

Contested (Post)coloniality and Taiwan Culture: A Review Article of New Work by Yip and Ching

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**Alexander C.Y. HUANG**

**Contested (Post)coloniality and Taiwan Culture: A Review Article of New Work by Yip and Ching**

The reciprocity and complexities of the (post)colonial conditions are some of the issues that propelled new theoretical developments in postcolonial studies and a recent surge of scholarly interest in modern Taiwan. Emerging from this renewed interest in postcolonial theories is an acute awareness of Taiwan's indeterminable status. A number of critics have noted that whether or how the postcolonial model can be deployed (see, e.g., Liao, "Taiwan" 85-86; Chou 15) depends on whether Taiwan is in fact being "re-colonized" under a US-American cultural logic (see Liao, "Postcolonial Studies" 1-16) or when Taiwan entered a postcolonial phase: "Was it with the end of Japanese rule in 1945? With the end of martial law and the KMT's (Guomindang, GMD) "internal colonial" rule in 1987? Or is Taiwan still under US-American "neocolonial" rule?" (Teng 250). At stake is not simply a problem of periodization or ambiguous terminology deployed by politicians, but a critical impasse surrounding Taiwan's contested (post)coloniality and modernity. Indeed, Taiwan can be said to be occupying a liminal, in-between space. This perpetual indeterminacy has given rise to quests for personal and cultural identities in Taiwanese literature, film, and historical narratives. Spatial and temporal ambiguity bred narratives that are challenging categories.

In this review article I examine these idiosyncrasies and cover two recent monographs on colonial Taiwan (1895-1945) and postcolonial Taiwan (1960s-1990s) by two US-based scholars: June Yip's *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation in the Cultural Imaginary* (Duke University Press <<http://www.dukeupress.edu/>>, 2004) and Leo T.S. Ching's *Becoming "Japanese": Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation* (University of California Press <<http://www.ucpress.edu/>>, 2001). Yip and Ching confront and complicate all the aforementioned questions. *Envisioning Taiwan* and *Becoming "Japanese"* cover two of the most important periods in Taiwanese identity formation in chronological order: the Japanese colonization in the first half of the twentieth century and democratizing decades in the second half of twentieth century. Read together, the books' contrasting periods of study and choices of examples help to illuminate the many ironies in the tropes of nationhood in Taiwan and in the greater Cultural China. These two studies position Taiwan in a truly transnational context in and beyond what Tu Wei-ming has called "Cultural China," an emergent cultural space produced through the interaction of three symbolic universes: societies with ethnic Chinese majorities (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), diasporic Chinese communities, as well as non-Chinese individuals who interact with the idea of "China" (Tu 1-34). *Envisioning Taiwan* and *Becoming "Japanese"* do not treat Taiwan and its cultural production simply as a part of Cultural China, Japan, or any of perceivably dominant cultures. Both books treat Taiwan as a hybrid (in Ching's case) and "newly emerging globalized" cultural space (in Yip's case) where different sets of highly contingent metanarratives are produced and negotiated. Bridging literary studies and historical analysis, both works make significant contribution to a marginalized but important field of study in relation to our understanding of globalization, nationalism, and the "China" question.

Some background information is necessary in order to understand Ching's and Yip's projects, given Taiwan's contested (post)colonial conditions and the idiosyncrasies of "Taiwan studies" -- which is not recognized by many as a field of study in its own right. I begin with Taiwan's unique situation. An island is a paradox, confined simultaneously by the ocean surrounding it, yet open to trade and exchange opportunities afforded (or made obligatory) by the ocean. The political and cultural history of Taiwan reflects these paradoxical configurations. An island off the southeast coast of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan was governed by a number of political bodies with contrasting ideologies. After four decades of Dutch colonial rule (1624-1662), Taiwan was governed by the Chinese (1662-1895), which was followed by Japanese colonization (1895-1945). The Japanese rule had a decisive impact on the formation of highly contested "Taiwanese" identities. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the defeat of the Republican nationalist government (which fled to Taiwan), both Taiwan and China have claimed sovereignty over each other. Within Taiwan, there have been three almost equally powerful forces at work:

one that imagines a pure Taiwanese identity that is anterior to the perceived "Chinese-ness" of Taiwanese culture; one that champions the centrality of Chinese influence in the Taiwanese cultural identity; and one that seeks solace in maintaining Taiwan's current ambiguous political status. Contributing to these complex conditions is Taiwan's linguistic and ethnic diversity. The residents of Taiwan include different ethnic groups that have immigrated to the island in different times: Han Chinese, Taiwanese, Hakka, and nine aboriginal tribes. While Mandarin Chinese is the official language, other dialects (especially Taiwanese and Hakka) are widely spoken and employed in the literature and film from the island. At times, these works problematize this linguistic diversity. Therefore, Yip has devoted an entire chapter to the relationship between language and nationhood as epitomized in Hou Hiao-hsien's films (chapter 5 and especially its sections on heteroglossia and bilingualism, pages 162-69).

Taiwan's multiply determined history is reflected by Yip's and Ching's interdisciplinary and border-crossing approaches. Yip delineates a Taiwanese identity in relation to the presence of Japan, China, and the West in Taiwan's nativist (*hsing-t'u*) writer, Hwang Chun-ming, and a New Cinema filmmaker, Hou Hiao-hsien. Ching focuses on the Japanese colonial discourse of assimilation and its relation to Wu Cho-liu's *The Orphan of Asia*. Yip's and Ching's studies shed new light on the paradox of Taiwan's geo-political and cultural locations, approaching these topics in a manner that is both historically and critically alert. They consider not only the roles different languages played (Japanese, Mandarin, Taiwanese, among others) in Taiwan's contested identities, but also the attendant promises and challenges of this diversity. Ching argues that the Japanese colonial discourse of assimilation (*doka*) and imperialization (*kominka*) entailed not only resistance but various forms of collaboration. Ching's book makes a great read before one comes to Yip's study. Ching provides an important historiography for the decades preceding those treated by Yip's book. Yip traces the continuous developments of senses of self and Taiwan's perceived others in the years after the Japanese colonial rule and the tensions between Taiwan's past ties with Japan and its current connections and disjunctions with a new nationalist China. New forms of assimilation can be seen in the literary and cinematic works examined by Yip.

Further, Taiwan's tumultuous political history prompted both Yip and Ching to begin their books with anecdotal accounts of key historical moments that illuminate their analyses of identity politics in subsequent chapters. Ching details the 1979 incident when seven Taiwanese aborigines traveled to the Yasuguni jingja shrine to demand the return of the spirits of their husbands who were drafted and died fighting for the Japanese empire. Yip theorizes the implications of the 1999 Taiwan Strait crisis triggered by Taiwan's first "native born, [pro-Japan], democratically elected" President Lee Teng-hui's remark on the "special state-to-state relationship" between Taiwan and China, a "surprising departure from the intentionally ambiguous terminology in which Taiwan's status has traditionally been shrouded" (Yip 1). In response, Beijing conducted military exercises and extensive missile "tests" in and around Taiwan, issuing a statement about Taiwan's status as part of the Chinese nation. On the other hand, Taiwanese officials rely on "slippery semantics" to describe Taiwan's undefined status (Yip 2). In the 1979 incident, both the Taiwanese aborigines and the Japanese officials at the shrine could not reach a consensus on how to handle the delicate requests in post-war and post-colonial conditions. Both parties demanded respect for their customs and values (Ching 3), and both parties were quite certain about their cultural affiliations and identities and refused to recognize any possibility of contaminating hybridization. Similarly, President Lee, a pro-Japan and US-American-educated "native" Taiwanese, was confident in his cultural coordinate in the cultural space and the political world. However, both the Chinese and Taiwanese considered his identity politics problematic and perilous, for President Lee did acknowledge in an interview in 1994 "he was 'Japanese' before the age of twenty" (Ching 174).

In both instances, all parties involved exhibit an irrepressible desire for recognition. Ching observes that, not unlike his contemporary writers and filmmakers and their predecessors, Lee Teng-hui's enunciated multiple cultural and national affiliations shows that what is really at stake is not "the verity of what they have claimed [of their and other's identities], but the facility with which those claims were made" (175). In this light, Ching reads Wu Cho-liu's *The Orphan of Asia* as a political allegory. Despite its channeling of politics into a personal journey and personal identi-

ty crisis, the novel imagines an "emergent" Taiwan at the juncture of the failed and "residual" Chinese culturalism and the "dominant" Japanese colonialism (Ching 176-77). Yip's observations based on a rather different set of examples echo some of the issues raised by Ching. Yip maintains that "the rural idyll" (192), a trope found in Hwang Chun-ming's *hsiang-tu* (regionalist or nativist literature) stories, has a "powerful emotional appeal" to readers in a society that was in transition from agrarian society to urbanization (Yip 191). What belies this fascination is not just the nostalgic mimicry but the "imagined sense of unity" (191) exposed and critiqued at once by these works.

In terms of methodology and scope, *Envisioning Taiwan* and *Becoming "Japanese"* are unique in their interdisciplinary approach as well as transnational focus that question the presence of national boundaries in cultural production and in cultural analysis. However, these two books also represent the wave of interest in identity formation that emerged in the past few years. They are part of the paradigm shift toward studying Taiwan's cultural history in the larger contexts of global movements of material and cultural goods. In recent studies of Taiwanese cultural scenes, we find a recursion to the island's long overlooked colonial past and its ambiguous relationship to the Anglophone West and two of its most powerful neighboring states: China (including the Qing dynasty and the People's Republic of China) and Japan. Taiwan's artists, writers, filmmakers, and consumers of these cultural products all wrestle with difficult questions of identities in one form or another.

A number of recent titles that appeared in the past five years revisit the vexed question of identity politics in the colonial and postcolonial eras. They framed their inquiries around Taiwan, a rediscovered site for differing theoretical exercises ranging from postcolonial studies to postmodernism. These books include Mark Harrison's forthcoming book, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity* (Palgrave 2006); Chun-chieh Huang's *Taiwan in Transformation, 1895-2005: The Challenge of a New Democracy to an Old Civilization* (Transaction 2006); Nancy Guy's *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (University of Illinois Press 2005); Melissa J. Brown's *Is Taiwan Chinese? The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* (University of California Press 2004); Emma Teng's *Taiwan's Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures, 1683-1895* (Harvard University Press 2004); Yvonne Sung-sheng Chang's *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law* (Columbia University Press 2004); Michelle Yeh and N.G.D. Malmqvist, eds., *Frontier Taiwan: An Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry* (Columbia University Press 2001); and Ying-Hsiung Chou and Joyce Chi-Hui Liu, eds., *Shuxie Taiwan: Wenxue shi, hou zhimin yu hou xiandai* (Writing Taiwan: Strategies of Representation) (Maitian Chubanshe 2000). Many of these works focus on the complexity of identity formation: some celebrate the diverse and not always harmonious visions in art and poetry, while others challenge the very institution of postcolonial studies. Echoing Leo Ching's argument about the absence of a decolonization process at the end of Japanese colonialism (Ching 15-50), Emma Teng finds that a similar absence of decolonization "determines contemporary China-Taiwan affairs" and the identity of Taiwan (250). Michelle Yeh concludes in her introduction to the anthology that modern Chinese poetry in Taiwan represents "a synthesis of heterogeneous forces and contending visions: aboriginal and Han Chinese, Chinese and Japanese, traditional and modern, local and global, 'mainlander' and 'Taiwanese'" (50-51). She attributes the sources of this distinct identity in poetry to multiple cultural transplantations. Working on a completely different medium, Nancy Guy analyzes the fate of Peking opera in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period. Not unlike Yeh, Guy pays special attention to identity politics. She argues that the most important factor for Peking opera's rise to popularity in Taiwan was the literati's need to "strengthen cultural ties with China, which in turn affirmed their identity as Chinese [and not that of the undesirable colonizers]" (Guy 15).

In light of these recent theoretical developments, Yip's and Ching's focus on nationhood and cultural identity is no coincidence. Yip highlights Taiwan's history of "multiple colonizations" and "its globally mobile population" (11). Both *Envisioning Taiwan* and *Becoming "Japanese"* are persuasive in their assertion of the limitations of conventional models of postcolonial studies that subscribe to or seek to deconstruct the nation. Yip and Ching emphasize the reciprocity of cultural

categories that are correlative terms: local/global, national/international, authenticity/hybridity, and more. Ching argues that Taiwanese or Taiwanese-ness "do not exist outside the temporality and spatiality of colonial modernity, but are instead enabled by [the colonial condition]" (11).

As such, *Envisioning Taiwan* and *Becoming "Japanese"* represent the beginning of the next phase of Taiwan studies, a field complicated by Taiwan's nativist campaign (or "indigenization," Yip 5), Taiwanese and Chinese nationalist sentiments, and the conscious effort toward institutionalization of the field in the U.S. (as represented, for example, by the founding of the Center for Taiwan Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara). In the context of postcolonial and Asian studies, Yip's and Ching's books also signify a new wave to study Taiwan in comparative contexts, to recognize and theorize the legacy of the Japanese Empire and Chinese nationalism. Just as colonialism has become an integral part of the theorization of modern life and identity in the West, Yip and Ching's works, along with others that emerged over the last decade, have exposed the ironies of any homogeneous nation formation, be it nationalist China, post/colonial Taiwan, the homogenizing West, or imperial Japan. These contexts made Ching and Yip self-conscious about their own historicity and locality in relation to the study of Taiwanese literature and culture, and this is why both books end with a reflection on the institution of postcolonial critical discourse itself. They discuss the implications of the recent surge of scholarly interest in Taiwan as a marginalized (post)colonial site rife with tensions. In their metacritical positions, Yip and Ching bring the anxieties and identity crises in works they analyze to bear on the attendant perils of the marginalization (by the US-American academe and by world politics) and centralization (by Taiwan's indigenization movement) of Taiwan. Their analyses of Hwang Chun-ming, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Wu Cho-liu not only call into attention what Ching calls "radical consciousness," a dialectic strife between overlapping yet ideologically opposed values (210), but also bring to light new challenges of new directions for postcolonial studies in a post-national era. Most of the texts Yip and Ching examine have been canonized and thus the issues they raise are not new. They have been fiercely debated in contested terms, especially in the scholarly communities of Taiwan and China. However, through their innovative approaches, Yip's and Ching's studies reposition these texts and the discipline itself at an interesting vantage point. They give equal attention to the processes and the dialectic of identity formation. Ching anticipates and Yip echoes Melissa Brown's argument in her ethnographic study that ethnic or cultural identities are based on complex personal and social experiences rather than common culture or ancestry. Since identity is "a matter of politics," Brown suggests that critics "must untangle the social grounding of identities from the meanings claimed for those identities in the political sphere" (2). Yip and Ching make it clear that they are not interested in producing attractive or politically "correct" results. They are self-conscious about the need to be critically alert to both the identity politics they are analyzing and the local politics on site (Taiwan, China, Japan) and in the US-American academe. Ching calls for an end to the "ghettoization" of postcolonial studies. Yip declares up front that her purpose is "not to shoehorn Taiwan into any particular metanarrative" (11). She challenges the orthodoxies of both the KMT (Guomindang, GMD) Party, which envisions a globally articulated identity for Taiwan, and the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party), which embraces a decidedly more local and nativist identity. Yip's deconstruction of the nation as a critical category and an ideology defies extremism. *Envisioning Taiwan* suggests a Taiwan that is neither a part of China nor a postcolonial nation.

One of the paradoxes in cross-cultural studies is the mutual exclusiveness of two approaches that, ironically, seek to expand critical possibilities and to accommodate the fluidity of globalizing processes. Yip identifies this paradox aptly as epitomized in the co-existence of the tendency to emphasize transnational contexts and the corresponding recursion to the nation. There have been two main groups of these competing "metanarratives": one that envisions the multiplicity and hybridity of post-national cultural spaces, and the other that insists on the "continued importance of local differences" and "reinscribe[s] the nation into the critical discourse" (Yip 3). Yip does not subscribe to either mode of engagement because the conventional models of the nation and postcoloniality are no longer effective to analyze the "complex cultural heterogeneity" (5) of Hwang and Hou's programmatic production of a post-war Taiwanese identity. This vantage point



allows Yip to see Taiwan as one of the first post-national or supra-national sites that demonstrate a number of postmodern characteristics (perhaps Yip would find it advantageous to inquire into the post-national situation of Canada?). Similarly, Ching has found postcolonialism to be a rather ineffective and limiting critical category in the contexts of Japan's "continuous disavowal of its war crimes and coloniality" (12) as well as the reconfiguration of Taiwan's conditions and consciousness (51-88). Ching suggests a "class-based interrogation" (as opposed to the ethnocentric mode) of the articulations of Taiwanese, Japanese, and Chinese consciousness and he theorizes Taiwanese identity as a triple consciousness. Emma Teng's remark (in her book published the same year as Yip's) about the significance of Asian postcolonial studies sums up the contribution of *Envisioning Taiwan* and *Becoming "Japanese"* to comparative cultural studies including postcolonial studies: "The study of Qing imperialism [in Taiwan] is important not simply because we are adding another regionally specific case to the already long list of colonizers, nor because such a study can show us what is 'missing' (from Western colonial theory) or what is 'different' [about Qing imperialism]. It is important precisely because it destabilizes the dichotomy between the West/colonizers and the non-West/colonized" (257-58).

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