

## Postnational homelands: Migration and memory in two novels of Taiwan

Mary Goodwin<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 19 October 2016  
© Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, Hungary 2016

**Abstract** Subject to colonial incursions for centuries, Taiwan has long struggled to define itself. Even today, after the May 2016 inauguration of President Tsai Ing-wen of the independence-supporting Democratic Progressive Party, the island is once again wracked by debate over its status: Is it an independent nation, or a province of China? Which aspects of its complex history should be seized upon to define its present and future? By some definitions “postnational,” modern Taiwan people are actively shaping their citizen-identities based on social experience and economic and cultural reality rather than unwieldy and outdated ideological constructs. In this essay I look at two recent English-language novels set in Taiwan, Francie Lin’s *The Foreigner* and Julie Wu’s *The Third Son*, which feature Taiwanese American protagonists who struggle with personal and cultural history in coming to terms with their own complex identity. Approaching these characters as “postnational” figures, I find ways in which their experience can be seen to parallel Taiwan’s own uncertain and dynamic situation.

**Keywords** Taiwan · Postnational · Migration · Memory · Francie Lin · Julie Wu

A small boat tossed on the sea of identity politics, Taiwan was characterized by local novelist Wu Zhuoliu as the “orphan of Asia” during its occupation by the Japanese in the early twentieth century. Wu’s 1946 autobiographical novel, originally written in Japanese, centers on Hu Taiming, born in Japanese-occupied Taiwan and educated in the Chinese classics by his grandfather before entering the Japanese educational system. Enduring pressure from multiple directions, Hu finds

---

✉ Mary Goodwin  
profgood@hotmail.com

<sup>1</sup> English Department, National Taiwan Normal University, 162 Heping E Rd, Sec 1, Taipei 10610, Taiwan

himself adrift, estranged from every cultural identity he has known—Taiwanese, Japanese and Chinese (Wu 2006). No stranger to external cultural influence, Taiwan itself has been subject to incursions by the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Japanese and finally the nationalist Chinese, following the defeat of Japan in the Second World War. Fleeing the Communists in the Chinese civil war, Chiang Kai-shek established the Republic of China on Taiwan in 1949, with the aim of eventually retaking mainland China. This political goal faded over the later decades of the twentieth century as Taiwan developed a thriving economy and an educated populace, for whom politics on the island continue to be wracked by debate over Taiwan's national status. Despite its transformation into an advanced industrial economy and a model East Asian democracy, Taiwan continues to struggle mightily to define, and maintain, a presence on the world stage.<sup>1</sup> The candidates for Taiwan's January 2016 presidential election, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) nominee Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), Kuomintang (Nationalist KMT) nominee Eric Chu (朱立倫) and People First Party (PFP) presidential candidate James Soong (宋楚瑜) were distinguished in local and world media primarily for their stance vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China, which maintains that Taiwan has always been part of China, and that unification is necessary and inevitable. The KMT's official One-China Principle follows the "1992 Consensus," under which both the PRC and ROC governments agreed that there is only one sovereign state encompassing both mainland China and Taiwan, but disagree about which government is the legitimate government of this state. Meanwhile, Taiwan's Pan-Green Coalition parties, which include Tsai's DPP, interpret this policy differently, viewing Taiwan as a country entirely separate from China, and advocating *de jure* independence. Tsai Ing-wen's resounding victory in these elections, as well as her party's overwhelming majority in Taiwan's Legislature, sends a powerful message to Taiwan people and observers worldwide as to the direction Taiwan is likely to take in shaping its identity. This direction, however welcome by many of Tsai's supporters, bears a cost. Su Chi, chairman of the Taipei Forum, a KMT-leaning think-tank, and National Security Council Secretary-General from 2008 to 2010, in an editorial in Taiwan's Chinese-language *United Daily News* predicted escalation of confrontations between Taiwan and China as a result of the changing identity of the people of Taiwan after the election of pro-independence Tsai Ing-wen as president of Taiwan ("Two Sides").

In his article "Contested (Post) Coloniality and Taiwan Culture," reviewing monographs by June Yip and Leo T. S. Ching on colonial and postcolonial Taiwan, Alexander C.Y. Huang discusses Taiwan's "indeterminable status" and "liminal, in-between" position as he details the multiple priorities that have shaped Taiwan's sense of itself:

Taiwan is pulled in different directions of identity without actually having one identity or being recognized as one thing, one identity on the world stage... Within Taiwan there have been three almost equally powerful forces at work:

<sup>1</sup> The Republic of China on Taiwan has had no official presence in the United Nations since it was expelled in 1971 by Resolution 2758, when the People's Republic of China took its seat, and counts fewer official diplomatic allies every year, down to 21 UN member states and the Holy See as of 2013, even while maintaining strong trade ties and friendly cultural alliances with many nations.

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. (2–3)

The complex cross-strands that Huang, Yip and Ching unravel in tracing Taiwan’s current situation and prospects parallel discussions of the “postnational,” in which civic identity formation occurs beyond and between national borders and constraints. In Taiwan it has never been a straightforward matter to “use the nation-state as the normative frame” for civic society, as Saskia Sassen says of certain “alternatives to a ‘national’ sense of identity” (281). Jürgen Habermas and Arjun Appadurai, among others, see the advent of the postnational in the trend by which nation states and national identification lose their importance relative to supranational and global entities such as multinational corporations and internationalized financial markets, and to the causes and effects of global migration. In *Modernity at large* (1996), Appadurai maintains that in confronting the emerging social reality in which other forms of identity have taken the place of the nation-state, we need to “think ourselves beyond the nation” (158). Taiwan, I will argue, has by necessity long occupied a social and political reality beyond the nation-state, and this argument is made in a personal and affecting manner in the thoughtful fiction to be reviewed in this essay.

In *The postnational self: Belonging and identity* (2002), Riva Kastoryano asserts that for many migrants to Europe, multiple strands of identification, including one country of origin and a different country of residence, “[disrupt] the relations ... between citizenship and nationality [...] and [signal], therefore, the nonrelevance of the nation-state and its integrative ideology in the face of identity claims being expressed within and beyond national borders” (134). Such complex considerations in terms of national identity, echoed exactly in the case of modern Taiwan, are given passing mention in the Introduction to *The postnational self*, as editors Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort describe conditions in which a person or group’s sense of belonging does not match “objective ascriptions of membership (... ‘political’ or ‘civic’ home)” (vii), leading to “organizations and political parties arguing their right to secede in order to reclaim their authentic sovereign space of belonging and action (Taiwan, Quebec, Flanders, Kosovo, East Timor)” (x). In a similar vein, anthropologist Melissa Brown invites us to consider Taiwan as a place whose identity is shaped beyond and between national borders, and that, despite or because of the external pressures it faces, Taiwan has “started to assert its claim to sovereignty in terms of the social basis of its identity” (Brown 2). Indeed, the multiple cultural influences mentioned at the start of this essay are a deeply ingrained aspect of Taiwan social character, as reflected in the languages used in daily life on the island: Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese Hokkien, and English are used in government, academic and business circles, along with Hakka, aboriginal languages and Japanese, still familiar to the older generation and featured on TV dramas, and studied by young professionals as well.

Considering how Brown’s point of view relates to the Taiwan-centered novels I will discuss in this paper, it is necessary to make several distinctions: first, that

*postnational* as both a theoretical term and a political reality has been defined almost exclusively in European and American contexts. As Hedetoft and Hjort (2002) point out, “postnational citizenship is construed as an already existing reality in postwar Europe” (xxvi). Modern Taiwan, meanwhile, has emerged from historical and cultural realities quite different from those that faced European states, which inevitably influences how its people construe their position. Second, Taiwan’s status—national, para-national, postnational or otherwise—has to this point been shaped in large part by powerful external forces. In recent decades Taiwan has taken steps toward self-definition, but at every turn it finds itself confounded by external pressures, political as well as economic, from China in particular but also from America and other Western nations.

Indeed, Taiwan’s ongoing struggle with self-identification reached new heights of tension in the summer following Tsai Ing-wen’s inauguration in May 2016, when the Chinese cut off official communication with Taiwan after Tsai declined to voice support for the 1992 consensus that holds Taipei and Beijing are part of “one China,” with different interpretations (Weymouth, “Taiwanese President Tsai.”) Several months later, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled that Taiping Island in the South China Sea, long claimed as part of Taiwan (as the Republic of China) and key to its fishery economic zone, actually belonged to the Philippines. The ruling triggered multiple passionate responses, with China furiously refusing to abide by the court’s decision. Even as America and other nations supported the ruling, which would strip from Taiwan its special economic zone, in July 2016 it was reported that China would hold joint naval exercises with Russia in September in the South China Sea (Buckley, “Russia”). These events make clear that Taiwan identity, far from being a side issue of importance only to Taiwan, is in fact the linchpin at the heart of a global nexus in a region that political historian Nancy Bernkopf Tucker in *Dangerous strait: The US-Taiwan-China crisis* (2005) claims is the “most dangerous place on earth at the start of the twenty-first century,” where war with China could erupt “out of miscalculation, misunderstanding or accident” (1).

Relatively little critical work in English has described Taiwan in terms of the postnational, however closely certain definitions of this concept describe Taiwan’s current situation. According to June Yip (2004), “Modern 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). In reviews of Taiwan’s arts, in particular film, writers have floated the notion of postnational development, with Alexander C. Y. Huang (2006) maintaining that Taiwan’s “perpetual indeterminacy has given rise to quest for personal and cultural identities in Taiwanese literature, film and historical narratives” (2). In “Enlivening New Taiwan Cinema: In Search of Taiwanese-ness and the Postnational,” Jason Ho Ka-hang (2012) discusses Taiwan cinema and the 2008 box office hit *Cape No. 7* (Huang and Wei 2008) as a film in which Taiwan’s Nationalist Chinese and colonial Japanese legacies are interwoven with modern Taiwan reality. Ho locates the postnational in Taiwan cinema, and *Cape No. 7* in particular, as “something less nationalistic/political and more humanistic/personalized in the form of belonging to a community” (63). In observing Taiwan’s popular

culture, Ho claims that “the postnational does not simply go beyond the national; it dialogues with nationalism and reacts critically to globalization [...] the postnational also evokes a different kind of individuality” (64). Whatever Taiwan’s official political definition, it is clear that artists in a wide range of fields sense Taiwan’s extraordinary position as the product of multiple cultural influences which render its present and future identity fluid and undetermined.

Recent fiction by Taiwan American novelists Francie Lin (*The Foreigner* 2008) and Julie Wu (*The Third Son* 2013) makes a provocative contribution to the complex issue of “belonging” and identity in foregrounding Taiwan’s long struggle to clarify its own identity, as experienced by Taiwanese American characters who are also trying to come to terms with their place in mainstream America. *The Foreigner* and *The Third Son* join a small but growing body of Anglophone fiction based in Taiwan, efforts of memory in autobiographical fiction that span the Pacific in their quest to uncover Taiwan roots to an American family tree.

In this essay I explore the ways in which individual and cultural memory in two recent novels set in Taiwan contribute to shaping identity and a sense of belonging for the Taiwanese American protagonists in these works that is “located partly outside the confines of the national,” as Saskia Sassen (2002) describes “postnational citizenship” (286). Characters in both novels confront issues of foreignness and the desire to belong, in terms of nation and family, language, sexuality, and cultural and social systems in an era of hybridity and porous cultural borders. Although these works are not overtly political, both raise issues concerning personal social responsibility and allegiances in an era of globalization, with a new sense of belonging arising from social ties rather than strict national identification. This process echoes what Melissa Brown (2004) has called the “new Taiwanese identity,” based on its people’s actual social experience, including sociopolitical and economic realities in addition to the process of migration, rather than inflexible ideological constructs (211).

*The Foreigner* (2008) is the Edgar award-winning first novel of Francie Lin, who was born and raised in the US and later spent a Fulbright year in Taiwan. Her Taiwan experience forms the basis of the novel’s plot, the trans-Pacific search for home and purpose for a Taiwanese American character raised in California. Lin’s protagonist is Emerson Chang, a 40-year-old bachelor, whose first-generation immigrant father dies early. Emerson and his younger brother Peter are raised by their steel-willed mother in the motel she owns in California. After she dies, Emerson is compelled by her will to return her ashes to Taiwan, and to inform his younger brother, known as Little P, that he is to inherit the family motel. The narrative moves between Emerson’s memory of his own peculiar and repressed upbringing in the US, under his mother’s obsessive and invasive surveillance, and his trip to Taiwan, where he confronts the underworld dealings of Little P and other relatives.

Second-generation Taiwanese American Julie Wu published her first novel, *The Third Son*, in 2013. This historical narrative with autobiographical echoes follows a family’s experience from the time of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan through the Second World War and after. Saburo, a child of Taiwan born in the Japanese colonial period and given a Japanese name, is the unloved and neglected “third son” of a prominent local family who nurtures a dream of personal achievement that

leads him to higher education, success and, ultimately, freedom in America. This Horatio Alger-like tale of success following struggles and hardship is framed by the history of Taiwan, “orphan of Asia,” in the allegory of the unwanted child and his search for his place in the world and recognition by his family members. *The Third Son* attempts a long-range look at the formation of identity in characters who criss-cross the Pacific and cross cultures as well, probing definitions of success and prosperity in both American and Taiwan terms.

In *The Foreigner*, Taiwanese American bachelor Emerson Chang has spent all his life in America but is compelled to return to Taiwan by his first-generation immigrant mother’s will. As his name implies, Emerson Chang is caught between two cultures; he is California-raised and Boston-educated, thus to a sturdy degree an “Emersonian” American, but he is also child of an immigrant mother from Taiwan who harbors deep hostility toward the “alien” American culture she has settled into. In noting that “His mother, in America 45 years, had grown a hard shell” (5), Emerson echoes Lisa Lowe’s observation in *Immigrant acts* (1996) about the Asian immigrant’s status as permanent outsider in mainstream American culture, “always seen as an immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’ even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before” (6–7).

But in Lin’s novel, this “foreignness” results from the Taiwanese mother’s refusal to fit in or assimilate rather than explicit pressure from the outside culture, creating a much more subtle dynamic in the concept of the foreign than we see in Lowe’s description. Emerson’s mother clings to the very edge of America, the west coast of California bordering the ocean that connects on its other shore to Asia, and she runs a motel that shelters transients and marginalized people, among them people wanted by the law. She too is trapped in a liminal state; like many of her generation in Taiwan, she saw in America an opportunity for her kids, but nevertheless holds herself aloof from American culture and Americans, and when the end comes, Emerson comments that she dies “far from home” (31).

This deep cultural ambivalence in his upbringing forms the foundation of Emerson’s problematic and divided sense of personal identity, and raises questions about the “foreign,” and about the location—place or situation—of “home.” Despite his name and upbringing, Emerson is not entirely at home in America; his mother’s dreams and restrictions also became his cocoon and, from one perspective, his coffin. Emerson is revealed to be something of an alien to himself, ill at ease in his position in his family, drifting toward an obscure destiny, even before arriving in Taiwan. Although he knows only that he is tired of being the “torchbearer of the Changs” (12), Emerson has spent most of his free time with his mother, acting the role of dutiful oldest son in the Chinese tradition. He has reached 40 without having had a lasting relationship. As described in the novel, while America does not exactly exclude Emerson, his mother goes to great lengths to make him feel his difference. He once had an “American” girlfriend, “J,” but his mother had deeply disapproved of the relationship, calling J “the American, that foreigner”:

You can have American friends [...] but when it counts, for the family, you marry a Chinese. What does the foreigner know about love? she would ask. What means love to them? What means marriage? (17)

At a restaurant in San Francisco with his mother, he envies the servers and kitchen workers, all newly arrived Chinese immigrants, as he perceives “something uncompromised about them” (15), a certainty and comfort in their knowledge of their cultural identity. However, when he is compelled to return to Taiwan with his mother’s ashes, Emerson is likewise a foreigner, not speaking the language (29) and at a loss to understand his relatives’ lives there, in particular their business ethics.

Emerson’s mother’s will gives possession of the California motel to his brother, who has been adrift in Taiwan for a decade, while Emerson gets instead the old family home in Taipei. This is a clever ploy on his mother’s part, giving each son through her will what he essentially had lacked. However, mother’s final command exacerbates Emerson’s own sense of placelessness, or in-betweenness, as the property at the center of the will has different “values” to Emerson and Peter. The Remada in San Francisco, so named by his mother to avoid copyright issues with the better-known Ramada chain, is a seedy motel occupied by anonymous transients, but it is the only home Emerson has known, and he is disturbed that his mother did not pass it on to him, the dutiful son. Instead he gets a decaying family manse in Taipei, the same city in which Uncle, his mother’s brother, presides over the Palace, a sinister karaoke establishment that is a front for prostitution and human trafficking.

Emerson is clearly not Taiwanese, neither by cultural experience nor by personal history. Nevertheless, he manages to lose his American identity as soon as he arrives in Taiwan. In short order, he is informed by email that he has lost his job in the US, and then his US passport is stolen. Emerson loses all his ties to the US in one fell swoop—his mother, the motel, his job, and his national identity documents. In Taiwan, Emerson is forced to start from scratch, literally from zero, as he confronts the meaning of his identity in his family’s murky history and in his own divided nature.

The title of the novel seems to refer to Emerson Chang’s position as an outsider in Taiwan, but in fact all the characters in the novel are to some degree “foreigners.” Emerson’s mother has lived as foreigner in perpetuity in America, longing for Taiwan, her “true” home. She has spent her years in America steadfastly resisting a culture she looks down upon, convinced that “Americans” are interested only in selfish pleasure and disdain deep long-term commitments, such as family bonds and respect for ancestral tradition, that take precedence over individual happiness in Chinese culture. She clings to the edge of American culture, in San Francisco on the shores of the Pacific, in a motel that itself has only a tenuous purchase on American social life, catering to transients and people attempting to live under the radar.

Emerson’s younger brother Peter, a long-term resident of Taiwan by the time Emerson arrives, also confronts his divided and “foreign” nature in the novel. In the family dynamic, Emerson is the dutiful eldest son, while his younger brother, called little P, who is his mother’s favorite and can do no wrong in her eyes, had decamped for Asia a decade earlier and then fell out of touch with the family. Little P tells Emerson later that he had a rough time at first in Taiwan before falling into step at the seedy underworld establishment presided over by Uncle, his mother’s brother, and his shady cousins. Like Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim, P has had to come to terms with his role in a horrific crime. As he tells Emerson, “I’ve gotten to the bottom of

something in my life. At least I've seen the thing" (114). Like Jim, he is overcome with guilt and breaks contact with his family in America, but unlike Jim, he does not ultimately take steps toward redemption. Little P's metamorphosis into a Taiwan crime boss specializing in human trafficking from China is complete by the end of the novel. In the process he becomes a foreigner to his brother Emerson, the naïve and dutiful son, who slowly comes to realize that Peter is irretrievably lost in the abyss of crime and moral degradation. In the final scene, as Little P chases Emerson across a shaky bridge, intent on killing him and taking back the memory card Emerson holds that records P's crimes, he has transformed in his brother's eyes into a sinister, nameless stranger: "a figure of blank malice—dark, shadowed, foreign, and absolutely unknowable" (303).

In Taiwan Emerson meets up with a cast of outcast characters, all of whom are to some degree "foreign," both to the cultures in which they reside, and to themselves. In this novel, Taiwan serves as a meeting ground for displaced characters from around the globe, people who challenge the identity they were born with while searching for a way to start over. There is a "New Hampshire born and bred" (72) Asian American woman called Angel Sheng-sheng Guo, a restaurant blogger and would-be journalist who is also in-between cultures. Angel has come to Taiwan to work but she refuses to live according to conservative local notions of correct female behavior, instead wearing army fatigues, drinking, swearing, and holding forth against what she calls the "superstitious crapola" in Taiwan culture: "Opium for the conscience! Narcotic for the soul! [...] Down with tradition!" (75). The only Caucasian Emerson meets in Taiwan is "A," an American guy who spends his leisure time in Taipei bars picking up local women. A is depicted as a user and abuser of Taiwan women, including his current girlfriend Grace. A harbors no illusions about Grace's feelings for him, saying that she only wants him for his foreign passport and a way out of Taiwan (210). However, eventually A reveals that he himself has run away from problematic relationships and a failed marriage in the US. A is depicted as one of the biggest losers in the story, but his problems, and the solution he hits on, of running away, are not unlike those experienced by both Emerson and Little P.

However, the most alienated characters in the novel are the wretched young women living in dark, prison-like conditions in Uncle's Karaoke Palace-cum-brothel. Coerced or duped into leaving mainland China and other places, these women live in the margins of globalization, the voiceless, invisible and stateless victims of forces beyond their control. Their situation exposes the dark underside of the postnational, with its potential for corruption and abuse of persons who find themselves trapped uncomprehending in shifting global currents. While most of the characters in *The Foreigner* have come to Taiwan of their own volition, seizing this opportunity to cast off past burdens and remake themselves, the captive women in the Palace brothel are a reminder that not everyone has the luxury of choice. Ultimately Emerson makes it his mission to free these women using evidence gathered by his friend Angel.

Bound up with concept of the "foreign" is its inverse, home and the familiar, and it is significant that the bulk of this novel takes place in Taiwan, the site of belonging that emerges as Emerson's chosen home, not America. In Taiwan



Emerson contends with his memories of the unfulfilling, mother-saturated life he led in San Francisco, and this return to Taiwan enables him to see himself in the context of both his family and his nation. He also faces the question of home: Is his true home in the shabby, dodgy motel in America, in the seedy karaoke Palace of his Uncle, or in the decaying ancestral home he inherits in Taipei? Emerson's American "home" is a cold, sterile, lonely place, a motel for transients, where Little P claims there were "pedophiles and scumbags dealing coke behind the Dumpster" (49). But the Taiwan of *The Foreigner* is also a dark and forbidding place, a nightmare landscape of nefarious underworld dens, and a language and lifestyle that are foreign to Emerson.

In some respects, *The Foreigner* seems to replay Orientalist clichés that associate Asia with crime, degradation, danger, corruption, filth, and inhumanity. This fictional Taiwan is far darker and more perverse than the Taiwan that many travelers and residents experience (including the author of this essay, a current resident of Taiwan who has lived on the island for decades). Nevertheless, the "Taiwan" of *The Foreigner* is also the site where a remaking of self is possible for many of the characters—both for good and for bad—something that had not apparently been possible for Emerson and other characters in America. In Taiwan, Emerson finally comes face to face with unpleasant facts about his own identity and his family's legacy, gaining an insight that America could not offer him. Emerson "loses" America in his journey to Taiwan; his mother is dead; the motel has passed to his brother; he loses his job and his passport. His friend, the Asian American Angel, and A, the Western guy, also shed America and find their way to Taiwan in an attempt to work out painful personal issues in their own lives. In this respect *The Foreigner* falls into the American literary tradition of a voyage of expatriation, where the protagonist finds it necessary to get the distance vital for self-understanding.

Perspectives on national affiliation and allegiance are enmeshed in the experience of the foreign in Lin's novel. On discovering the loss of his American passport soon after arriving in Taiwan, Emerson comments on the mutable nature of national identity:

I had thought I would be an American all my life, but when I looked closely, I found I had no objective reason to believe this. America was a contract, based on reason, not blood – and a contract of the will could be broken more easily. Perhaps that was why my mother had never been comfortable in America. [...] America, in its best days, smashed that immortality, cuts its memory short and diluted it with the waves of new immigrants, year after year. At its shining best, it kept itself immortal not through the shadow of threat or empire but through a kind of republic of the spirit. (226)

Identity is negotiated through memory in this novel, and memory is shown to be the foundation for identity as well as an unstable, subjective interface with one's environment, at times even an impediment to be overcome. Much of the novel concerns Emerson's memory of his mother, who dominated his life while alive and haunts his every move when dead, to the last frame, as he carries her ashes in a purse around his neck throughout the plot. Memory thus manifests itself as a material presence—as the mother's ashes, in little P's scars, and in the Taiwan

house that Emerson inherits, a decaying edifice that yet contains pictures of Emerson's ancestors. In that memory allows a foundation for identity, as those memories fade, a person's sense of self can also blur. At the midpoint of the novel, in explaining why he needs to stand by his brother, Emerson tells another character, "all these memories are disappearing now that my mother is gone. Little P is the only one who would understand. [...] he's the only one who can ... justify my memories. Make them true. I need some kind of witness" (81).

But Emerson and his brother have utterly different memories of their shared past, and assign these quite different values as well. Arguing with Emerson about what to do with their mother's ashes, Little P says: "For Christ's sake, she's dead. Go home. Let me take care of it." Emerson responds: "There's something called memory [...] there's something called dignity, even if she doesn't know it anymore. It has to be considered" (190). For Little P, however, memory is a tool that must be bent to one's will; it can also be a harsh scourge to conscience and as such, an impediment to "progress." It is revealed that Little P gives his uncle drugs to scrub his memory and keep him tractable, allowing P to rule unimpeded the criminal empire he has built through the Palace. P also remembers his mother's motel differently than Emerson does, as a place where the worst scum of humanity sought shelter, to which their mother turned a blind eye in the interest of doing business. P has a blindingly painful memory of his own crimes that he needs to suppress or forget in order to survive. Finally, there is his murderous pursuit of Emerson for the memory key to Angel's camera, which contains evidence of human trafficking and other crimes in the Palace. Ultimately, memory is the enemy for Little P.

However, memory, and in particular the memory key containing evidence of Little P's crimes, ultimately serves as a key for Emerson in opening the door to a purposeful life, the "only treasure" he has left in his quest to destroy the family legacy of evil (275). In the final frame, in order to survive, Emerson needs to "lose" both his brother and his mother, as both Little P and the purse containing his mother's ashes pitch into the abyss beneath the bridge. As he returns to Taipei with the intent of freeing the captive women at the Palace, Emerson acknowledges he had to release the material memory of the past in order to move forward, letting go of both his brother's corruption and his mother's corrosive fears. It is significant that Emerson, once the dutiful son of Taiwanese-American parents, must shed his closest family members, and become, like Taiwan, the "orphan of Asia," in order to survive and live a meaningful life.

Emerson's losses continue as the plot moves along; next, he is stripped of an important certification of his national identity as well, in the loss of his passport. But Emerson comes to see all these losses as advantages rather than disadvantages, giving him the opportunity to shape his identity based on social identification, experience, friendships and personal choice rather than government mandate. By the end of the novel he no longer cares whether he is "allowed" to do a thing or not; he no longer answers to any authority outside himself. Although Emerson is not a political creature, his situation mirrors in some ways Taiwan's own position, caught between past and future, between memory and reality, morally and socially adrift as it struggles with its own tumultuous history and with powerful historical forces at a distance beyond its control. What June Yip (2004) calls "Taiwan's persistent

uncertainty over issues of national identity” (4) has a great deal to do with how the island’s memory is recorded, and indeed how it is manipulated. There is literally “no” place like home for Emerson; “home” is a mirage of shifting values that is fading in his memory, compelling him to find or create a better one. Meanwhile, Little P has turned his back on every home he knew, and fought to suppress those memories of home until the pressure creates a black hole that drags him in. His regression into criminal habits is a problematic commentary, in some ways, on his residence in Taiwan, which is portrayed in some moments as dark, criminal, a kind of purgatory where sins are worked out, while “America” retreats into a kind of false dream. Meanwhile, Emerson’s American home is gone, and the novel ends with him contemplating a new start in Taiwan, which offers both insight into the darkest legacy of his family, and freedom—the option to start over in any guise he cares to inhabit, as a postnational subject. Both America and Taiwan are drags, so to speak, on Emerson’s character. He ends free—free of all anchors—and becomes therefore “unanchored,” in terms of family and national identity.

The modern history of Taiwan casts a broader shadow over the characters in *The Third Son* (2013), a Cinderella-like tale for which author Julie Wu said she mined her parents’ own experience to write, closing the circle of memory in her own experience as a daughter of Taiwan immigrants. “I had taken the image of the [lonely] boy and tried to wrest it into telling my story. I had to grow up to let the boy tell his own story and to find out that he was, in fact, the hero I was always looking for,” she said in an interview for the online *Columbia Medicine Magazine*. “The emotional journey remains my father’s” (Interview).

Wu’s work underscores Taiwan’s own history as the “orphan of Asia” with the tale of Saburo, born in Japanese-occupied Taiwan and given a Japanese name and education. He is an intelligent and independent kid who, due to his position as third son in the family, is neglected and ignored. In Chinese tradition sons rank higher than daughters, with the first son given all advantages. The plot follows the characters’ development, running in parallel to Taiwan’s own struggles to adapt to changing regimes.

The story opens with American bombing of Japanese-occupied Taiwan in 1943. Saburo’s family members have taken Japanese names and integrated into Japanese society in Taiwan, for which they receive advantages including more rations. However, Saburo’s father, revealing his apparent lack of allegiance to the Japanese imperial rulers of Taiwan, translates radio broadcasts of Japanese defeats without much emotion or sense of tragedy (18). But as the Japanese lose the war and exit Taiwan, another imperial regime enters when the island is ceded to Nationalist China. At a welcoming parade for the Kuomintang (KMT, or Chinese nationalist) armies of Chiang Kai-shek, his father says they had wanted the Japanese to leave, but not for Chiang and his “unpopular” Nationalist troops to come (33). In front of the mainlanders, Saburo’s father calls him by his Chinese name, Tong Chia-lin, for the first time, warning his son not to use Japanese in public again (37). Saburo and his family are thenceforth forced to speak yet another foreign language, mandarin Chinese (40). As Saburo’s plan to travel to America for higher education matures, he is compelled to study a third foreign language, English. Saburo’s family’s ongoing efforts to adapt to new regimes illustrate the stresses Taiwan and its people

have long endured from the various competing interests that periodically sweep onto the island. As has been true for generations of Taiwanese, Saburo must continuously adapt to historical circumstances in order to survive, a strategy that has made Taiwan and its people supple and flexible but which at the same time complicates the development of a stable and unique identity.

Saburo's introduction to the world beyond his island, and to the possibility of ultimate freedom, comes through a book, *The Earth*, which in its sweep of global geography and the sky above offers his imagination a boundless space beyond nation, beyond history and certainly beyond the dead weight of his uncaring family. After he is bitten by a snake in a field near his home, he seeks help from a friendly doctor, who tells him that America is a country of personal freedom (24). This is puzzling news to Saburo, as Taiwan is being bombed by American planes. This doctor gives him this precious book, from which he first learns about the clouds, sky and stratosphere, the "other worlds" in which there was "no limit to where I might go": "the stars, the sky, the earth would save me from this life" (30).

Standing between Saburo and those stars, however, is Taiwan's tumultuous political history. In front of the new KMT rulers, he finds himself marginalized as a Taiwanese collaborator with the Japanese. The painful reality of regime change descends on him during the White Terror period of KMT crackdown following the February 28, 1947 incident in Taiwan, in which clashes between native Taiwanese and Chinese nationalist soldiers left thousands dead. Saburo commits a prank criticizing his Chinese teacher that costs him his place at his prestigious middle school (43). He is expelled, but almost immediately his personal tragedy is swept away in the rumblings of political and social unrest as government troops violently suppress local uprisings (51). Saburo's political fortunes only improve when he passes a notoriously selective exam for a scholarship in America that no one from his county had passed before (42). But in a chilling reminder of the wide-scale violence that followed the 2-28 incident, as well as the intertwining of his personal history with that of Taiwan, Saburo takes the exam in "the same hall where a plea for democratic representation had ended in massacre" (121).

The bombing of the war years seemingly forgotten, America appears as the promised land for Saburo and young Taiwanese of his generation. Watching films of America, he imagines it as the "land of movie stars, Cadillacs and freedom" (44) where he will sit "tall as a cowboy poised atop his horse on the prairie, strong as George Washington's gaze carved in south Dakotan granite" (120). His fiancée Yoshiko echoes his enthusiasm for emigrating to America, saying that there "we'll have a better life. We'll be free" (122). When he arrives in America, he realizes that the "humid climate of Taiwan had weighed him down" (132). In America Saburo reinvents himself as a person with outsized American ambitions, with the goal of surpassing even the Americans at their own game. To reach his goal, he has to work faster and smarter than everyone else, as he did in Taiwan. Saburo's ability to reinvent himself in some ways parallels that of Emerson Chang in Lin's *The Foreigner*; there is the suggestion that as the result of its tumultuous history, Taiwan offers the opportunity as well as the necessity for reinvention, and its people, always poised for this eventuality, have developed the skills to adapt readily.

While the political drama of Taiwan and its Nationalist regime continues to dog him in America, with KMT agents stalking Taiwanese students (142), the greatest threat to Saburo's freedom and happiness, however, is still his own devious, plotting, greedy family, which in this novel is as much a drag on him as it had been on Emerson Chang in *The Foreigner*. His concerns for Taiwan's future recede as soon as he can secure passage for his wife and son to America, where he looks forward to a promising career in atmospheric science. Indeed, he comes to see that the Americans do not care what he was in Taiwan, or whether he went to a prestigious school there; all that matters in America is results: "Perhaps the only thing that matters is what we do in America" (234). In America, Saburo has the chance to slip away from the ties that bind him to Taiwan, to lead the life of the mind, as a scientist—a thinker who is a global citizen in the country of the mind—and a space scientist in particular, who occupies a literal "no-man's land." Thus *The Third Son* is not a tale of assimilation or "claiming" America, in Sau-Ling C. Wong's term, quoting Maxine Hong Kingston; it's about escape from many binding ties (Wong 3).

Saburo's tale proceeds in a surreal postnational space as both Taiwan and Saburo suffer the slings and arrows of an uncertain future. Echoing the alienation of Hu Taiming, the protagonist of Wu's *Orphan of Asia*, this novel's Taiwan-born, Japanese- and KMT-dominated protagonist finds himself estranged, to varying degrees, from all cultures. As another character remarks to Saburo, "The Taiwanese have been subjugated so long they don't even know how to express their own identity. All they can do is express loyalty to different regimes" (197). Like Emerson in *The Foreigner*, Saburo faces rejection both from family and from nation of origin, and must define himself against these gaps and absences. Saburo must invent his own future and make his own home, based on his own talents and inclinations. In both novels, Taiwan has become less a concrete reality than an idea, a space both within and beyond borders. For both Saburo and Emerson, the goal is neither to assimilate into American society entirely nor to retreat to Taiwan and disappear. Indeed, in these novels, a new sort of migration pattern emerges, imagined as a journey in multiple directions, in space and time, to and fro in space, and backward and forward in time. This migration pattern, relying both on memory and personal volition, echoes June Yip's observations about Taiwanese New Cinema as evincing a "shift":

from conceptions of nation and cultural identity based on unitary coherence and authenticity toward alternative models that emphasize multiplicity and fluidity – models that perhaps better reflect the multicultural, transnational consciousness of today's Taiwan (11).

It is necessary for Emerson Chang to leave America in order to escape his oppressive upbringing there and to reclaim a sense of purpose and a fresh start in Taiwan. It is equally necessary for Saburo to escape his own family nightmare in Taiwan, and carve a future for himself as a scientist in America. In the course of their journeys, these characters become something other than American or Taiwanese or Japanese or even Taiwanese American, seeming to enter instead a postnational future that picks and chooses from past and present. As the characters

address their families' shortcomings and failings, they clear a way for free movement between cultures, for a productive space in which they can live as free people. This tantalizing prospect of a productive and complex future that builds on a diverse and layered past echoes Carlos Rojas' remarks on Taiwan's peculiar identity issues as presenting a unique case as a "political construct":

'Taiwan' itself, as a social/cultural/political entity, is not a self-evident preexisting category but a discursive and political construct that is continually being constituted and contested through a multifaceted process of 'writing,' literary or otherwise (*Writing Taiwan* 4).

Indeed, if earlier searches for roots in Asian American fiction established a form of autobiographical tourism (as is the case to different degrees with Amy Tan's fiction and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* [1976]), with the aim to return with renewed purpose and clarity from "the old country" to American life, the characters in these recent Taiwan-based novels are instead separating themselves from their roots and unanchoring themselves from nation—any nation. In *The Foreigner* and *The Third Son*, recent generations of Taiwanese Americans appear less eager to melt into American mainstream life than to participate in multiple traditions and a kind of multi-dimensional migration which renders identity as something other than either American or Taiwanese. If we can accept Benedict Anderson's definition of nations as "imagined communities," created out of input from a variety of media, these recent literary works may repair some of the gaps David Wang (2007) observes in the literature available to the Western world on the subject of Taiwan's geopolitical status and historical development: "It is ironic that in the English-speaking world ... so little has been written about the multifarious sociopolitical, cultural and literary dynamics of Taiwan" (*Writing Taiwan* ix).

Civic identity for characters in Lin's and Wu's novels parallels Taiwan's own situation in important ways—it is liminal; the product of multiple competing forces; a work in progress. As Melissa Brown (2004) comments on Taiwan's current struggle, "Identity is the negotiated product of the interaction between what people claim for themselves and what others allow them to claim" (245). If President Tsai Ing-wen's Democratic Progressive Party seeks an independent Taiwan not bound by inherited ideology, characters in Lin's and Wu's novels similarly seek personal independence and self-determination, even as they are acutely aware that "history" in all its forms—globalization, war, regime change, economic fluctuations, immigration and other forms of displacement, family turmoil—is a fundamental factor in the social experience that shapes their identity. Taiwan's political, social and cultural leaders confront similar issues in how to approach the island's complex past, how to make the most of the present, and how to prepare for what comes next. Further, as current tensions in the South China Sea illustrate, with China, Russia, the US, Japan and a host of other nations lining up to take sides, the question of Taiwan's identity should concern the rest of the world as well, as we bear in mind historian Nancy Tucker's claim in *Dangerous strait* that the Taiwan strait is a flashpoint of enormous consequence to world security (1). Taiwan may be the "orphan of Asia," but as these novels make clear, it has long been the focal point of very large players with competing interests, a shifting cast of relatives, friends, and

enemies. Lin's *The Foreigner* and Wu's *The Third Son* offer important insights and background for readers unfamiliar with the Taiwan people's historical struggle for identity, and shine a light on the unique Asian American issues bound up in Taiwan identity.

## References

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Brown, M. J. (2004). *Is Taiwan Chinese? The impact of culture, power and migration on changing identities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Buckley, C. (2016, July 29). Russia to join China in naval exercise in disputed South China Sea. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/world/asia/russia-china-south-china-sea-naval-exercise.html>
- Hedetoft, U., & Hjort, M. (Eds.). (2002). *The postnational self: Belonging and identity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ho, J. K. H. (2012). Enlivening new Taiwan cinema: In search of Taiwaneseess and the postnational. *Trespassing Journal: An Online Journal of Trespassing Art, Science and Philosophy*, 1, 62–81. [http://trespassingjournal.com/?page\\_id=390](http://trespassingjournal.com/?page_id=390)
- Huang, A. C. Y. (2006). Contested (post) coloniality and Taiwan culture: A review article of new work by Yip and Ching. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 8(3). <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss3/7/>
- Huang, J., & Wei, T. S. (2008). *Cape No. 7*. Taiwan: Ars Film Production.
- Kastoryano, R. (2002). Citizenship and belonging: Beyond blood and soil. In U. Hedetoft & M. Hjort (Eds.), *The postnational self: Belonging and identity* (pp. 120–137). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lin, F. (2008). *The foreigner*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Lowe, L. (1996). *Immigrant acts: On Asian American cultural politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sassen, S. (2002). Towards post-national and denationalized citizenship. In E. F. Isin & B. S. Turner (Eds.), *Handbook of citizenship studies* (pp. 277–291). London: SAGE. <http://saskiasassen.com/PDFs/publications/Towards-post-national-and-denationalized-citizenship.pdf>
- Su, C. (2016, March 13). 兩岸五二〇後的可能對撞 (Liang an wu er ho de ke neng dwei jeng; Two sides face possible clashes following May 2 inauguration). 聯合報 *United Daily News*. <http://udn.com/news/story/7339/1559874-名家縱論/兩岸五二〇後的可能對撞>
- Tucker, N. B. (Ed.). (2005). *Dangerous strait: The US-Taiwan-China crisis*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Wang, D. W., & Rojas, C. (Eds.). (2007). *Writing Taiwan: A new literary history*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Weymouth, L. (2016, July 21). Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen: Beijing must respect our democratic will. *Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2016/07/21/44b0a1a4-4e25-11e6-a422-83ab49ed5e6a\\_story.html?postshare=3651469113639891&tid=ss\\_tw-bottom](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2016/07/21/44b0a1a4-4e25-11e6-a422-83ab49ed5e6a_story.html?postshare=3651469113639891&tid=ss_tw-bottom)
- Wong, S. L. C. (1995). Denationalization reconsidered: Asian American cultural criticism at a theoretical crossroads. *Amerasia Journal*, 21(1–2), 1–27.
- Wu, Z. L. (2006). *Orphan of Asia*. (I. Mentzas, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Wu, J. (2013a). *The Third Son*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- Wu, J. (2013b). Interview, listening to dad. *Columbia Medicine Magazine*. New York, NY: Columbia University. <http://www.columbiamedicinemagazine.org/webextra/spring-2013/node%3Atitle%5D-1>
- Yip, J. (2004). *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, cinema and the nation in the cultural imaginary*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.