Dialectical Narrative Strategy and
the “Angel of History” in
Two Early Stories by Huang Chun-ming

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Abstract
Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History” serves as an ideal hermeneutic image for readings of Huang Chun-ming’s (黃春明) work, especially stories in which the narrator may be imagined as the angel flying backward into the future, surveying the rubble of traditional Taiwanese life in the wake of increasingly pervasive post-war urbanization, attempting to awaken his countrymen to the dark side of utopian progressionism and the rhetoric of “newness.” Although this concern is most clearly developed in Huang's stories written after the rise of the Taiwanese “Economic Miracle” in the 1980s, its roots are clearly visible in earlier works such as “The Drowning of an Old Cat” (1967) and “The Taste of Apples” (1972), in which the author dramatizes his concerns about modern cultural change, often foregrounding local belief as a locus of misunderstanding, loss, and denial in relations between rural Taiwanese and “outsiders” from Taipei and other Taiwanese cities as well as the West. Read from a Marxist, post-colonial critical perspective, these tales develop a powerful dialectic not only between the cultural past of individual characters and the “newness” thrust upon them by social/economic/political forces they can neither understand nor control, but also between the impossibly positive narrative of utopian progressionism and the stark reality of cultural ruin in the wake of modernization leading inevitably to globalization.

Keywords
Huang Chun-ming, Walter Benjamin, Angel of History, Taiwanese Nativist fiction, dialectical materialism, modernization, globalization
Modernization and its implications is a major theme of Taiwanese Nativist fiction, particularly in the work of Huang Chun-ming, “widely recognized as the best Nativist writer” and over the past twenty or so years “elevated to the status of a Nativist cultural hero” (Chang 153). His fame has reached such a point that he was honored with the national Culture Award by the Taiwanese government in 2010. His previous honors included his 1999 selection as one of Taiwan’s thirty classic writers, an appointment as Writer in Residence at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and an honorary Ph.D. from Fo Kuang University in Ilan, city of his birth. Such distinction has resulted in large part from Huang’s efforts to not merely preserve his people’s collective memory but to focus so clearly on something akin to Anthony Giddens’s “discontinuous character of modernity” (Consequences 5) or, more closely applied to the 1970s-80s settings of many Huang stories, what Fredric Jameson terms “some radical break or coupure, generally traced back [in the West] to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s” (1). For Huang, this cultural disconnect is in large part a result of what Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang terms “the erosive power of corrupt city life” (155) that can be traced to the emergence of the major Taiwanese urban areas—Taipei, Kaohsiung, Taichung, etc. The rise of such massive population centers in which the individual inevitably lost agency and dignity was both a cause and result of Taiwan’s “Economic Miracle,” an economic/social phenomenon that formed the bedrock of a distinctly modern urban lifestyle radically different from life in traditional Taiwanese villages and rural areas. The result has often been a wrenching “break” between old and new. To dramatize this break and what he sees as in large part a cultural/social/psychological catastrophe, Huang developed a dialectical narrative strategy in which Taiwanese vernacular and other details of traditional everyday life serve as a framework for tales of confrontation between East and West, city and country, local and global culture in the post-World War II era. The appeal of such writing, especially for older working-class Taiwanese readers, results from a growing sense of cultural loss and the

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1 Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, in her seminal study Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan (1993), defines Taiwanese Nativist literature as “a creative genre—the main features of which are use of the Taiwanese dialect, depiction of the plight of country folks or small-town dwellers in economic difficulty, and resistance of the imperialist presence in Taiwan” with roots in “a patriotic literary trend under the Japanese occupation” (149-50). She adds that the Nativist movement “was triggered by the nation’s diplomatic setbacks in the international arena during the 1970s,” used literature “to challenge the dominant sociopolitical order,” and “may be properly considered counterhegemonic” (2). Chang also characterizes “the elitist, Western-influenced Modernist Literary Movement of the sixties and the populist, nationalistic . . . Nativist literary movement of the seventies” as “‘alternative’ and ‘oppositional’ cultural formations” (2).
realization that once lost, many precious values and beliefs can never be regained.

To bring home his concerns about the unbridled enthusiasm in the “new” he feels has been destroying much of what makes Taiwan unique, Huang has also developed a rhetoric of “newness” through which he deplores the cultural devastation of traditional Taiwan as a result of the positivist, utopian, capitalist progressivism and embrace of “newness” according to which nothing from the past must be allowed to impede the business-oriented modernization hailed as a gateway to paradise. This rhetoric may be understood according to Walter Benjamin’s use of Marxist dialectical materialism in “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” where he argues that the means of production determine the nature of anything cultural: substructure determines superstructure. Benjamin refines this position by asserting that the substructure changes more quickly than the superstructure (217-18), causing cultural practices to lag behind whatever material conditions produce them. This gap between “new” conditions and “old” cultural practices, or perhaps more accurately the lack of new cultural practices with which to deal with new conditions, forms the dramatic framework of many Huang stories. In those considered in this study, the author’s dialectical narrative strategy reveals that “newness” can exist only in relation to “oldness.” Anything “new” is significant only in relation to whatever “old” it replaces; the old always affects the new even as the new affects the old. Such a strategy allows a writer to discern seeds of cultural destruction in apparently positive changes taking place in Taiwanese life as a result of new technologies, new economic modes, new international relations, all leading to new realities far more complex and problematic than the prophets of progressivism realize or are willing to acknowledge.

Despite Chen Ying-chen’s (陳映真) declaration that Huang is a born Communist,² we do not mean to imply that his stories are consciously written with a Marxist subtext but merely that reading them in light of ideas developed by neo-Marxist thinkers such as Benjamin can help us plumb depths we may not otherwise discover in his work. Certainly it is true that, if we insisted on classifying Huang as a Marxist writer, we would be bedeviled by inconsistencies between his works and Marxist doctrine, especially the fact that his stories tend to leave the reader with a profound sense of irretrievable loss rather than fervor for proletarian revolution. Perhaps we may argue that Huang is less idealist than Marx despite the latter’s vaunted materialism. Huang’s reality is one in which the proletariat, primarily rural Taiwanese with little or no education and no understanding of the forces arrayed against them, lack the strengths of nineteenth-century European factory workers.

² Referred to in Huang’s “Wenxue lutiaotiao” 7.
Their numbers are relatively small, their effect on the island’s economy, or potential economy, relatively meager given that their material culture is almost exclusively based on small-scale agriculture. They consequently lack the strength to mount effective resistance against the forces of capitalism appropriating their land, reducing them to unemployment and penury.

We do mean to suggest that Huang’s well-documented focus on traditional culture is complimented by an equally important, if less apparent, concern with the economic foundation upon which culture is built. He is clearly materialist in his emphasis on the loss of land and other elements of the traditional Taiwanese economic base. Many of his stories focus on job loss, on forced changes in the individual’s ability to make a living in traditional ways, and how these changes create wrenching cultural disconnects. His characters often face the specter of abject poverty as a result of losing the material foundation of the life-style for which their birth culture has prepared them. In Benjamin’s terms, as the substructure changes, the superstructure lags behind, leaving individuals caught in the gap with decreasing material or cultural lifelines. Rather than issuing a call to arms, however, Huang seems intent on leading his readers to recognize a cultural tragedy in the making in Taiwan, to gaze as he does on the rubble heaps of shattered tradition and individual broken lives piling ever higher all about the island. Thus we find ourselves, as we peruse these tales, harkening back to Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and its invocation of Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus” as a metaphor of the cultural destruction Benjamin sees in modernism. Klee’s painting, Benjamin explains,

shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257-58)
Reading Huang’s stories, one can easily picture him as Benjamin’s angel flying backward into the future over Taiwan, wings caught in the swirling storm of “progress,” body helplessly hurtling over the rubble of old Taiwanese culture, aghast at the cultural devastation he sees on every side and yet even so struggling to “awaken the dead.” As the stories proceed, as the angel flies over what he sees, the transformation of culture has already happened and is in that sense irreversible.

To develop our argument on Huang’s use of a dialectical narrative strategy, we focus on two stories as translated into English by Howard Goldblatt and collected along with seven others in *A Taste of Apples*:

3 Chung Chao-cheng (鍾肇政) and Wang Chen-ho (王禎和) are two other Nativist writers who may be read as Taiwanese “Angels of History.”

4 Published by Columbia University Press in 2001. Our reading of Huang is based entirely on Goldblatt’s translations collected in this edition with no reference, except in special circumstances, to the Chinese originals.

5 We wish to thank our reviewer for pointing out that some of Huang’s stories published during the 1990s more clearly illustrate Benjamin’s theories than the two earlier ones studied here. We entirely agree but chose to focus on these two from the 1960s and 70s because both deal with fundamental losses representing the failure of resistance to modernity by the most affected characters, concerns that we feel profoundly affected Huang’s increasing embrace of leftist views as his career developed. We also wished to demonstrate that such concerns affected his early work more than is sometimes assumed by his readers.
international political status was not solely responsible for the Island’s economic transformation, however. As Alice H. Amsden points out in her 1979 article, “Taiwan’s Economic History: A Case of Etatisation and a Challenge to Dependency Theory,” the late sixties and early seventies saw major changes in how ordinary Taiwanese made a living. In 1969, only about 16.7% were “employed directly or indirectly in manufacturing for export,” but, because international “trade flows were growing at an unprecedented rate” during this period, and Taiwan was well-positioned to profit heavily from the Vietnam War (366), “by 1973, 23% of all workers (15 and over) were engaged in the industrial sector (Economic Planning Council, 1974).” In 1974, “Taiwan ranked twenty-eighth among world producers of machine tools,” and “the world’s largest ship, a 445,000 ton oil tanker,” was being built in the Kaohsiung ship yards (369-70). By the time Amsden had completed her article (1979), agriculture had declined to 15% of the Taiwanese economy while industry, primarily engaged in manufacture for export, had expanded to 40% (369). Huang was clearly quite aware of such changes, and his stories written during this period increasingly focused on them.

Our reading of the two stories contends that even the earlier one develops a powerful sense of doom concerning cultural change, a sense of inevitable local loss in the face of invasive economic interests, a theme more directly and powerfully developed, and from a more leftist perspective, in the later story to include military/geopolitical/colonial forces and the beginnings of globalization for which these forces were in effect grooming Taiwan. Another progression we see between these two works concerns age. The first focuses on the older generation of Taiwan’s rural communities and their inability to live with the radically “new” being forced upon them, the second on the younger generation of parents whose children are taken from them, both literally and figuratively, by irresistible changes in substructure and, as a consequence, superstructure leading to the “new” Taiwan.

In “The Drowning of an Old Cat,” a confrontation between old and new dramatizes the discontinuity and “break” to which Giddens and Jameson respectively refer as well the “progress” Benjamin’s Angel of History finds so appalling. Focusing on rural villagers’ dismay and intimidation as real estate developers begin constructing a swimming pool on the sacred site of the Dragon’s Eye, the well that has provided water for the local rice fields for generations, this story serves as an excellent example of Huang’s dialectical narrative strategy in which the struggle between a thesis (the old) and its antithesis (the new) leads to a synthesis (modern capitalism). For the developers and construction company, the entire affair is nothing more than a government encouraged and protected business
opportunity opposed by a gaggle of misguided hayseeds who have failed to adapt to changing times. For the villagers, it is a disaster that will destroy the land’s feng shui (風水).

The story begins with a rapid historical overview. For hundreds of years before the beginnings of post-war Taiwanese urbanization, “The sixty or more households who lived [in Clear Spring Village] were as pure and simple as the spring water that flowed to the surface; there was little difference between them and the unbroken gush of water as they diligently tilled the . . . land” (12). This spring had been revered for generations as “the source of the people’s pure and simple nature” (13), but when visiting city-dwellers find it ideal for recreational swimming, the rage for modernization and financial gain leads inexorably to government subsidized construction of a swimming pool at the site despite the villagers’ objections.

When a community meeting is called to discuss the swimming pool proposal, Uncle Ah-sheng, representing the older generation, speaks against it in local Taiwanese dialect, expecting the deference traditionally accorded village elders. To his dismay, he is ignored by the “special invited guests” introduced by the village chief, “three gentlemen in Western suits” accompanied by Constable Lin and “five unfamiliar policemen” with “disagreeable looks on their faces” (21), all seated on a dais raised above the level reserved for villagers. Outraged, Ah-sheng cries, “Hey! Gander Kunzai [the village chief’s nickname], I told you I had something to say tonight” (21). Rather than attracting the respectful attention to which he feels entitled by virtue of his age and many years’ residence in Clear Spring Village, however, his outburst elicits embarrassed laughter from the crowd along with smirks from the five policemen and angry exasperation from Village Chief Xie Ah-kun, who “turned to look down at Ah-sheng” (21). Not realizing, or caring, that he has broken a taboo concerning “official” public meeting protocol imported from the cities, Ah-sheng feels unjustly rebuked and continues to insist on his right to speak.

The upshot of this scene is that a village elder who tries to assert his traditional right to influence public policy is thought to be an embarrassment to the community and an impediment to modernization, an ungainly insult directed against the gods of the “new” and their unquestioned faith in positivist, capitalist progressionism. The fact that the meeting is opened by the village chief with a speech in Mandarin rather than the local language, a speech of which Uncle Ah-sheng and many of his fellow villagers understand not a single word, augers ill for their concerns. For them, the high quality of material and cultural life enjoyed by the inhabitants of Clear Spring Village depends on specific characteristics of the
land around the spring. When Uncle Ah-sheng is finally, grudgingly allowed to speak, he declares, “As for the lay of the land, Clear Spring is a dragon’s head. The village exit leading to town is the mouth of the dragon, and the well beside the school is its eye, which is why we call it Dragon Eye Well. Ever since the time of our ancestors, the people of Clear Spring Village have been protected by this dragon” (23). Any hole dug in or around the spring would therefore destroy the land’s feng shui. Despite Uncle Ah-sheng’s eloquence and the support of his fellow elders, his advice is ignored, and, for the sake of a good business opportunity for outsiders, the old life in a small part of Taiwan is destroyed forever, dramatized in the suicide-drowning, fittingly in the new pool itself, of Uncle Ah-sheng, who simply cannot live the new life.

To borrow Benjamin’s words, Uncle Ah-sheng has played the role of a “man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes” (Benjamin, “Theses” 255). Rather than capitulate to such class-based misery by abandoning the personal consequence and assurance conferred by the feng shui beliefs he expounds, by accepting an end to the special relationship between man and land these beliefs hold in place, Ah-sheng insists on his right to speak for the past in the face of the policemen, businessmen, and village chief so symbolically looking down on him. As Benjamin asserts, “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (“Theses” 255). Ah-sheng fails in that attempt because he and his fellow traditionalists are unable to counter the economic conformism so carefully cultivated by the growing powers of urban capitalism, unable to reverse the tacit acceptance among many of their fellow villagers of a ruling class dominance imposed by outsiders.

In constructing his story according to a dialectical materialist concept of the real, Huang establishes his understanding that traditional societies have been historically self-sustaining by ensuring the inheritance of highly conservative, local, and stable ancestral values. As Giddens theorizes, “in traditional cultures, the past is honoured and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations” (Consequences 37). The members of these societies are bonded to a particular geographical territory essential to the formation of each member’s identity. Their languages and other customs rise out of that specific land area just as indigenous flora and fauna do. In such “pre-modern environments,” Giddens adds, “the ‘local knowledge,’ to adapt a phrase from Clifford Geertz, . . . was rich, varied, and adapted to the requirements of living in the local milieu” (145).
These are cultures in which everyone knows precisely what to do, how to act and interact and behaves accordingly, never having to confront an unfamiliar face. The life of old societies creates a wholeness and firmness that modern life cannot attain as urbanization destroys the individual’s stability and wholeness.

Although the businessmen and their lackeys in “The Drowning of an Old Cat” may not possess the philosophical sophistication necessary to articulate it, they clearly realize that the key to triumph over local traditional values comes in forcing a radical change in the relationship between humans and the land upon which they live. The land in question, and particularly the Dragon Eye Well, which has served for untold generations as the bedrock of local food production, the local economic base, is to be transformed for the sake of outside business interests, into a playground for city dwellers. The local superstructure built on the economic substructure provided by the land has been dominated by feng shui belief whereby the specific geologic characteristics of the well and the land around it are believed to be sacred, inviolable. Such a belief, however, impedes the march of capitalism, which requires more layers of commerce between the produce of the land and its consumers, layers allowing for more profit-taking. Thus the barter culture of the old superstructure must be replaced by the money culture of the new essential to business profits. To effect this transformation, the Western-suited businessmen in the story rely on something akin to what Nietzsche, in *Untimely Meditations*, terms “the ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel *unhistorically* . . .” (62; emphasis in original) in order to achieve some supposed gratification or hope for happiness. This ability to forget the past, in order to believe oneself to be happy in the present or to believe in a greater future happiness, makes possible the aestheticization of reality theorized by Benjamin, what Jameson terms the “acculturation of the Real” (x), as the land and its natural features lose the aura of their distance from the human maintained by traditional feng shui belief. Thus we may reverse Benjamin’s assertion that “The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist” (“Theses” 254). Uncle Ah-sheng goes down fighting for the “refined and spiritual things” made possible by belief in a fortunate coexistence of “crude and material things” in nature, a belief being swept away by the raging storm of “progress.”

Although the defeat of traditional local belief in this story seems absolute, a Marxist reader may wonder if Huang’s dialectical narrative strategy results in a characterization of Uncle Ah-sheng as a proletarian hero whose “courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude” carry a “retroactive force” that “will constantly call in[to]
question every victory, past and present, of the rulers’” (Benjamin, “Theses” 254-55). A Nativist reader might find comfort in such an interpretation, but the ending provides little reason to believe that the author himself finds solace in such a view. Instead, he leaves us with little hope for a resurgence of the traditional culture that Ah-sheng symbolically takes with him as he furiously disrobes in protest against the skimpy swimming suits displayed by young women at the pool and then drowns himself: his moral outrage has exceeded his capacity to survive in a “new” world in which business profits trump even common decency. As outraged as many of his fellow villagers must also be, although Ah-sheng’s family persuades the pool manager to close it for the day of his funeral, “even before the coffin had passed by, many of the children of Clear Spring, not to be denied, had sneaked into the pool area, and the peals of laughter that accompanied their frolicking in the water washed over the walls like waves” (31). Thus Huang leaves us with a sense of finality: the struggle between traditional local culture and the forces of urbanization has resulted in victory for the latter. There can be no going back. Any seeds of destruction within the capitalists’ victory must be very well hidden, indeed.

For Chang, “By suggesting that Uncle Ah-sheng’s heroism constitutes a futile act of social resistance and is trampled in the course of social progress, the author is trying to affirm humanity, even in its moment of failure” (156). Although we agree, we also insist on taking our reading further because Huang’s narrative strategy in “The Drowning of an Old Cat” extends well beyond the thesis-antithesis-synthesis dynamics of the confrontation between local tradition and modernization resulting in the “new” synthesis embodied in “The Sound of Laughter,” the last section of the story. Beyond that relatively obvious dialectic lies a less apparent one suggested by the ironic subtitle, “The Fundamental Knowledge in Democracy,” at the beginning of the village meeting scene. As Goldblatt points out in a footnote, this subtitle refers to “A book dealing with the procedure of parliamentary rule, written by Dr. Sun Yat-sen” (19). Although the meeting is pompously staged as if the local community could have a say in the fate of the Dragon Eye Well, the manner in which the locals are reduced to a powerless underclass, and demonstrations against the building of the swimming pool are suppressed, is part of another dialectic resulting in a new political synthesis whereby local control of the land is usurped by urban business interests working through the “Reliable Construction Company” that brings in “fifty outside laborers” (24) to fill jobs refused by locals. Although we

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6 Chang has pointed out Huang’s “ingenious use of section subtitles to convey sarcasm.” As she notes, “The interplay of such subtitles with the content of a story gives his works an extra thematic dimension” (66).
agree with Chang’s argument that Huang’s early stories tend to be less ideological than his later ones, to “treat modern civilization, including technology and democracy, as a potential threat to basic human values” rather than “communicating a socialist message” (Chang 155), we also see in this section of “The Drowning of an Old Cat” clear indications of a growing ideological commitment that would strengthen considerably as Huang’s writing career developed. This scene, in which the local government uses “democratic procedures to enforce its decision to build the pool” (Chang 155) may be read as ideologically satirical since those in power so cynically use “the villagers’ ignorance of modern society” (Chang 155) to advance their capitalist economic agenda at whatever cost not only to local sensibilities but also the people’s ability to make a living from the land. As the story closes we can once again imagine Angel of History Huang sadly contemplating, even as the distance between him and Clear Spring Village increases with every gust from the storm of “progress,” the generational disconnect between Uncle Ah-sheng and his elderly cronies and the children cavorting in the pool. These children, as they age into adulthood while Taiwan enters and moves through its great “Economic Miracle” toward globalization, will never know the simple yet firm assurance with which the Dragon’s Eye blessed their forbears.

In his most biting satires on modernization in Taiwan, Huang uses his dialectic narrative strategy to present characters from differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds who talk past each other incomprehensively in conversations embodying conflicts too complex to be fully understood by those most affected by them. The inevitable result is that many who have heretofore lived according to traditional Taiwanese values and beliefs find their lives permanently altered as essentials of their native culture are diluted, transformed or even entirely replaced by modern Western values and beliefs as a result of changes in the external conditions of life (substructure) that inevitably lead to changes in corresponding internal, spiritual, and social conditions (superstructure). “The Taste of Apples,” which originally appeared only five years after “The Drowning of an Old Cat” and yet goes so much further in depicting the disintegration of traditional Taiwanese culture in the face of overwhelming international as well as internal forces, serves as an especially apt example of Huang’s use of trenchant irony to cast grave doubts on the benefits of urbanization, modernization, and nascent globalization, especially that cloaked in the guise of American military and economic “aid.”

The story uses an “accident” involving a Taiwanese laborer and an American military man to flood the reader with a powerful sense of change taking place in the lives of such workers. Ah-fa’s situation before the accident is that of thousands of
post-war Taiwanese living on the edge of material disaster after leaving their rural homes in order to “try their luck” in the suburbs of Taipei and other urban areas. The fact that such a move has been undertaken despite the opposition of Ah-fa’s wife, who continually reminds her husband of his mistake as the family struggles to survive in one of the illegal shanty-town squatter districts ringing the city, acts as one of many elements of irony to invoke the reader’s sense of the modern world as accidental, contingent, gratuitous, and impersonal. Ah-fa has taken the position of a man attempting to adapt to changing times, wishing to take advantage of what Giddens calls “the ‘opportunity side’ of modernity.” His wife, on the other hand, has acted in fear of the “risk” side. Their bickering on the subject becomes a microcosm of the global dialectic of “security versus danger and trust versus risk” characteristic of modernity (Giddens, Consequences 7; emphasis in original). In the story’s opening scene, subtitled “The Accident,” we see the abject weakness of Ah-fa’s economic and social class in comparison with that of the people who run into him. Commuting to work on a “rickety” bicycle, he is virtually unprotected from the physical force of the collision in contrast to the passengers in the automobile. He and his bicycle end up literally “under the car” (135).

The ferocity of the collision, and what the reader soon discovers to be that of the cultural confrontation about to take place for Ah-fa and his family, is made shockingly clear in the story’s second sentence: “A dark green sedan with a foreigner’s license plate crashed into a rickety old bicycle like a wild animal pouncing on its prey, crushing it on the other side of the yellow dividing line of the two-lane highway” (135). Thus Huang immediately provides his readers with symbols central to the story’s dialectical opposition of local and foreign, country and city, poor and rich, weak and powerful, old and new, from which only one side can emerge intact. By the end of the first paragraph these symbols have been supplemented by others, including subtle irony: “a lunch box—mainly rice . . . scattered all over the street . . . the solitary salted egg . . . lying smashed at the edge of the safety island” (135). The force of the collision breaks both Ah-fa’s legs, forcing him to undergo surgery. Because he is his family’s principal bread-winner, the possibility that he may not be able to work again creates consternation in his dependents as well as himself. However, wishing to compensate the family for its loss, Colonel Grant, the American whose car hit Ah-fa, offers 20,000 New Taiwan dollars with more to come, a fortune to the heretofore impoverished family, along with other forms of material aid, ironically raising the family’s standard of living beyond anything they could ever have expected. Thus we find ourselves with a story of crushing poverty allied with simplicity and innocence confronted by
seemingly unlimited wealth and power and their attendant complications.

As a common laborer before the accident, Ah-fa made just enough money to cover his family’s basic needs. Accordingly, when she hears of the accident, her wife, Ah-gui, who has been desperately struggling to make a decent life for her family, foresees a bleak future of penury. Ironically, to the Taiwanese reader, her name suggests the laurel tree, whose deliciously fragrant flower suggests upper-class status even as Ah-gui’s social and economic situation seems to be deteriorating by the minute. The elder daughter, Ah-zhu, whose name in Taiwanese means “pearl” while her life is dominated by household chores and caring for her younger sister and brother, imagines herself being sold in order to pay family debts. Given the significance of Ah-fa’s name, so popular among Taiwanese for its ability to express the hopes of the named individual’s parents for good luck and prosperity, the family’s situation seems even more cruelly ironic until they find themselves at “The White House,” an American hospital where Ah-fa is undergoing treatment and Ah-gui and Ah-zhu’s fears, at least in purely material terms, begin to dissipate.

Ah-fa’s lack of economic/political status is reinforced in the second subtitled section of the story, “The Telephone Call,” by a conversation between two Americans—one apparently in Taipei, the other perhaps in Washington, discussing Colonel Grant, Ah-fa, and the accident. The key passage is “Don’t forget, we’re in Asia now! The other fellow is just a laborer” (136). Ah-fa is a mere menial, a prole, a member of the least powerful class in the story. The speaker on the other end of the line makes it clear that America “can’t afford any trouble” in this “Asian country with which we have the closest ties of friendship.” When he or she adds, “Besides, it’s the most secure” (136), we remember the strategic importance of Taiwan for the United States at the end of World War II. At bottom, Huang’s story concerns the geopolitical importance of what a casual observer might consider a routine accident and the overwhelming effects geopolitics can have on the unsuspecting, powerless individual.

The third section, “Labyrinth,” continues to develop these initial themes of economic and political class as well as international relations while introducing the equally if not yet more important issue of Taiwan’s linguistic complexity and its attendant economic/social/political ramifications. Soon after the accident and conversation, we find ourselves following a young foreign affairs policeman acting as guide for Colonel Grant, who is looking for the victim’s family in the “squatter’s district” of “tiny illegal shacks made of wooden crates and sheet metal” (139) on the outskirts of Taipei. The policeman’s job is to act as intermediary between the
American and Taiwanese, but he is poorly prepared for such duty culturally and emotionally as well as linguistically. Finding themselves “meandering through a labyrinth” (136), the foreigner feels utterly lost while the policeman worries about losing face. Other details emerge as the section develops to clarify Huang’s juxtapositioning of material facts to underscore his theme: when the colonel jokes that this would be a good place for “a game of hide-and-seek,” the policeman wonders if he is being mocked for his inability to find what they are looking for. He is almost as much out of his element as the American who is “a head taller than any of the shacks” (136). The policeman feels “stung by the injustice of it all,” he, trained only to deal with local incidents involving foreigners (read “not involving native Taiwanese”) now “in the position of having to find his way through all this confusion” (136). The term “labyrinth” takes on special significance as we sense the presence of a minotaur in the maze, in this case the economic/political power invested in the American colonel as well as the Republic of China government that employs the policeman. The story, then, concerns three distinct classes: the Taiwanese-speaking proletarian lower class, Mandarin-speaking low-level Taiwanese government employees (a sort of middle class), and English-speaking high-level American military officials. In contrast to the other two classes, the Taiwanese workers represented by Ah-fa and his wife, along with their old Taiwan culture, take on a position of abject weakness in the face of a mysterious, inscrutable, overwhelming force.

To alleviate his sense of shame and inferiority compared with the American colonel, the policeman lies that new accommodations for the inhabitants of the slum “are nearly completed,” that once the inhabitants are moved out, a “high-rise” will replace the tin shacks. The American’s habitual response, “mm-hm,” is “pregnant with ambiguities and dubious connotations” (137). Thus the policeman finds himself more concerned with determining the American’s true thoughts than with finding Ah-fa’s house. Although his English is quite good, he does not possess the collective idiolect such American expressions require for full comprehension. When he and Colonel Grant finally find a little girl to ask for directions, she turns out to be mute: no useful communication is possible as she peppers “their retreating backs with a stream of incoherent grunts accompanied by a flurry of hand motions” (137). The American’s reaction to finding such a child in such a place introduces the religious issue for the first time as he intones “a muffled ‘Oh, my God!’” (137). Perhaps even more importantly, however, it provides an answer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous formulation of what she considers to be the central
question faced by the Subaltern Studies group: “Can the subaltern speak?”, the answer in this case being, “No, she literally cannot.” “The Other” in this instance is actually Ah-fa’s younger daughter, who could hardly be more subaltern in the social context of the story given her identity as a mute female Taiwanese minor, an embodiment of Spivak’s “silent, silenced center” (25). If Huang means to dramatize something akin to what Benita Parry has described as “Spivak’s decree that imperialism’s linguistic aggression obliterates the inscription of a native self” (39), he could hardly have chosen a more effective human signifier.

Shifting our focus back to the American Colonel, we may interpret his invocation of God, as does Chang, as an ironic reference to the Colonel’s “first-world humanitarianism” leading to an “altruistic attempt to help the family” (158). Of course his “help,” as we will see, has the effect of breaking up the family when the mute daughter is sent off to America to attend a special school for the handicapped. The most important function of this “Labyrinth” section of the story, then, is to emphasize that communication between persons of power and those unfortunate enough to be relegated to the illegal squatter’s district, where in effect they do not officially exist, is very nearly impossible because of cultural and linguistic barriers erected by geopolitical forces.

As the story continues we come to realize that the policeman’s first language is Mandarin, his second apparently English, and his third a slap-dash Taiwanese capable of little beyond the most basic communications. This tandem of foreign affairs policeman and American military man consequently becomes an embodiment of the demarcation in power relations among languages in Taiwan after World War II with English at the top and Taiwanese at the distant bottom. The policeman means well, but when he and the American finally find Ah-gui, who knows neither Mandarin nor English, his efforts to calm her do more harm than good because his Taiwanese is so poor. Thus it is the Catholic nun at the American hospital who comes to the rescue with her excellent command of the local language. Ironically, a woman who bears no racial or ethnic similarity to Ah-fa’s family....

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7 Primarily South Asian scholars whose work focuses mostly on postcolonial society on the Indian subcontinent but who also study the developing world in general. In this article Spivak comments especially on the work of Ranajit Guha.

8 Occupying the bottom of the political/social/cultural hierarchy sketched by Huang in this story, Ah-fa, his wife and mute daughter correspond roughly to what Spivak terms “the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (25). The mute, in addition, being female, is relegated to an even lower level, “even more deeply in shadow” (28) than she would be if male. We may add yet another level for her being a child.

9 This realization is reinforced in the “Civics Class” section in which Ah-fa’s son, Ah-ji, is being taught in Mandarin rather than Taiwanese.
communicates with them much more effectively than a policeman of their own race and nationality. How comical! And yet how utterly disconcerting. The family finds itself even more culturally disoriented by this linguistic disconnect than by the mystifyingly modern American hospital surrounding them. They are accustomed to people talking the way they look, a linguistic stereotype upon which every traditional culture builds its ethnic-linguistic edifice.

Again referring to Giddens’s sociological theorizing of the dialectics of modernity, we can understand the Taiwanese family’s experience with the Taiwanese-speaking American nun as a form of linguistic-ethnic discontinuity, one of many elements of the cultural disconnects characteristic of globalization invoked by Huang in this story. For Giddens, globalization can be explained in part as a result of our current “time-space distanciation” being “much higher than in any previous period” so that “relations between local and distant social forms and events become correspondingly ‘stretched.’ Globalization refers essentially to that stretching process. . . . Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa, . . . a dialectical process” (Consequences 64). Thus we see Huang’s dialectical narrative strategy in this story stretching well beyond Taiwan’s coasts, literally encircling the planet as the island is caught up in the give-and-take of global dialectics that Giddens has described. The accident that acts as the story’s inciting incident, and renders what happens to Ah-fa and his family possible as a consequence, transforms into the tale’s central symbol and metaphor as the accident and its consequences reverberate from the illegal squatter’s district outside Taipei to The White House in Washington, D. C. and back again.

As “The Taste of Apples” develops, Huang adds level upon level of dialectical confrontation, confusion, and surprise. Underlying those levels concerned with language is what Goldblatt in his “Translator’s Note” terms “the language gap among people in Taiwan” (x). Goldblatt also points out that most rural Taiwanese of the times depicted in the stories (1960s and 70s) lacked education and spoke only “their native Taiwanese dialect” (ix). We may add that, although Taiwan may be considered a polyglossic society, it is so in a very different sense from what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin describe in The Empire Writes Back as a community in which “a multitude of dialects interweave to form a generally comprehensible linguistic continuum” (39). Much of the power of Taiwanese Nativist literature resides in the fact that the island’s languages—dominated by Taiwanese, Mandarin, and Hakka—particularly in situations like that described in
"The Taste of Apples," have not hybridized to become mutually comprehensible despite the rapidly increasing social and economic relations among speakers of these languages during the run-up to and development of Taiwanese globalization since the 1945 KMT takeover. They are, rather, as Victor H. Mair describes them, among the "hundreds of varieties of mutually unintelligible speech classifiable as Sinitic," something akin to what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as languages "coexisting but closed and deaf to each other" (12).

Such a linguistic situation, in which the foreign affairs policeman can hardly communicate with the locals in their sole language—and in which they understand nothing of the putative "national" language, Mandarin, or the "world language," English—exemplifies the political reality that Taiwanese culture, after fifty years of Japanese colonization followed by the domination of the Chinese republicans who fled the Mainland before the Communist onslaught, is weak to the point of being nearly ignored. The policeman has achieved his status by learning Mandarin and English well while picking up just enough Taiwanese to get along in those distasteful situations in which he finds himself confronted with such "backward" people as Ah-fa and his wife. This increasing weakness of the local traditional culture is a result of the geopolitical situation confronting Taiwan complimented by the radical change in relations between humans and the land observed in "The Drowning of an Old Cat." Under the Japanese colonial domination known only too well by Uncle Ah-sheng’s generation, Taiwan had seen Japanese displace both Mandarin and Taiwanese as the language of power. The island had then been transferred by treaty after the Japanese defeat in World War II to the Republic of China, which installed Mandarin as the language of power. The ultimate geopolitical force in the transfer, however, was the United States whose military acted as guarantor. Thus the supremacy of English as embodied in the American Colonel whose automobile and money are the chief instruments of Ah-fa’s transformation from poverty-stricken laborer to ward of the American military. In essence, then, the story dramatizes the developing pecking-order of linguistic-cultural-political reality in post-war Taiwan: America and English moving inexorably to the top, republican Chinese and Mandarin taking over the middle, native Taiwanese and their language settling to the bottom.

As Mair has so ably pointed out, the superior positions of English and Mandarin are a result of their "association with military might, political power, and economic clout" while Mandarin benefits as well from "its designation as the official national language." On the other hand, both the policeman and Ah-fa have been thrust into the position of a colonized people whose language occupies a
relatively weak position in comparison with the language of the colonizer. Both Huang’s dialectical narrative strategy and the looming shadow of globalization become particularly evident whenever English is being used in the story, as we watch it edging out local language as the medium of supreme power in which final determinations are made that overwhelmingly impact the lives of Ah-fa and his family. Mandarin, in these cases, clearly occupies an inferior position in comparison with English but a place still far superior to that of Taiwanese. Taiwanese is never a language of economic or political power in this story.

The scene in which the political-economic-cultural order is most apparent comes in the section subtitled “Blessed are the Believers,” in which Ah-fa, unable to understand the policeman’s Mandarin explanation that the colonel was taking responsibility for the accident but nevertheless realizing it must have been Colonel Grant’s car that hit him, declares accusingly in Taiwanese: “Aha! So it was you. . . . I pulled over to let you pass—I never thought you’d come right at me. Aiya! When you smashed into me, you also smashed my family to pieces” (153). The Colonel, mystified by Ah-fa’s Taiwanese, seeks the policeman’s help, but that young man has himself been unable to follow, so again it is the Catholic nun who translates and from that point on acts as intermediary between the colonel and Ah-fa. Thus the policeman becomes a mere spectator as the two Americans take complete control while the colonel tells Ah-fa how everything will work and how, in essence, his life and that of his family will no longer be their own. Not only will the colonel, and America, make sure Ah-fa and his family do not suffer financially, but he will send their mute daughter to “a special school in the United States” (153). Ah-fa’s reaction, intensified by an envelope containing twenty thousand New Taiwan dollars, is “the uneasy feeling that they’d [he and his family] done something wrong and offended someone” (154). The tables have been turned: the victim has become guilty of the crime.

The appearance of the money in this scene brings us back to some of the dialectical materialism we touched on in our comments on “The Drowning of an Old Cat.” The entire economic base, the substructure, of Ah-fa’s family has been stripped away. His status as a worker is gone, replaced by a new status as ward of the state—perhaps we should say “foreign state”—a way of life entirely “foreign” to his native culture and for which he is grossly unprepared. Within just a few short months, his young life has been wrenched from a relatively stable land-based substructure to a peripatetic quasi-industrial one. We never learn specifically what his job in Taipei was, only that he was a laborer in a construction project related to Taiwan’s “Economic Miracle.” As a result of an accident, then, his life transforms
into something that might seem to have no substructure at all: a ward of geopolitics in the early stages of Taiwanese globalization with nothing to do but exist. Once again we invoke Benjamin’s reminder that “The transformation of the superstructure . . . takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure” (“Work of Art” 217-18) and quickly realize that, not only will Ah-fa’s life never be the same, but he will never again know happiness even to whatever modest extent his former life allowed it. The impossibility of making a clean break from the psychological/cultural past will become increasingly evident in his life whether he realizes it or not. Quite certainly, in fact, he will lose his grasp on what happiness is.

At this juncture we should point out that while Ah-fa and Ah-gui can be read as representatives of the pre-colonial linguistic stage in the history of twentieth-century Taiwanese globalization under American geopolitical, economic, and military domination because Taiwanese is their only language, their children represent the first generation of Taiwanese being educated under the KMT language policy explicitly forbidding instruction in any of the island’s native languages while requiring a high level of competence in Mandarin. Section six, “Civics Class,” forces the reader to face this political/economic/linguistic reality underlying the story. During the class, “only the sounds of loud, shrill-voiced teachers” (139) can be heard, and they are not speaking Taiwanese but rather Mandarin. Ah-fa’s son, Ah-ji, is serving as an example to teach an economics lesson, standing in the corner of the classroom as punishment for not paying his tuition. His family, desperately caught in the substructure-superstructure gap, the time it takes families and individuals to adapt to new conditions imposed by economic and cultural change, has not been able to find the money. The lesson for the day, then, is “Co-op-er-a-tion” (140). The teacher uses Ah-ji as an example of what happens to those who fail to cooperate, an example of how down-trodden Taiwanese are humiliated and excluded for their failure to work within the capitalist system and how education is being used to enforce the progressivist ideology of the modern Republic of China nation-state. Ah-ji and his family therefore fit perfectly within Huang’s dialectical narrative strategy as well as the principles of dialectical materialism. All the while they struggle to catch up with changes in the economic base, they are punished for not already being ahead of the curve. They are in effect puppets being jerked back and forth between the opposing forces that control their strings.

For the increasingly ideological Nativist writers such as Huang had become between the writing of “The Drowning of an Old Cat” and “The Taste of Apples,”

10 This reading assumes that Ah-fa and his wife, because they apparently know no Japanese, have been relatively untouched by the linguistic effects of Japanese colonization.
the KMT language policy was a naked attempt, perhaps even more so than what had occurred under Japanese colonization, to destroy Taiwanese culture, consciousness, and identity. Ah-fa’s mute daughter thus takes on special significance as a living symbol of the voicelessness and resulting loss of subjectivity and identity among Taiwanese people. Because she will be sent to America, she will presumably learn to read and write English to the exclusion of even Mandarin, much less Taiwanese, a language with no “native” reading/writing system (Mair). She will literally have no Taiwanese voice at all no matter how well she learns to read and write. We can also assume that her “special school” will teach her to be culturally American, certainly not Taiwanese, and very likely not Chinese, either. The dialectics involved in such a situation are quite clear as she will become progressively less Taiwanese, progressively more American and global all the while she remains ethnically Taiwanese. Her brother, Ah-ji, presumably able to continue his schooling, will be obliged to become less and less Taiwanese while becoming increasingly Chinese, his native speech giving way to that of the Mainland. And yet, in his case as well, much that is Taiwanese will remain uncomfortably in the nooks and crannies of his soul.

Huang’s dialectical irony goes yet further, however. The foreign affairs policeman, continually concerned with losing face before the American Colonel, finds a way to reinsert himself into the action by attempting to lecture Ah-fa on his good fortune: “This has been a stroke of good luck for you, . . . being run down by an American’s car” (154). Ah-fa’s reaction, “through tears of emotion,” is “Thank you! Thank you! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry” (154). This speech, in Taiwanese of course, amounts to a concession in the power struggle between traditional Taiwanese culture and the Westernized, Americanized global culture sweeping all before it with full complicity from Taiwan’s Mandarins. The Taiwanese language, the ultimate root of Taiwanese culture, occupies a position of relative abjection in comparison with Mandarin and English and all that they represent. Thus Ah-fa has achieved material well-being not by selling his soul but by being sold in effect by his own government for the sake of the geopolitical security and modernization offered by America. To make his surrender total, to divest him of his last shreds of cultural integrity, he must be made to apologize, fully accepting the lowest position not only socially but spiritually. None of the situation in which he finds himself has come about as a result of Ah-fa’s desires or will but rather as an inevitable outcome of being caught up in the machinations of overwhelmingly powerful forces over which he, and traditional Taiwanese culture, have no control. As Chang puts it, Ah-fa has lost his “self-respect as a result of overpowering external conditions” (157).
He has become a pawn not merely of the KMT’s struggle with the PRC but even more so of America’s imperialist insistence on controlling Asia. We can link this loss of pride—of which he has mere inklings rather than any specific awareness—to loss of identity and subjectivity. Chang interprets “The Taste of Apples” as one of Huang’s “later stories” in which “the poor are no longer able to sustain their pride,” and in which the writer shifts focus “from the individual to the environment, to the collective fate of the group as united by class or nation” (157). Couched in the Marxist terms we have been using in this study, the Taiwanese proletariat, dispossessed of their traditional ties to the land as the island lurches away from an agricultural substructure toward an industrial one dependent on international trade, finds itself in a substructure-superstructure limbo in which they can no longer be themselves, in which they progressively forget who they are. More symbolically, the American colonel representative of global American power displaces Ah-fa as family breadwinner and protector. The American hospital becomes a heaven, its whiteness in Ah-fa’s mind transformed from the traditional Chinese/Taiwanese connection with death to a symbol of American materialist purity and sterility.

The importance of religion and the pressures being applied to the traditional systems of belief according to which Ah-fa and his family have lived until the accident become increasingly pervasive as the tale develops. Redemption for Ah-fa, his wife and children in their seemingly impossible material situation comes through the intermediary of the Catholic Church, the modern hospital it has built, and the Taiwanese-speaking American nun. The secular power represented by the Taiwanese policeman and the American military is certainly important, but it is the Church that renders essential communication possible between the American colonel and Ah-fa and his wife. This religious theme is developed even further by the explicit linking, in the final sentence of the story, of “temptation” with the apples brought to the hospital for Ah-fa’s family. Although non-Christian Taiwanese reading the original Chinese-language version of the story may not make such a connection, Westerners reading the Goldblatt translation could easily associate these apples with the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, especially since the apple-eating scene occurs within the Christian context of the Catholic nun and hospital. According to such a reading, tempted by Satan to partake of the forbidden fruit, Eve does so and her

11 *Genesis* does not identify the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as an apple, but popular belief among Christians holds that it is. For many Westerners, and especially Christians, any story that uses apples as a central image is almost inevitably associated with the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man.
eyes are opened to a new world much as are Ah-fa’s and those of his family by their experience after the accident. Their apparent good fortune, like Eve’s knowledge, however, comes at a very high price, indeed—their Taiwanese subjectivity and identity as embodied in their heretofore simple, traditional Taiwanese life. Nothing for them will ever be the same. Ah-fa loses his traditional position as family god, his identity as provider and protector for his family, a place usurped by the American colonel, an effacement symbolic of Taiwan’s loss of sovereignty to American economic, political, and military power. Huang’s choice of apples as a central symbol goes beyond the religious connotations we suggest here, however, since apples are not native to Taiwan and were “introduced in trials conducted during the Japanese colonial period.” Thus the apples may also be read as symbolic of Taiwan’s history of foreign domination as well as prophetic of the globalization and money culture Huang foresees. For even today apples are grown on the island only in small quantities and few Taiwanese apples are available in domestic markets. Ordinarily, if one wants an apple in Taiwan, one must find it where imports are sold, and that takes money, the new currency of a globalized subtropical island where the barter economics of old have faded away, and products from other lands must be paid for in the end in global currency, the American dollar. We may even suggest that these apples represent the beginnings of consumer culture in Taiwan and the introduction of “false needs” to replace the “real needs” of independence, agency, family cohesion, etc.

In the end, then, Ah-fa’s name also proves prophetic, if in a most ironic fashion. He comes to see himself in a new light, as a man of leisure. His wife finds him far more attractive than ever before, thinking, “Today he really looks like a human being” (154; emphasis in original) and stops criticizing him for insisting on moving north to try their luck. And yet, despite these seemingly positive developments in her attitude toward her husband, they also indicate a loss of love and respect for him as Taiwanese. In that case, she represents a critical stage in the transformation of the colonized from self to other by learning to devalue their native cultural heritage. As Giddens points out, “The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options” (Modernity and Self-Identity 5). For Ah-fa and his family, however, the accident (fate) that plunges them into the vortex of Taiwan-American geopolitical forces leaves them no negotiating position, no choice, no options. They

12 As pointed out in “History of Taiwanese Fruits” (Government Information Office, Republic of China).
Ah-fa’s construction worker colleagues, taken to the hospital by the colonel for a visit, joke about the injured man’s new, “lucky” life while they themselves must continue “working like animals” (155). They represent the ordinary local laborer struggling to keep his head above water in the swirling eddies of early globalization while Ah-fa, immobile in his totally white bandages and bed, surrounded by “The White House,” is seen, most ironically, as the lucky one. The intense surrounding whiteness at this point in the story reverses itself in the dialectic between American and Chinese cultures, reasserting its Taiwanese/Chinese death symbolism. The old Taiwanese Ah-fa is dead.

And thus Ah-fa’s family enters into their new life by struggling to learn how to eat the apples provided by the colonel, each worth four catties of rice. The beauty and expense of the apples, however, cannot entirely obscure the reality of their being not “quite as sweet as they [the family] had imagined; rather, they were a little sour and pulpy . . . and not quite real” (156). For Chang, these “precise symbolic implications of the apple” suggest “Taiwanese people’s feelings about American aid in the postwar years,” therefore conveying a much clearer ideological message than anything in Huang’s earlier stories, which tended to be more “mysterious,” full of “richly suggestive images” but relatively unresponsive to “reasonable analysis” (158). Ah-fa himself, as he quietly muses over his situation in “The White House,” Chang concludes, suffers from an “ineffable, . . . existentialist fear of loss of identity” (156). He literally does not know who he is anymore. Unlike Uncle Ah-sheng, however, he is still relatively young with a long life ahead. The thematic power of Ah-sheng’s death, although his suicide is unfortunate, cannot compare to that of Ah-fa’s fate. Ah-sheng and his generation are about to make way for the young, the “new,” no matter how unfortunate the manner in which they must do it may seem. Ah-fa and his wife, however, with fifty years or more to live, will always be behind the curve, always somehow tethered to traditional cultural practices their children will learn to mock. Taiwanese will always remain their language no matter how well their children learn Mandarin and English. They will always be caught up in the spiritual violence of Taiwanese cultural dialectics, always in the limbo between substructure and superstructure, always pawns in the “new” Taiwan’s international relations games.

By so masterfully developing his dialectical narrative strategy to dramatize the messy, tragic yet inexorable transition from the old Taiwan to the new in stories such as “The Drowning of an Old Cat” and “The Taste of Apples,” stories in which he serves as an Angel of History attempting to “awaken the dead” to the dark side
of “newness” and utopian progressionism, Huang Chun-ming has firmly established himself as perhaps the island’s foremost Nativist author. His use of Taiwanese vernacular in dialogue, his careful delineation of the details of everyday life, as well as his loving depiction of a passing generations’ most cherished beliefs fading before the overwhelming onslaught of modernization and globalization have reserved for him an enduring place in the pantheon of Taiwan’s most revered and beloved contemporary writers. His fears that the old Taiwan, with its unique local dialects and beliefs, will slide inexorably into oblivion may turn out to have been well-founded, but his works, much like those of Mark Twain for the old American Southwest or Honoré de Balzac for the now defunct alleyways of nineteenth-century Paris, will forever remain an invaluable repository of local social and cultural history for any reader who hopes to understand and appreciate Taiwan’s human history.

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