

Book Review

June Yip, *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation in the Cultural Imaginary*

Durham: Duke UP, 2004. 356 pages. \$24.95. ISBN: 0-8223-33367-8.

June Yip's book on the formational roles of fiction and cinema appeared in 2004, along with three others that deal with the multiple facets of Taiwanese public culture. They called attention to the increasingly globally unsettled, controversial status of the island state, with concentration on the radical structural transformation of its ethnicity and history. Catherine Farris and a group of feminist critics examine new gender consciousnesses in Taiwan, with the emergence of new women and of gays as well as lesbians (*Women in the New Taiwan*, Sharpe, 2004). Melissa Brown highlights the hybrid character of Taiwanese cultural identity as it is constructed in the dynamic processes of social interaction among the Han Chinese migrants from the mainland and the island's aborigines (*Is Taiwan Chinese?*, U of California P, 2004). To her, identity is at the core of the divisive political issue whether the Taiwanese can or should be considered Chinese. While Brown and Farris aim at contemporary Taiwanese social imaginary, Emma Teng leads us back to seventeenth century Taiwan (*Taiwan's Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures, 1683-1895*, Harvard UP, 2004). She traces the ways in which travelers' accounts of the "land beyond seas," inhabited by "naked and tattooed savages" over the last three hundred years, helped incorporate the frontier island into the Qing Empire's imaginary geography and thus complicated the relationship between China and Taiwan.

A similar deepening of our understanding of a new Taiwan is found in June Yip's *Envisioning Taiwan*. She considers Taiwan's emergent discourse of a national identity in light of its regionalist or nativist (hsiang-t'u) literary movement and New Cinema that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. Yip's book has seven chapters, largely devoted to the work by such artists as Hwang Chun-ming and Hou Hsiao-hsien; it gives a most sensible and nuanced account of the development of postcolonial global consciousness and of the indigenization processes

in the post-1987 Taiwan when the Martial Law had been lifted. It argues that language, literature, and cinema have played a vital part in constructing cultural nationalism. To map the critical paths in which the Taiwanese have struggled to fashion a unique cultural identity, Yip reveals how “the complexities of Taiwanese literature and film have themselves necessitated a reassessment of conventional assumptions about the local, the national, and the global” (p. 11).

Democratization, indigenization, and the emergence of a vigorous native consciousness have provided parameters that pushed forward local demands for “creative ways to assert the island’s undeniable existence as an independent entity without actually declaring itself a nation” (p. 246). According to Yip, the ascendancy of Taiwanese national consciousness was indebted to the political liberation of the 1980s, but was in fact inspired by the hsiang-tu literature of the 1960s and 1970s. She begins with the literary debates of 1977-78 and uses Hwang Chun-ming as a prime—albeit “curious”—example which provided a voice of local color in response to capitalist lifestyles, trendy western ideas and American cultural goods. She situates Hwang in relation to modernism and separatism debates of the time, looking upon him as ideologically detached but culturally engaged. For unlike other writers who wrote essays in defense of Taiwanese nationalism or became directly involved in politics, Hwang “generally let his fiction speak for itself” (p.43). However, Hwang would occasionally employ the rhetoric of nation to discuss his work, and he was aware that his writing could be seen as “a part of a more widespread rejuvenation of native consciousness and nationalism.” Hwang can also be credited for revitalizing the vernacular oral tradition in making use of the Taiwanese dialects.

What Hwang and his generation did in the 1970s was to foreground the differences within a national formation, and Hou Hsiao-hsien, together with several of Taiwanese New Cinema film makers, were to push it further by orienting themselves toward a “more postcolonial or postmodern understanding of nation that is neither essentialist nor caught up in notions of cultural authenticity” (p. 66). *City of Sadness* is of course a major piece in the re-narrating of Taiwan’s national history, and Yip elaborates on Hou’s films in terms of the many forces that shape modern Taiwanese society. Hou is said to be most revealing in the ways he creates characters who move between multiple cultures—rural, urban, ethnic, national, and even transnational. Drawing on work by Benedict Anderson, Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, Paul Willemsen, and many others, Yip suggests that the tension between official (KMT) history and popular memory is at the heart of the nationalistic struggle. Hence, she examines Hwang and Hou in light of the history of the everyday in which literature

and cinema became a means not only of political representation but of cultural belonging. Hou's films are said to have sought "to articulate his place in Taiwanese society and to affirm his identification with the island on which he has lived his entire life" (pp. 75-76). Yip reads the texts by Hwang and Hou very closely, first by examining the linguistic components and their implications for national construction, and then by highlighting the narrative functions in conjuring up reality effect. Her major discoveries are postcolonial subjects as they clear space for heterogeneous and disjunctive time frames. *City of Sadness*, for example, is "full of temporal disjunctions, gaps, and discontinuities that leave audiences with a rich and complex, though ambivalent and incomplete, sense of history" (p. 95).

In the concluding section to *Envisioning Taiwan*, Yip moves from the local and the national to the global; and by working through topics such as exile, displacement, and shifting identities, she puts Taipei on the cognitive map of globalization and cultural hybridity. Hou's 1987 film *Daughter of the Nile* featured the "global teenagers" affected by transnational consumer culture. Yip mentions a more recent film by Hou, *Goodbye, South, Goodbye* (1996), without elaborating on it; this is where the book seems to fall short. For Hou has been turning attention from Taiwan to China since the 1990s and has become more interested in the Chinese diaspora or alternative narratives of people moving across the Taiwan Strait. Hou has openly criticized the localization movements as advocated by Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, finding the measures taken to promote cultural nationalism to have already "generated very clear antagonisms" (Hou et al., "Tensions in Taiwan," *New Left Review* 28 (July-August 2004): 21). Hou's late films may fit better into Yip's observation concerning the fluidity of identity formation and the politics of travel in between spaces. The selection and significance attributed to Hwang and Hou thus present problems as Yip chooses to explore the imagining of a nation that has neglected trans-regional subjects and multinational interests in Taiwan, subjects which both Hwang and Hou have addressed. "Creative" ways to pursue the "formal independence" as outlined on p. 246 therefore need to be complicated by the new developments over the controversial Anti-Secession Law and with strategic interventions from the US and Japan.

The book nevertheless identifies and analyzes in a rather convincing, well documented manner the texts most crucial to the formation of a new Taiwan. Notes and the bibliography fill almost one third of the book's 344 pages. Yip has conducted interviews with the artists to provide first-hand material in support of her interpretive accounts. Yip is evidently versed in postmodern and post-

colonial theories, and she is able to draw on critical insights from other worlds that shed new light on Taiwanese literature and film of the 1970s and 1980s. While still an ongoing process, Taiwanese nationalism is now negotiated and increasingly on the verge of turning sour as DPP leaders start to back off. If Yip can continue to investigate the more recent literature and film from Taiwan, she will identify many of the implications of Taiwanese nationalism for the twenty-first century. As it is, *Envisioning Taiwan* is a must read for students in East Asian literature and cinema.

Ping-hui Liao

National Tsing Hua University

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature