Introduction: Transnational Taiwan

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In this age of globalization, scholars tend to rely on a tripartite analytic structure that incorporates the global, the national, and the local. However, the middle level here—the national—may be missing; this is one way of explaining the phenomenon of glocalization, the absorption and modification of the effects of globalization at various localized points. But with the concept of transnationalism we bring back into play the idea or role of the national when it seems to have already disappeared. In other words, while transnational approaches tend to problematize clearly pre-existing (in the year 2010) national boundaries, e.g., those of France or Japan, such approaches also can create ambiguous (perhaps porous, indeterminate) national boundaries or at least the possibility of such boundaries. Such a strategy may be compared with various poststructuralist strategies of analyzing or producing “difference.”

The special topic of this issue of Concentric is “Transnational Taiwan.” All four papers devoted to this topic break away from the paradigm of “imagining” Taiwan, i.e., from the “Taiwan imaginary,” a paradigm which seems monolithic and idealizing. Rather, the approaches here tend to be historical, multi-ethnic, and localizing. By using transnational approaches these four authors reach, in different ways, the paradoxical conclusion that a pure “Taiwan” or purely “Taiwan/Taiwanese identity” (whether national, ethnic and/or cultural) does not exist. Rather, to attempt to construct a Taiwan(ese) national identity or subjectivity, one must negotiate with and among a range of complex factors. These include not only history, colonialism and geopolitics but also inter-textuality, cross- or intra-cultural translation and the narrative arts of cinema and the novel.

In “Toward a Transnational Taiwan history,” Ann Heylen begins with Taiwan’s status as an island in the Western Pacific Ocean—and thus as part of an “oceanic” geographical region—as well as with the history of European colonialism from the 16th and especially 17th century. In historical-transnational terms Taiwan may be seen, not as a nation in its own right nor even primarily as the onetime market or colony of economic powers like China, Portugal, Holland, England and Japan, who were engaged in various geopolitical games as they vied with one
another for maritime domination in the whole region. Rather than as an object or extension of these already-existing nations with their powerful economies, Taiwan emerges as a point of intersection of multiple trading and maritime forces within an oceanic region of the Western Pacific. The transnational perspective on Taiwan, in emphasizing the ocean itself in which the island is situated, also emphasizes the oceanic (Pacific-island) origins of Taiwan’s aboriginal peoples, and the seafaring, adventurous spirit of those peoples living along the southeastern coast of China who began sailing to Peng-hu and Taiwan in the 16th century, and are now referred to as “Taiwanese.”

Heylen also notes that throughout its history, Taiwan has struggled to selectively emphasize some aspects of its complex multi-ethnic past while forgetting others, in order to fabricate a seemingly coherent national narrative. Yet this narrative can never be fully coherent given the need to keep resifting through the various fragmentary narratives of the past, both local and transnational, and also given the fact that the current social and political climate keeps changing. Thus the national narrative has to be re-written again and again. Reframing the issues in a new transnational agenda, Heylen suggests, we must be clear about the questions we are asking, why we are asking them, what our own investment in them is, and how much risk there may be in remembering some things while forgetting others.

If Taiwan was a Western-Pacific point of intersection in an economic network or grid of European, Chinese and Japanese shipping routes in earlier centuries, in the mid-20th century the old European powers had largely dropped out while America had become a very important player. The ships were now joined by airplanes, including jet fighters and bombers, as well as (from 1945) by nuclear weapons, and geopolitics had become an increasingly important part of the game. Chih-ming Wang’s article, “Risky Fiction: Betrayal and Romance in the Jing Affair,” invites us to ponder the risky, and not totally implausible, cold-war situation imagined by American author D. J. Spencer in his 1964 novel. It is the 1950s, cross-Strait relations are tense though China has not yet fired missiles at Jinmen (Quemoy) and Matsu, and Jing, a high-level official in the KMT government, is attempting to turn Taiwan over to the Chinese communists, who are an imminent threat to Taiwan’s independence and to American national interests in the Western Pacific.

Referring to the calculations of game and risk theory as well as to the history of the 1950s US-ROC relationship and Cold War (geo)politics, Wang argues that this novel is strategically and politically useful insofar as the alternative history it imagines could actually have happened, and thus may be productively analyzed and
compared with the historical reality. In The Jing Affair, when it is learned that Jing intends to sell out Taiwan, the Taiwanese-American hero leads an independence uprising; independence is achieved, and the US makes sure that its influence and interests in the Western Pacific are as strong as before. Wang points out the paradoxical but also realistic nature of this model: an independent Taiwan seems to always survive in its own negation; in its disavowal of Chinese influence, American and Japanese support is mobilized, leading to Taiwan’s status as an in/dependent state that is forever dependent.

From the imaginable scenario of the KMT’s total control and imminent selling-out of Taiwan to the equally imaginable scenario of the Taiwanese people’s revolution and setting-up of a truly independent Taiwan, “Taiwan” itself may be seen, Wang suggests, as in effect a “spectral nation” that is paradoxically both independent of and persistently dependent on the actual state-machine. This idea of spectrality attends to the mutual haunting or constitutive interpenetration of nation and state, and thus sheds light on the aporia of “in-dependence.” Taiwan’s spectrality stands witness to the transnational trajectory of the Taiwan Independence movement in history and to the lasting influence of imperialist disavowal in the present.

Wang speaks of the “literary mediation of a crisis” as a “productive event,” and once again we are shown the role of literary writing in the creation of a transnational imagination in Yu-lin Lee and Shan-hui Hsu’s “Taiwan Literature, a Minoritizing Project.” In this paper, minor literature does not specify any particular type of literature or indicate the literature produced by any specific groups; it instead designates an internal linguistic variation or transformation, a becoming-associated with social change and a people-to-come. Lai He’s works, which are based on linguistic experiments with Mandarin, provide for Lee and Hsu a perfect example of minor literature. Thus their paper proposes to look at or into a local literature through the lens of the minor one, exploring how this local-minor literature can become a mode of writing and of existence for the dominated people.

The paper argues, then, that the minor as a perspective may allow us to see a “literature of the dominated” beyond all linguistic, ethnic, national and cultural boundaries in the flux of transnational/global flows. (Here we may be reminded of Heylen’s transnational Taiwan as an oceanic “point of intersection” of economic, and by extension political, forces). Lai He’s writing is taken here as a practice of translation as well as a particular form of “East Asian hybrid Chinese writing” and a minor writing “in the face of” imperial and colonial domination. Unlike contemporary local writers who “translated” locality into the colonizer’s language
Lai’s manipulation of the art of “translation” also marked a social change and an encounter with modernity, one in which the national/ethnic character was criticized and a history of subjectivity was constituted. What Lai’s writing has accomplished, in the view of Lee and Hsu, is not simply an enactment of linguistic transformation within Mandarin but also an intervention into the polylingualism and cultural hybridity that characterize Taiwan’s colonial situation. (Again this point will remind us of Heylen’s essay). The authors conclude that Lai’s linguistic experiment could provide a practical literary strategy for the survival and renewal of a local culture in the face of the juggernaut of globalization.

Of course, narrative art is not limited to prose fiction: it can also be found in narrative poetry, drama, cinema and even dance. The most popular film in Taiwan in 2008 was Cape No. 7, and in our fourth “Transnational Taiwan” essay Ivy I-chu Chang discusses De-Sheng Wei’s movie. Most film audiences were thrilled by the romantic plot without even noticing that the characters in the film speak several languages: Mandarin, Taiwanese, Hakka, and Japanese. As Chang notes, this attests to the fact that Taiwan’s basically hybrid, multi-ethnic, transnational culture is taken for granted by the public. But Taiwan was a colony of Japan from 1895 to 1945, and the film also foregrounds the issue of Japanophilia in Taiwan. Thus Chang asks how director De-Sheng Wei can utilize cinematic symbols to link together the Taiwanese older generation’s nostalgia for Japanese colonial rule and the glocalized younger generation’s tendency to fetishize current Japanese culture and fashions.

As a further development of the above issue, Chang tries to analyze the complex and ambivalent “cultural relationship” between Taiwan and Japan and the problem of how this relationship can be explored, as in fact they are in Wei’s film, by means of camerawork and cinematic symbols that themselves come from a 21st-century, spatio-temporally compressed and accelerated society or culture, a society/culture of advertising and superficial fashions, virtual surfaces or simulacra (to use Baudrillard’s term). Chang concludes her article by asserting that, in current Taiwanese society and culture as in the older society and culture portrayed in Cape No. 7, we naturally do and must accept a diverse range of experiences. We will continue to listen to stories of our (colonial) past as we become increasingly multi-ethnic and transnational, and we must continue to nurture our collective grassroots imagination, and to draw from it in designing new and diverse modes of
self-identity and life.

These four essays on “transnational Taiwan” will hopefully provide some new insights into Taiwan’s history, culture(s) and “arts” in the broadest sense of the term, in relation to Chinese, East Asian and world history, culture and art. Perhaps Taiwan as it is discussed here may serve as an example for more general discussions of globalization, glocalization, and the “oceanic” transnational in relation to the indeterminate or porous concept of the “national.” Perhaps some readers, seafarers at heart who are not afraid of taking risks, may even be motivated to undertake their own intellectual journeys of discovery into new and still uncharted seas.

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