

*Translingual Narration: Colonial and Postcolonial Taiwanese Fiction and Film*

Bert Scruggs

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What is Taiwanese culture? Before introducing Bert Scruggs's nuanced answers in his book *Translingual Narration: Colonial and Postcolonial Taiwanese Fiction and Film*, it may be helpful to probe the characterization of Taiwan by the Government of Hong Kong (GovHK), a special administrative region of China under the "one country, two systems" policy. In March 2016 when a Taiwanese drama group went to Hong Kong to perform, their producer who graduated from Taipei National University of the Arts was asked by GovHK's Leisure and Cultural Services Department to delete the word "national" from his biography to be printed on the promotional pamphlet. GovHK did a terrible job of explaining this "censorship," but the message was nonetheless clearly political: any characterization of Taiwan as a "nation," or even as a faintly separate entity cannot be tolerated according to mainland China's "one nation" principle.

Focusing on "colonial Taiwanese fiction, its translation from Japanese to Chinese, and films produced during and about the colonial era" (1), Scruggs's monograph challenges China's official position on the Taiwan question. A few basic facts Scruggs lays out in Chapter Two about colonial Taiwanese literature are enough to cast doubt on the "one nation" ideology held not only by the people of the Greater China but also by overseas Chinese around the world: "Taiwanese authors wrote with three, some would argue four, languages during the Japanese colonization of the island between 1895 and 1945" (12). They were 1) classical Chinese, the official language of Taiwan under the Qing rule from 1877 to 1895; 2) Japanese, the colonial language used in education, commerce, and law; 3) vernacular Chinese, popularized by the May Fourth Movement in 1919; and 4) written Taiwanese (台灣話), which some authors advocated as Taiwan's "national language" (12). In his book, specifically Chapters Three to Five, Scruggs closely reads fiction written in vernacular Japanese and Chinese. However, he does not regard either of these languages as Taiwan's national language because "[m]ost of the Taiwanese read, spoke, or wrote either or both as second or third languages, and both served distant empires," whereas "Taiwanese remained the dominant language" (12).

In lieu of an introduction, Scruggs introduces his methodology and the main issues about Taiwanese literature in the first two chapters. The main focus of Chapter One is identity and ideology, which explains his approach to the fiction and films included in his

study. He is interested in how the literary and filmic texts reflect the identities of their authors “making sense out of the contingencies of life in one body by writing another into existence” (2). Many of these authors wrote in the mode of *shishōsetsu* (私小説), or single-consciousness narration (3). For instance, Wang Changxiong (王昶雄) and Yang Qianhe (楊千鶴) “introspectively portray the entanglement of language, location, and ethnicity and describe the knot of women, modernity, and tradition” (2-3). From their works, Scruggs sees a process in which the modernity brought upon by Japanese colonization led the individual to “break free” from the Han Chinese tradition made up of filial piety, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc., and the identities created by this rupture were unstable (6).

As the above censorship fiasco shows us, the question of Taiwanese identity has always been a matter of contention between Chinese nationalists and Taiwanese nationalists. It is not surprising when Scruggs writes that the critique of colonial Taiwanese literature is “a radically political undertaking” in and of itself (8). Much of the colonial literature of Taiwan, except for Chinese texts, disappeared due to the Nationalist government’s cultural and educational censorship policies. It was not until 1974 that Taiwan began to see Chinese translations of colonial fiction written in Japanese. However, this translation process, purported to make the otherwise vanished literature accessible to the Chinese readership, was “politically driven”: “Only unquestionably anti-Japanese stories seemed to enjoy translation, and this process resulted in a canon that left Chinese readers with an incomplete, skewed portrait of the era” (9). Some writers went so far as to mistranslate the works to make them more anti-Japanese. Mediated through postcolonial translation, the colonial past becomes “a mistranslated memory” (9). By examining the Japanese-to-Chinese translation, Scruggs can foreground: 1) “the impact of translation on descriptions of the content and aesthetics of colonial Taiwan fiction” and 2) “the traces of the political and culture concerns of translators left behind in their work in both the martial law era (1947-1987) and the years since” (10). As a mediation, translation was not just restricted in fiction; it also had an impact on postcolonial movies about the colonial era and films produced in that era. According to Scruggs, sound recording changes the concerns of translation. Although vernacular Taiwanese can now be heard without the limitations of Chinese or Japanese written texts, the use of Chinese subtitles for the non-Taiwanese speaking audience “continues to inflect viewings, critical or otherwise” (10-11).

Overall, the book’s key chapters, better focused and organized, made fruitful readings, providing insights into major and lesser-known Taiwanese authors. Titled “Locative Identity and Cultural Free Agency,” Chapter Three examines the issues of ethnicity and location through the fiction by Weng Nao (翁鬧), Wang Changxiong, and Wu Zhuoliu (吳濁流). The following chapter, “Class Consciousness, Fictive Space, and the Colonial Proletariat,” shifts focus to the question of class by exploring “the relationship among leftist themes, theses, proletarian literature, and fictive space” through the works by

Yang Kui (楊逵), Yang Shouyu (楊守愚), Zhu Dianren (朱點人) and Wang Shilang (王詩琅) (58). Chapter Five, “Women Writers, Female Roles, and the Body Politic,” explores gender and subjectivity by studying female writers of the time, including Zhang Bihua (張碧華), Ye Tao (葉陶), Huang Baotao (黃寶桃), and Yang Qianhe. Finally, Chapter Six, “The Appearance of Colonial Taiwan in Fiction and Film,” turns to the construction of both “the future and the past” of colonial Taiwanese culture as “transnational rather than semicolonial China or the Japanese colonial empire” (113). The texts studied include not only fiction but also movies by Hou Xiaoxian (侯孝賢) and other directors.

Scruggs presents his book as a postcolonial intervention. It provides a good model in analyzing Taiwanese culture in the island’s unique history of identity formation. By highlighting the fluidity rather than the absolutism of national culture, the book thus intervenes in the ongoing debates in Taiwan and Hong Kong about local identity, autonomy (自主, 自決), independence (台獨, 港獨), and relations with mainland China.