A Passage to China: Literature, Loyalism, and Colonial Taiwan
Chien-Hsin Tsai
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A Passage to China by Chien-Hsin Tsai focuses on the literary and intellectual discourse around loyalism in colonial Taiwan. Tsai’s monograph engages with the existing scholarship on colonial Taiwanese literature, but with a different orientation from such well-known works as Leo Ching’s Becoming Japanese and Faye Yuan Kleeman’s Under an Imperial Sun that have located Taiwanese literature and writing about Taiwan from the position of a colonial literature. Tsai focuses on the connection between Taiwanese literati, the majority of whom are of Hakka background, and a series of Chinese political formations, including the Ming, the Qing, the short-lived Republic of Taiwan, and the identity of the current government on Taiwan.

The book expands on an issue raised by David Der-wei Wang in “Post-loyalism” (in Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, eds., Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader [New York: Columbia University Press, 2013], 93–116), pointing out the resonance between the Chinese word for migrant and loyalist, two distinct words that share the same pronunciation, yimin (移民／遺民). Tsai builds on a term that Wang coins in this essay, postloyalism, to create his own concept of the postloyal. According to Tsai, the postloyal results from the union of Ming loyalism and Chinese nationalism in the early modern period. Tsai deploys the term to indicate the way that the aesthetics and politics of loyalist works interact with temporality, referencing and expanding on past temporal and political formations.

A Passage to China opens with the historic 1907 meeting between Qing reformer and exile Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1927) and Taiwanese businessman Lin Xiantang 林獻堂 (1881–1956). Lin sought advice on how the Taiwanese elite should face the Japanese colonizers. Tsai uses this event to demonstrate the importance of loyalism despite the predominant discourse of modernity. He proposes rethinking loyalism not as a conservative discourse but, rather, as a mix of competing discourses that prompts a rethinking of past events predicated upon understanding tradition.
In the introduction, Tsai traces the concept of yimin 遺民 from its early appearance in the Zuozhuan 左傳 (The Zuo Tradition) as an indicator of the remaining survivors of a fallen regime to its politicization after the fall of the Southern Song through acts of political defiance. Tsai uses the end of the Qing to demarcate the historical moment where loyalism gave way to postloyalism: acts that collapse different paradigms and temporalities into one another. He also lays out the book’s framework of overlapping references to past loyalists that define the discourses available to writers and intellectuals in the colonial period.

The book is divided into two parts, the first concerning early modern literary production written in classical Chinese and the second tracing the transformation of Taiwanese literary production into Japanese and various forms of vernacular, primarily Mandarin and Southern Min. Chapters 1 and 2 both focus on the generation of Taiwanese literati who bridged Qing rule and the Japanese colonization of Taiwan. Chapter 1 focuses on Qiu Fengjia 邱逢甲 (1864–1912), a prodigious poet, who was involved in the ill-fated Republic of Taiwan and lived out the rest of his life after colonization in China. Chapter 2 concerns the Taiwanese historian Lian Heng 連橫 (1878–1936) who wrote the General History of Taiwan. Although these two men ended their lives in different places, both connected their literary personas and their work to a rich web of poetic and historical loyalists, such as Sima Qian 司馬遷 (?–91 BCE), Yu Xin 庾信 (513–81), Du Fu 杜甫 (712–70), and Zheng Chenggong 鄭成功 (1624–62).

Chapter 3 opens with a substantial discussion of the effort among Taiwanese intellectuals to create a vernacular written form of Southern Min dialect or Taiwanese in the 1920s and 1930s. Lian Heng reappears in a different role, here intent on establishing the connection between the ancient common speech in ancient Chinese classics and his native Taiwanese dialect. Tsai reads this intellectual endeavor as laying the groundwork for a rhetorical justification for Taiwan as an independent state. The final section of the chapter focuses on Lai He 賴和 (1894–1943) and Zhang Shenqie 張深切 (1904–65), a writer and a playwright who put Taiwanese colloquialisms into their work.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two colonial-era Hakka writers, Zhong Lihe 鍾理和 (1915–60) and Wu Zhuoliu 吳濁流 (1900–1976). Tsai’s discussion of Zhong reads his work, particularly that set in the Japanese colony of Manchukuo, in the light of the uneasy binary of guest and host. Tsai reads Zhong’s work in light of the Derridean conception of hospitality and the uneasy relationship that the Hakka have as permanent guests wherever they settle and a strong relationship to their imagined ancestral community. He turns to Zhong’s fiction set in the Japanese colonial city of Mukden in Manchukuo and after he returned to Taiwan, describing Zhong’s persistent feeling of not being at home in what he perceives as his native land and not being recognized as a native son by the northeastern Chinese people he encounters. A great deal of his inability to feel at home is due to language:
his lack of Mandarin proficiency requires him to use the “guest” language of Japanese, and the protagonist of Taidong luguan 泰東旅館 (Taidong Hotel) struggles to prove his cultural and linguistic authenticity to the Chinese hotel owner. In the final section of the chapter, Tsai takes up Zhong’s autobiographical writings largely set in Taiwan’s colonial past but written shortly before his premature death. He ties these writings back to the idea of hospitality by suggesting that these autobiographical pieces open up a space of “autohospitality” where the self becomes an other worthy of introspection and exploration.

In the final chapter, Tsai turns to another foundational modern Taiwanese writer, Wu Zhuoliu and his well-known novel, Ajia no koji アジアの孤児 (Orphan of Asia). In the chapter Tsai explores not only the novel but also various well-known contemporary Taiwanese writers’ reactions to the figure of the orphan. Chen Ying-chen reads the protagonist Hu Taiming as an aspirational figure for the Taiwanese people: he shakes off his orphan mind-set to embrace his Chinese family. Sung Tse-lai, on the other hand, reads the state of being an orphan as a reflection of the true nature of the Taiwanese people. Tsai makes an interesting point in linking Hu Taiming’s realization of his orphanization to his peregrinations throughout East Asia. His experience is that of being not just an orphan but an orphan-migrant. He characterizes Wu Zhuoliu as a postloyalist writer, whose writings reflect the legacy of the Han Chinese Ming loyalist settlers by writing the Qing dynasty out of their history. In doing so, Tsai defines Taiwanese postloyalist identity as one based on “creative hermeneutics and temporal rupture” (269).

The conclusion of the book, “Towards a Postloyal Criticism,” provides an interpretive framework in thinking through the term postloyalism and its interactions with culture, nationalism, ethnicity, and language. Tsai returns to Taiwan’s particular relationship to postloyalism when he asks the question: “If Taiwan were not a nation to begin with (Taiwan is certainly not a nation recognized by the United Nations today), wouldn’t the postcolonial and national discourses on Taiwanese identity be retroactively imaginary?” (287).

A Passage to China is an erudite work that engages early modern writers working in a variety of classical Chinese and vernacular styles. Many of these authors have not been discussed in the context of English language scholarship, and Tsai offers a new perspective on well-known modern Taiwanese writers such as Zhong Lihe. The author’s ease in moving between classical and modern literature is commendable. Scholars of late imperial literature and Taiwanese literature will find this volume of particular interest.

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