented by the Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, KMT). As the Chinese Communist Party established the Peoples' Republic of China in the mainland in 1949, Taiwan had remained the Republic of China under the KMT before Chen Shuibian, the leader of the Democratic Progressive Party, was elected President in 2000. For more than four hundred years, the people of Taiwan have suffered from a troubled national identity and an unsettled international status.

There are at least three main master narratives in Taiwan's negotiations with a national-cultural identity. The first national narrative is told from the perspective of the Han settlers. One instance was the Ming subjects' dream of recovering the mainland from the Manchus; the other was the KMT's national project of claiming back the sovereignty from the hands of the communists. The historical situation was further complicated by the influx of cultural influence from the West in the mid-twentieth century, which resulted in the second national narrative in the essentialist rhetoric by pitting Chineseness against Westernism in the literary milieu. From the Modern Poetry Debate in the early 1970s to the decline of "Native Soil Literature Movement" in the early 1980s, the decade witnessed the emergence of Taiwanese consciousness, which is conspicuously distinct from the Chinese cultural nationalism of the past. The third narrative bespeaks the separatist agenda of those who foregrounded Taiwanese's nativist consciousness in the 1990s. With the figurehead of the Democratic Progressive Party as the President, the turn of the millennium marked the post-KMT era in Taiwan. In the light of history writing in Taiwan literature, Yang Mu's poetry is doubtlessly a succinct demonstration of a cultural practice of intervention, similar to what Homi Bhabha proposes: "[It is] a space of intervention in the here and now ... To engage with such invention and intervention ... requires a sense of the new ... an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (7; on the theoretical notion of "in-between" as a location of culture, a widely divergent and diversely employed concept, see also Tötösy <<http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/theorie/STotösy1.pdf>>). In Yang's works, the Chinese practice of historiographical writing in poetry is adopted not only as an aesthetic precedent but also as a means of inversive intervention. Many of his poems can be read as a space of intervention in

which the poet imaginatively explores the liminal moments of the past and supplies the missing voices in History. His first-person poems in particular allow an expressive catharsis in the voice of those on the periphery. The dramatic monologue of a lyrical persona such as a Dutch soldier, a Chinese concubine, or a cultural pilgrim native of Taiwan visiting Changan in contemporary China reveals the constructedness, fluidity, and multiplicity characteristic of the post-structuralist sense of self and place. Their personal reading of the historical upheavals de-stabilizes the official accounts.

To introduce Yang Mu: born as Ching-hsien Wang -- Yang Mu is his alias -- in 1940 in Taiwan, he is professor of comparative literature at the University of Washington. He served as dean of National Dong Hwa University in Hualien and Director of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy at the Academia Sinica in Nankang, Taiwan. To date, he has published over twelve books of poetry since his teens and is considered one of the most important Chinese poets now writing. In 2000 he received the Taiwan National Award for Literature and Arts. English translations of his poems include Joseph R. Allen's *Forbidden Games and Video Poems: The Poetry of Yang Mu and Lo Ching* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1993), and Lawrence R. Smith and Michelle Yeh's *No Trace of the Gardener: Poems of Yang Mu* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998). German and French translations of his work are *Patt beim go. Gedichte chinesisches-deutsch* by Susanne Hornfeck und Wang Jue (München: Al Verlag, 2002) and *Quelqu'un m'interroge à propos de la vérité et de la justice* by Angel Pino and Isabelle Rabut (Paris: You Feng, 2004). The poems I selected for the present study are all set in a "post" context such as post-Dutch occupation in Taiwan and post-Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China. "Zeelandia" ("Relanzhe cheng" 1975) talks about the end of the Dutch occupation around 1662, while "The Story of Five Concubines" ("Wu Fei Ji" 1983-84, 1990) relates to the fall of the Eastern Ning Kingdom into the hands of the Qing in 1683. Both hinge on the crucial events during the change of the ruling regime in the seventeenth century. "Difficult is the Journey" ("Xinglu nan" 1982) gives an account of a traveller's traumatic encounter with the Chinese cultural imaginary, Changan, after a long separation between Taiwan, the Republic of China, and mainland China, the People's Republic of China. When these poems are read in close reference to the period of unease between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, Yang's refiguration of the contingent historical moment shows how a poet can deploy the "in-between" space of the "past-present" to interrupt the prevailing national narratives. His poems are "history plays" in which disparate "histories" come into play and where his inventive detour to address the contemporary political conditions both evokes and erases the mainstream narrative of Taiwan in which the poet was situated historically. Strictly speaking, among the poems to be analyzed here, only "The Story of Five Concubines" can be categorized generically as "history play." Other examples such as "Zeelandia" and "Difficult is the Journey" are poems that display dramatic qualities such as conflicts of values and roles, as well as the expressive power of dramatic monologue behind masks. In the works selected, the invisible "I"'s articulation is dramatized in a spent tension between two worlds. The elision of subject position from which the poet writes offers a variety of enunciative positions for the dramatic personae to intervene the widely accepted version of History. Instead of orchestrating a stable, continuous account of national narrative that makes explicit of a positive understanding of the course of historical events, individual personae in Yang's literary texts speak through fissures to challenge the invented coherence of the official narration, doing what Jonathan Arac calls, an explication of the silence (148). In "Zeelandia" and "The Story of Five Concubines," voices of both the colonizers and the colonized, from the centre and the margins are amplified to engage national narratives in a dialogue. In "Difficult is the Journey," one hears a traveler's dramatic monologue, animating the shadows of a suppressed history beneath the communist agenda on the billboards.

In turn, for the reading and writing of literature of decolonization, a bi-polar reasoning of violence such as victory versus defeat, or power versus lack, prevails. Edward Said's post-colonial reading of Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan" operates on the assumption of a lack in the colonized (284). If the open question in "Leda and the Swan" suggests that the colonial violence effects the acquisition of "his" knowledge and power that can enable Leda to write and fight back, the empowerment of the subaltern is fake. To seize the power and knowledge of the colonizer can-

not guarantee national liberation, as Frantz Fanon warns us (see, e.g., 222-23). The power and knowledge that the national bourgeoisie appropriated from their ex-masters only help to perpetuate colonial rule in new forms even after national independence. Reading "Zeelandia" against poems of decolonization, one can see Yang's adoption of the gendered metaphor of colonization as sexual intercourse is in fact an inversion of the patriarchal hegemony in the colonial discourse. Zeelandia is at the south of Taiwan, the first region on the island colonized by the Dutch in 1624. The town was built and developed by the colonizer and it is the place where the Dutch governor had lived until Zheng Chenggong took over the place in 1661. Zeelandia is a significant historical site, which marks the beginning of colonial experiences of Taiwan. In Yang's writing of colonialism, Zeelandia is situated at the historical juncture when the Dutch rule was about to end: "Zeelandia" is a spatial inscription of the local history of Taiwan. The Dutch soldier's confession in the poem in this last moment of occupation in Taiwan is an insertion of an alien position into the "Chinese" monolithic version of national recovery in 1661. The gendered representations such as taking the landscape as the female body and national resistance as buttons on woman's clothes are stereotypical, yet the agency for change is not predominately male. Unlike "Leda and the Swan" in which the colonized cannot save herself except by co-opting the other into the self, the colonized in "Zeelandia," as a local female being dominated, fights back with her exotic otherness that frustrates the male vanity of conquest. The violence of change is mutual as Zeelandia is the site of colonial violence and foreign administration, where contact and pacification between two peoples take place. "The huge canons have rusted, gunfire / Vanished into the fragmented pages of history" (*Beidou xing* 136; unless noted otherwise, all translations from the Chinese are mine). The canons have rusted to indicate that violence, military or sexual, becomes impossible or irrelevant in the course of time. In the end, the Dutch soldier has accustomed to a quiet counting of the twelve buttons and a slow unbuttoning of the new clothes, suggesting a new relationship has developed between the colonizer and the colonized. The woman, although mute in the poem, wears down the invasive approach by her pervasive nature and local customs. The history of the Dutch surrender inscribed as solely a military defeat by a "Chinese" national army is revised. Inserted into the national narrative are the nativist resistance to and a cultural naturalization of the colonizers on the tropical island. "Zeelandia" ends in a chanting of "Ilha Formosa," a second name to Taiwan, coined by the exotic gaze of the European explorers and now well received by the native islanders: "Ilha Formosa, from afar, I have come to colonize / But I have come to surrender. Ilha Formosa. Ilha Formosa" (*Beidou xing* 137-38). "Zeelandia" and "Ilha Formosa" resonate to render an exoticized and eroticized identity of the island. These names are imprints of colonial experiences constantly revived and almost endeared, especially in nativist discourse. The prosopopoeia to "Ilha Formosa" is an evocation of a Taiwanese-ness, characterized by colonial experiences and thus distinguished from a monolithic "Chinese-ness." In Yang's "Zeelandia," the interpellation is invoked not to affirm one's self against the other, but to problematize the Dutch colonial project and the Chinese national recovery in the light of a surrender. This "monologic" utterance, can be taken in a Bakhtinian way, as the site where "an intense interaction and struggle between one's own word and another's word is being waged" (Bakhtin 354). The Dutch soldier's confession opposes the Dutch narrative of conquest and at the same time casts doubts on the Han celebration of national recovery solely ascribed to Zheng Chenggong's military success. In-between two nations' historical battle in 1661, the Dutch soldiers in diaspora and the local people on the island -- the agents living in the juncture of authoritative national narratives -- spell out disparate narratives from their marginal positions.

Following the chronology of historical events, Yang's "The Story of Five Concubines" is a sequel to "Zeelandia." To put an end to the Dutch occupation of Taiwan, which had started in 1624, a fierce battle was fought at Zeelandia in 1661, resulting in the defeat of the Dutch and the victory of the Ming troops led by Zheng Chenggong. In October 1661, Zheng, who was granted a dynastic surname, Zhu, set up the regime of "Eastern Capital" on the island, in relation to the capital in the mainland now fallen into the hands of the alien Manchus. The name "Eastern Capital," suggests that it is a Ming empire taking Taiwan as a temporary refuge with a view to an eventual return to the mainland. The ultimate ambition of Zheng is to expel the Qing and restore the Ming. When

Zheng Chenggong died in 1664, his son Zheng Jing succeeded to the ruling position by crooked means. He changed the Eastern Capital to Eastern Ning so as to establish a Ning kingdom independent of the Ming. Under his rule, the power and prospects of the Ning regime declined. Despite a few conquests along the coast east of the mainland, conspiracies and corruption reigned on the island while across the strait the Qing empire had prospered and became a great power. "The Story of Five Concubines" consists of three fragments from an incomplete verse drama. The play captures the liminal moments when the Eastern Ning kingdom of the Zheng family is about to fall in 1681. In contrast to the "official" History of high politics, which is usually written by male inscribers from the ruling regime, "The Story of Five Concubines" impresses its readers for the diversity of fragmentary experiences from female perspectives. Similar to "Zeelandia," the history writing of this poem is mixed with individual consciousness "living" in history. The difference is that each of the three fragments presents a distinct framing of the historical event within a specific role: Madame Xiu, one of the five concubines of Prince Jing, Shen Guangwen, a poet-cum-historian, and Zhu Shugui, Prince Jing of Ning Kingdom. The soliloquy in each fragment poses a challenge to the history writing of Han patriarchy: "Fragment I: She Foresees the Catastrophe" opens with the question "What date is it today?" to a concubine, Madame Xiu. While fabricating an appropriate response, she reveals her foresight of the historical circumstances and her own location in it. Madame Xiu is shrewd and self-conscious, fully aware of her gender role in history: "Oh summer, a magnificent theatre / Happy and bright. / All living creatures / Fit well in their pre-given positions / And grow. Let us too, before a meticulously designed / Setting, concentrate on playing our designated roles / To please and beg, to envy and love madly / In blood and tears, to perform a play well" (*Shiguang mingti* 93-94). A play is going to be staged. The concubines and the princesses have to commit suicide together with the emperor himself at the fall of the dynasty. So is the predestined fate of the women in the "Chinese" patriarchal culture, as it is the fate of the concubines in a displaced miniature Ning kingdom offshore in Taiwan. The ritualistic sacrifice is a signifying act of female loyalty. The female body and life are commodified as the properties of an emperor. If the territory cannot be protected and the palace cannot be taken away, the evacuation of the royal family by death is both total and final. This absolute prohibition of the concubines' being taken into the possessions of the usurper is an illustration of patriarchal fetishization and hegemony on the female body. To the concubines, the traditional gender code of conduct assigned for them is clear. However, the particular nature of such construction does not go under-ground into their collective subconscious. It is foregrounded and identified in terms of Madame Xiu's awareness and interest in the dramatic plot. Thus, this Han tradition of patriarchal hegemony over the female is presented in a deconstructive way. Madame Xiu's recognition of what is demanded of her in order to complete the sacrificial practice makes the scene ironic and the juxtaposition of the seasonal activities of living creatures in nature with the female's fated roles in such a historical moment is allegorical. The "pre-given positions" to the ants and bees in nature are compared to the "meticulously designed setting" in which they are required to "perform" their "designated roles." What happens in the natural cycle is deployed to highlight what is unnaturally demanded of the female in the "man"-made historical cycle. With this awareness, Madame Xiu's compliance is not a result of loyalty or submission, but an indication of her professional ethics as an "actress." If she commits suicide at the end of the play as the plot suggests, her suicide will signify nothing more than the performance of a self-initiated act, which destabilizes the conventional narrative of female allegiance to the nation and patriarchal culture.

An official narrative of events connected by their long-term and immediate causes is common in history writing: "Fragment II: Shi Lang Sets off from Mount Tong" presents such an account of Taiwan history in the seventeenth century. Shen Guangwen, the persona in this fragment, was a subject of the Ming dynasty and was under threats of persecution when Zheng Jing rose to power. His writing career prospered after the Qing Empire took over Taiwan. He was considered the founder of Taiwan history and literature. In the poem, Shen Guangwen plays the role of a poet-historian. Through a flashback, Shen gives a historical account of the Han takeover of Taiwan in 1661 and at the same time accounts for the eminent fatal battle waged by Shi Lang in 1681. In Shen Guangwen's narrative, Shi Lang was once a sworn brother of Zheng Chenggong. In 1651, in

a conflict caused by jealousy and power struggle, the father and brother of Shi Lang were killed by Zheng. Several years later, Zheng departed for Taiwan and settled on the island. For thirty years, Shi Lang had not given up his determination to avenge his family members and the chance finally came in 1681 when he was entrusted with the task of recovering Taiwan by the Qing emperor, Kang Xi. This soliloquy of Shen Guangwen is delivered at the time Shi Lang sets off from Mount Tong to Taiwan. The tempest is eminent. This is the moment when the catastrophe is about to befall the concubines and the Ning ruler in Fragments I and III respectively. Shen's version of history is chronicled by the events organized along the paternal line where women have no part to play. The persona in the third fragment is Zhu Shugui, Prince Jing of Ning kingdom. The soliloquy in "Fragment III: Prince Jing of Ning Kingdom Sighs in His Life of Refuge" (1990) shows the prince's personal despair immediately after the fall of the Ning Kingdom. Zhu is a ninth generation descendant of the founder of Ming dynasty, seeking refuge in Taiwan at the time of political turmoil. Now a fugitive on the move, his sighs show some humble wishes to dismantle the wall, so that he can find a way to flee and a place to settle, physically and spiritually: "Oh sigh if you may / If sighing, or weeping, or wailing / Can burst open your bottled up chest / Let those shames and furies gathered over time / Leak, from the back of your mind, or pour / We shall all sigh loudly" (*Shiguang mingti* 101). Zhu Shugui is contemplating a heroic exit. This last act of a play can be taken as a dramatic climax to honour the Zhus, paying the last tribute to the Ming, who has now reached its final fall. The prince's pathetic urge to disintegrate and to let go of the kingdom, and his identity with it, is a plea for liberation from the national narrative, which has circumscribed his existence: "Oh sigh if you may / Weep, wail. Let the furies of the universe / Blow up, explode, to shock the cosmos / Make the tempest shake my way out / Of the broken walls at the southeast; Make mountains and rivers tremble / Whip the cracked earth, for the sake of the ancestors / Create a genuine doom for the last time" (*Shiguang mingti* 101-02). Zhu wishes to blast his way out from ancestral narrative. Ironic to the sacrifice demanded of the woman in Fragment I, the national myth is inverted by the myth-bearer, the Ming descendant: what he demands is a wham, not a whimper, for staging a dynastic annihilation.

The three fragments that make up "The Story of Five Concubines" offer three different perspectives to a single historical event. The conventional national narrative dissolved into various strands of family histories, individual predicaments and burdens of gender role. The characters in the verse drama are not competing for representation of authenticity. Each occupies a separate scene, enjoying an equal right to speech. The concubines whom history objectifies, marginalizes, and obliterates are placed at the centre of the stage, spotlighted by the title. The historical significance of their story is restored. The poet-historian's organized narrative in the second fragment is written in linear time with a strong sense of causality, following the common practice for documentary record. Zhu's fantasy for a boisterous and flamboyant last act is tainted with a pathetic vanity, despite its deconstructive effects on the orthodox national narrative. The dramatic figures are situated on a temporal "national" border at a dynastic turn. The concubines, the poet-historian and the fugitive prince are placed together not in a service of "free play." Rather, their separate presences in three different fragments offer multiple narratives that underscore the constructed nature of social, historical realities. As there are different ways of imagining time, there are different histories. Just like the designated roles in a play, none is less inventive than the other. The concubines are inside a gendered historical imagination, which is over-determined and under-discussed. A historian's imagination works by proper names and dates -- signifiers that claim to be credible documentation of the signified -- and achieves objectivity and reliability. However, the irony is conspicuous when the female voice in the preceding fragment is immediately erased by this official account. In History, proper names of the female do not count. The royal version of the Zhus is an exclusive, linear familial concern. Ancestral inheritance and continuity is the basis of the Han patriarchy hegemony. In contrast, Zhu's ambivalence towards this burden of familial-national tradition and duty exposes the fissures in this grand narrative. While the first two fragments were written in 1983, the third was added in 1990, and the verse-drama was first published in 1997. The poem marks the gradual dissolution of the Han legitimacy of rule in Taiwan since the lifting of

martial law in 1987. Incomplete though it is, "The Story of Five Concubines" stages different histories that play against one another in a moving dramatic tension.

Yang is at his most powerful when he deploys a mixture of poetic forms and referents to render the very moment of national-cultural crisis itself. The poet often fractures a text by intercutting it with other texts, and lets the speaker's train of thoughts and observations bring disparate texts together and draw the verse forward. This precarious and temporary suturing of different referents at the intersection of positionalities is itself a performative act. The subject thus produced is one of mobility and multiplicity as in François Lyotard's post-modern conception: "each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before ... a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass" (15). In Yang's poetry, the nodal point of communication circuits is usually animated by a dramatic persona who is situated at a historical juncture. His dramatic monologue spins out a narrative of history, which is displayed as constructed, or sometimes, self-deconstructive. A prominent example of such a dramatic persona is the traveller in "Difficult is the Journey": the poem taken from the section labelled "New *Yuefu*" in Yang's ninth book of poetry, *You Ren (Someone)*. *Yuefu* is a nominalization of ballads gathered from the society in the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.). The genre is often compared to the realist literary canon of *Shi-jing* for its expression of communal concerns. Since it was institutionalized as cultural products of the Music Bureau in the later period, its relation with the everyday realities of the people has slackened. *Yuefu* has gradually become part of ceremonial rites and diplomatic exchanges employed by court officials on imperial occasions. The New *Yuefu*, as advocated by Bai Juyi (772-846), was meant to be an inversion of the official *Yuefu*. Through a revival of the ballad form of the early *Yuefu* poetry via a vernacularization of the genre, "New *Yuefu*" was claimed to be accessible to old women, indicating its simplicity and plainness. Interestingly, Yang's poems collected in this "New *Yuefu*" section are in fact texts that destabilize the generic distinction. Read against the history of *Yuefu*, the "newness" of Yang's "New *Yuefu*" is significant in that echoing the thematic characteristic of the genre, the poet admits that these poems are composed in reaction to immediate circumstances, both local and global. Instead of presenting the mundane daily experiences in a simple and direct way, Yang problematizes the factual account of events by digging up the suppressed narratives. Among the poems in the "New *Yuefu*" section, "Difficult is the Journey" is a notable example of how two contrasting historical readings of a place come into play. "Difficult is the Journey" is a long narrative poem that delineates a traveller's sojourn in Changan and his meditation on Chinese cultural history (*You ren* 176). The *Yuefu* title is sutured with the first two lines from Lu Zhaolin's poem, "Can you not see that beside Wai bridge north of Changan / Rotten logs lie across the ancient fields" (Lu 76). Lu's poem is a *Yuefu* composed at Changan during the early Tang. The last line of Yang's poem alludes to the fourth line of Lu's work, depicting the alluring scenery of a prosperous Changan, which entices "the mist as well as the smoke" (Lu 76). Since Changan was the capital for thirteen different dynasties of ancient China, it has witnessed the rise and fall of empires and become a significant cultural signifier for the Chinese.

When the sedimentation of cultural and historical significance is invested in a place, a conceptual shift occurs. An attachment to the place can signify a location of identity as Caren Kaplan observes, "When a 'place on a map' can be seen to be a 'place in history' as well, the terms of critical practice have made a significant shift ... The notion of a politics of location argues that identities are formed through an attachment to a specific site -- national, cultural, gender, racial, ethnic, class, sexual, and so on ... Location can be seen to be a place in relation to history, used ... to unpack the notion of shared or common experience" (25). In Chinese culture, the imperial centre Changan not only is a place in history, but is history itself. The location conveys an embodiment of rich literary and cultural treasures. For the culturally and politically ambitious, the yearning for Changan has been a persistent theme for writing in classical literature. "Difficult is the Journey" begins with a prelude, composed of stanzas one to four, in which the persona records his journey to Changan, and a time-travel into History: "A donkey-drawn cart clumsily rolls down the street / I stand before a loess alley, gazing at History / Before my eyes, a crowd of shadows wriggles on the



red wall / Dry, peeled off; it seems that among them is me: / Wrapped up layers over layers behind the billboards, a thin one that / Hardly bears the spring chill. People push towards me / Slanting body temperature gradually touches my blood and bones / I turn to distinguish left and right, and find that they are but overlapping shadows / On the wall, the shapes are false. I then understand / How alien and alone, insignificant and insubstantial, I am / And cannot help shivering in the twilight that has survived since ancient times" (*You ren* 140-41). As a traveller strolling in Changan, the persona sees History as distorted, broken shadows projected onto the red wall. The wall admits who is inside and who outside, and installs who is at the centre and who at the periphery. It is a screen on which History can be read and written. The colour of the wall on which History is inscribed simultaneously conjures up juxtaposing images: the palace walls of Changan in imperial China, the wall under the Gate of Heavenly Peace of the People's Republic of China, as well as the Red Wall of communist Russia. Changan is a hybrid of all these, historically and ideologically. These shadows are fragmented beyond recognition, wrapped up by billboards and big character posters. Other than the traveller, no local inhabitants bother whether the shadows are fakes or not: "but I know / Their interests lie in chestnuts, cigarettes / Flour, vegetables, salt and lard / And in snow, pasture, flooding outside the city wall / I gaze at the magnificent Goose Tower. Their / Interests lie not in the tower, nor in me" (*You ren* 142-43). At a historical instance when people are preoccupied by their livelihood, the cultural and religious symbol of the Big Goose Tower falls into oblivion. In contrast to the persona who makes a cultural pilgrimage to Changan, the local inhabitants who are situated inside the cultural capital lead their lives outside its cultural influence. They are cultural exiles unaware of the importance of return.

The traveller, with an outsider's gaze external to the present place, perceives a fissure in History. He resists the temptation of oblivion, which conceals and represses memories of past glory by repeating his elegiac laments for the loss of a cultural China, punctuated by the refrain "Can you not see." Three nostalgic outbursts introduced by this refrain are located in stanzas 5-6, stanzas 7-10 and the last five lines of stanza 10, respectively. The first appeal addresses the loss of art and poetry. Changan is a cultural signifier frequently invoked in classical poetry. Besides, one famous site of the capital is the Forest of Calligraphy Steles. Calligraphy is a virtual inscription of art, poetry and history. The contents of these works of calligraphy and carving inscribe the canonical texts, records of visits to the place, people's preoccupations and pastimes, as well as poems, prose and epitaphs of different dynasties. These writings not only display the evolution of literary skills and calligraphic styles, but also exhibit the livelihood and current events in different historical periods: "Can you not see the miserable wind at the tower of Cien Temple / There hide the ghosts and gods, and there poetic spirits sob" (*You ren* 143). The rich cultural life lived by the ancestors is now nowhere to be found. Nonetheless, the persona continues his journey and eventually comes across a man who sells fiction. To the pursuer of a cultural China, this man's face is both familiar and unfamiliar: "That face is a face that I cannot recall, not / Old nor young, without joy and without / Sorrow. This is an extremely familiar face -- / I have seen it in books; a face I have imagined and fashioned / A boatman, a rickshawman, a herdsman / Fleeing for refuge in ancient times, making connections and ties in modern days / He is literate; he has seen *The Strange Phenomena Witnessed in the Last Twenty Years* / He has seen workers, peasants, soldiers; he looks up / Astonished -- he has seen me too" (*You ren* 144). Unlike Tiresias who has seen all and has foresuffered all in *The Waste Land*, this face is an indifferent face, unaffected by all that it has come across. The encounter between the persona and the fiction-selling figure dramatizes how an individual conceives History and how History receives an individual in return. This face "has seen" people and events in history as if it "has seen" a novel. By cataloguing what this face "has seen," the poet stresses this "seeing" which sweeps over both immediate realities and fictional writings in an all-levelling glance. The textuality and fictionality of History are foregrounded. On the contrary, the persona has seen Changan inscribed in books, in calligraphy and in poetry only. Revived by the traveller, the cultural imaginary, Changan, rises from repressed narratives and astonishes the indifferent History. At the moment when he is about to be appropriated into an anonymous category or an umbrella phenomenal term, the persona recognizes the familiar/unfamiliar face of History/Fiction. In a self-alienating gaze at himself, he sees what he is in the eyes of History: "My tem-

ples gray as an alien's, and I / Am actually an alien who has travelled thousands of miles to this place / Standing independently in the cool shades of the tower, gazing at / History: its dust, its mud and its blood / I heard the sonorous clamours of swords and spears, the cries for a breakthrough / The devouring flaming tongues, the falling roofs / Thunders, lightnings, rainstorms and gales / The refugees' song of exile" (*You ren* 144-45).

After the Cultural Revolution, Changan has become an *anacoluthon* that ruptures the narrative of the cultural imaginary. The distancing of the persona as the alien to the locals questions the cultural grid in relation to which Chinese intellectuals of the past have situated themselves. The locals are now preoccupied with what concrete realities of daily subsistence and political practices demand of them. Changan is now a cultural signifier that is purged of its usual signified. The persona who now feels himself culturally dislocated has paradoxically become a culturally dislocating excess to the stable, homogeneous historical narrative fabricated by the present regime. As a matter of fact, few would have the mindset of the traveller as to expect to see the cultural Changan in the People's Republic of China in the 1980s. The historical circumstances do not allow such nostalgic imagination. Thus, the "I" is an "excess," or a surplus that astonishes the figure of History who has seen all. The sweeping glance of History, which is used to collecting and absorbing stray details and residues into a homogeneous narrative, finds it hard to assimilate this alien's anticipating gaze. The persistent gaze functions like a dangerous supplement, as an inherent, internal "excess" which impedes from within the "smooth-running" history writing of the ideological apparatus, as its immanent antagonism. The second emotional outburst introduced by "Can you not see" describes the traveller's forlorn leave-taking: "Can you not see the dark clouds sweep by the west side of Baishui / The official path is haunted by weeping willows" (*You ren* 145). The persona's position in this cultural matrix is ambivalent. He is not exactly an exile who reiterates laments of the paradise lost. Following the traditional practice of travellers fashioned in classical Chinese poetry, the persona does ponder over the cultural centre at a window in the night: "Starlight of March / Glitters, and floats across the silent north / Oh China! A guard patrols under the iron gate / Keeps watch and stands in the shadows of swaying willows" (*You ren* 146-47). The traveller's quest for the essential, cultural China is doomed. China is kept watched by the iron gate and the guard, who stands on an ancient land, not knowing that the place has, for a long time, been known to be rich in feelings and perseverance. The guard stands amidst the swaying willows, unaffected by its literary and cultural references to sentimentality: "Attentively, I look and listen, wishing to find / Some sound, to grasp the pulse of the old city / Yellow and dark, yet an undying face / Wishing to sketch the dawn upon the night" (*You ren* 147-48). To his disappointment, he finds only the ruins in the land, which "was once as fertile as home" (*You ren* 148). Changan, which was a metonymy of cultural China, now relates to the traveller only as the ruins in the north. The traveller occupies an ambivalent position between an exile and a tourist. The poem is a record of a traveller's inquiry and a report of the effects of the journey on the traveller. The persona is not a shopper-spender tourist who goes there for sightseeing and souvenirs. Having known the place from literary and cultural inscriptions, he now goes for a re-cognition of these inscriptions locally. The traveller is a cultural exile, who finds Changan, the marked space of a national culture is now nowhere to be placed on site.

The lament reaches its height in a lyrical chanting by incremental repetition. In the last five lines, the persona cries: "Yet can you not see / Can you not see that beside Wai bridge north of Changan / Where travellers walked into daybreak, in those days of yore / Where thousands of steed sped by, today only the cold / Mist mixes with deserted smoke. Can you not see" (*You ren* 148-49). The pathetic, insistent appeals to take heed of the lost treasures in the national tradition exemplified by the compassion, richness and beauty of Tang culture, seem to be futile. The rhetorical question "Can you not see" as used in classical poetry, is an apostrophe to mark a striking scene. Here, the question is asked three times, as resolute attempts to draw the inhabitants' attention to the cultural deprivation in their living, but at the same time, the repetition betrays the speaker's despair. The accelerated refrains of "Can you not see" mount in crescendo, only to fall into an affirmation of blindness -- you cannot see. If Changan is the centre on which a system of cultural coordinates can be set up, this centre no longer holds. Roaming in the ancient cultural

capital, the shadow of the traveller and those of the local people merge to compose a picture on the red wall. Yet, their preoccupations never meet. Only in a distanced projection can these differences be erased, yet the distortions do not go unaware. The spatial mobility of the traveller in the place results in a discovery of temporal banishment from the cultural imaginary. The transposition of the lyrical voice into Tang poetry parallels a dispersion of a unitary personal voice into a cultural one. The sense of loss is intensified by the disturbances caused by an absence, not so much an absence of the memorable past as the absence of the memories of the past. The fragmented but continuing connections between the lost Changan, as a point of departure for the cultural imaginary, and the present Changan the traveller finds as a site of arrival to the cultural realities, can still be made. The encounters in the persona's cultural sojourn are staged as critical commentary on the cultural ruptures caused by a historical upheaval. The journey is difficult indeed because the traveller locates himself on a specific itinerary. A symbolic location of the self in a discursive and imaginary topography is a self-enclosure in a communication circuit. This visit to the pre-communist, national-cultural China is a problematization of diasporic imagination. The attachment to a special cultural and literary site that used to serve as the basis for diasporants' identity formation is now proved irrelevant, if not infeasible. The traveller's discoveries urge a rethinking of the place-based consciousness of the cultural home. The anxiety and despair experienced by the traveller uncover disparate national narratives suggested by the Changan symbol.

Compared with the common cultural practice of re-narrating the past by installing a place, "Difficult is the Journey" is a meta-criticism of this construction of an elected cultural identity for the present. Politics of location in identity discourse argues for a place-based conception, but one has to note that the chosen site is always open to historical revisions; as Kaplan reminds us, "that site must be seen to be partial and not a standard or norm ... the stakes in the politics of location lie in the effort to address a perceived gap between poststructuralist relativism and rigidly essentialist articulations of identity" (*You ren* 25). Through the encounter of the persona's anticipating gaze with History's all-seeing glance, Yang addresses this gap of perceptions and juxtaposes disparate history writings in the poem. In addition, "Difficult is the Journey" displays the performative power of deploying the past to demystify the present. The incessant reminder of "seeing" and "not seeing" works between blindness and insights in a way Berger has already suggested: "The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized for exactly what it is. History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past. Consequently, fear of the present leads to mystification of the past. The past is ... a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act" (*You ren* 11). In the poem, the traveller is an excess, attaining an existence free from the historical frame of the present. By a different drawing from the past, he draws a different present. The cultural reverie embedded in his preconceived Changan makes him see the lack and the loss in the place he has landed. The ancient Changan is then detached from the place as a cultural imaginary that travels with the traveller. It is no longer a place, nor an origin, but a set of cultural signifiers drawn from the past. The location of identity is to be deterritorialized as an imaginary homeland in which the persona's identity is lodged. While History continues to patch up the gaps with fictionality for fashioning a singular, unitary narrative, the poem's open ending questions the nature of history writing itself -- a chanting in a double-bind of record and erasure, between "can you not see" and "you cannot see." If, as Berger says, fear of the present leads to mystification of the past, perhaps hope for the future lies in demystification of the past and the present. In this paper, the three poems of Yang are read as history plays in which the field of national discourse becomes a field of contention, peopled by different subjects voicing their individual consciousness. Voices of the native Taiwanese, the women and the diasporant articulate contested stories of a historical event or a historical site. The "lived" experiences of the participants rupture the orthodox narratives, whether it is the Dutch imperialist conquest, the Ming glory of national recovery of Taiwan and royal allegiance of the subjects, or the place-based cultural imaginary of Changan. Yang's poems are attempts at demystification as well as political critique. They are history plays in which disparate histories play against each other, letting open a myriad of alternatives for addressing national narratives in post-colonial Taiwan and in contemporary China from some peripheral posi-

tions.

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