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Conflict and Coexistence in Gan Yao Ming's *Pangcah Girl*

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“For the unfair treatment and pain suffered by all of you [Aborigines] in the past 400 years, I apologize on behalf of the government. I believe that even now, there are still some people who think there is no need for such an apology, but that is the main reason why I need to make this apology on behalf of the government today.”¹ – Tsai Ing-wen, President of Taiwan

On August 1st, 2016, President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 issued an official apology on behalf of the Taiwanese government to the sixteen recognized Aboriginal peoples² for the subjugation and discrimination that they faced in the past four hundred years. For a prolonged period of time, Aboriginal peoples had to bear such disdained names as mountain peoples and savages, in contrast to the allegedly much more civilized Han people or plains people. It is worth noting that the negative view on Aborigines is being shaped and re-shaped with time. A decent number of Aborigines have become widely loved icons in pop culture and professional sports in Taiwan, despite the continued discrimination of Aborigines from the society. Tsai's formal apology, thus, represents both a friendly gesture of overdue justice to Taiwan's Aboriginal communities and a direct response to Formosan people's political campaigns that started in the late twentieth century. In the past few decades, Taiwan has faced a series of activist movements that involve political, ethnic, and gender issues. One notable trend is the rise of Indigenous consciousness on the island. This political trend is well connected with the literary writings on Taiwan's Aboriginal history and cultures. Since the 1980s, Aboriginal writings have called for the cultural

subjectivity and political empowerment by directing readers' attention to the unfair living conditions endured by Indigenous people. In modern Taiwan, there have been a decent number of literary works by Indigenous writers. The major agenda of Aboriginal writings here is to recuperate the authentic, non-Han centered voices.

This paper engages with the critical topic of the Aboriginal representation in Taiwan literature and cinema. To achieve this goal, it surveys the literary creation and criticism of Taiwan's Aboriginal cultures and offers a close reading of Gan's 2015 novel *Pangcah Girl* 邦查女孩 [Bangcha nuhai], which illustrates a fluid concept of indigeneity beyond ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. Intertwining conflict with coexistence, Gan's latest attempt contributes to the discursive interflow between Indigenous writings and writings on the Indigenous in Taiwan literature. In this sense, Gan's writing re-creates a profound ethnoscape of conflict and co-existence for both Han and Indigenous readers in postcolonial Taiwan.

Readers should keep in mind that the rise of Aboriginal writings coincides with the nativist trend of modern Taiwan. A notable point is that Taiwan's nativism, with its pursuit of nativist consciousness and identity, has always played an essential role while seriously challenged first by Japanese colonial rule and then by the China-centric ideology. While examining Taiwan's nativism, the preservation and decline of Aboriginal culture also serve as cases of importance. Some may question the correlation between Aboriginal writings and Taiwan's nativist trend and wonder how the mix of the two leads to the formulation of Taiwanese subjectivity. As Welin-Lin Chen defines, nativist writing is the "extension of self-writing" with a close engagement with "locality" in an individual sense.³ An individual take on the homeland can be further elevated to a representative, collective imagining of the native soil shared by distinct ethnic groups. This

place-based writing strategy is well conducted by Aboriginal writers. Following this prevailing trend, a large number of Aboriginal writings are obsessed with the calling from the tribal past and from the wild nature mountains and seas. On this matter, writers tend to bring to focus the discrepancies between Aborigines and Hans, between nature and society, between villages and cities, and of course, between traditions and laws.

Han People's Writing on Aborigines: A Case Study

In addition to Aboriginal literature, Han people's writing on Aborigines plays an important role when it comes to the cultural representation of the Indigenous in modern Taiwan. It is crucial to consider that the literary representation of Taiwan's Aborigines went through a series of adjustment and transformation over centuries. From the angle of Han people, Taiwan's Aborigines were deemed as savage and barbaric at best. This Han-centric view was persistent and widely adopted by Chinese settlers for hundreds of years. In the introduction of *The General History of Taiwan* 台灣通史 [Taiwan tongshi] (1920), the author Lian Heng 連橫 chronicles Taiwan's historical progress in a China-centric light, excluding Aborigines' experiences on the island as if they were simply uncivilized savages unworthy of inclusion.

About a decade later, Lai Ho 賴和 [Lai He] published his pronounced poem "Southern Territory Lament" 南國哀歌 [Nanguo Aige], which recognizes Seediq warriors' practice of headhunting during the Wushe Incident as an act of cultural resistance against Japanese colonization. Lai's poem interestingly blurs the line between Han and Aboriginal subjects.⁴ From an anti-colonial, pro-nationalist perspective, Aborigines' identity is morphed from "savages" to "brothers [of the Han people]."⁵ It leads us to reconsider the issue of how Aborigines can be included in the Han discourse while constructing a unified picture of Taiwanese consciousness.

For a long time, Aboriginal cultures are oppressed and treated as cultural commodities by the dominant sociopolitical power. Although the divide between Han and Aboriginal subjects still exists, the inclusion of Aborigines in Han people's writing reflects upon the significant progress of Taiwan's ethnoscape. With diverse approaches and agendas, a large number of Han writers have produced works about Aboriginal characters and cultures. Prominent cases include writers like Lee Chiao (Li Qiao 李喬), Chung Chao-Cheng (Zhong Zhaozheng 鍾肇政), and Wu He 舞鶴. Take, Wu He, for example. As a prolific writer, Wu He has published literary works widely ranging from gender politics to historical trauma. Two of his novels, *Ruminating on Abang Kalusi* (Sisuo Abang Kalusi 思索阿邦卡露思; 1997) and *Remains of Life* (Yusheng 餘生; 1999), bring into focus the re-presentation of Aboriginal subjects through the lens of the Han I-narrator. In these two works, Wu He adopts a neutral role as an observer or recorder so as to illuminate a self-claimed non-biased picture of Aboriginal communities. By means of lively, on-site contacts and engagements, Wu He's writing is consciously separated from a Han-centric view and further initiates a critical thinking or discussion on the troubled past and present of Aboriginal subjects within a postcolonial framework.

It is true that Wu He's works make manifest the I-narrator's concerns about Aborigines, but the author does not provide a sympathetic view from a superior cultural position. It is the reason why Wu He's re-presentation of the Indigenous is widely recognized by readers and critics across ethnic borders. Trailing Wu He's remarkable achievement, the new generation of Taiwan's Han writers has also joined the campaign in re-presenting Aboriginal cultures and subjects. It would be helpful to rivet attention on Gan Yao Ming as a representative Taiwanese writer on this topic. As one of the most notable young writers in Taiwan, Gan has explored various critical topics and styles that closely engage with the multi-layered cultural history of

Taiwan. Therefore, his unique writing on Aborigines is worthy of exploration. In 2009, Gan published his first long-length novel *Killing Ghosts* (Shagui 殺鬼), which spans the history of Taiwan from Japanese colonial period to post-war era. With magical nativist elements⁶, this novel provides a profound picture of cultural hybridity as embodied in the leading character named Pa-pak-Wa-qa. Pa's Aboriginal name refers to Dabajian Mountain, which represents the tribal origin and sacred mountain the Atayals. As an orphan, Pa is adopted first by a Han, or Hakka to be more specific, settler and then by a Japanese colonizer. The story of *Killing Ghosts* is centered around Pa's shifting identity from one period of time to another and around his superpower to cope with both the living and the dead.

With its magical nativist style, *Killing Ghosts* tackles this complicated subject by examining the (post-)colonial history of Taiwan. Still, it is a slight disappointment rather than a surprise to understand that Pa, as one of the most unforgettable characters in Taiwan literature, merely delivers the nominal existence of Aboriginality without any further involvement with its customs and values. The author extends beyond such topics as cultural subjugation and economic exploitation of Aborigines, as seen in works by earlier Han writers. *Killing Ghosts*, therefore, grapples with the enlarged, overarching view of Taiwanese history and ethnoscape.

It is intriguing that Gan Yao Ming's second novel, *Pangcah Girl*, again stages the leading character with Aboriginal attributes. As its title suggests, this richly dense novel revolves around Gu Axia, an eighteen-year-old Pangcah girl. Pangcah refers to the Amis, the largest Aboriginal clan in Taiwan. The story is set in Taiwan of the 1970s. The major storyline of the novel is related to Gu's love relationship with Pacilo, whose Mandarin name is Liu Zhengguang. Considered a mentally disturbed man due to Asperger's syndrome, Pacilo works as a lumberjack at the Chrysanthemum Port Villa at Morisaka, which is the Japanese name of the Lintian

Mountain in Hualien. Because of Pacilo, Gu starts a new life at Morisaka and becomes attached to the residents in the logging community and to the forest itself. Intertwining Gu's individual story with some memorable historical incidents in the post-war era, the author remains loyal and faithful to the native soil of Taiwan. Similar to *Killing Ghosts*, Gan's *Pangcah Girl* characterizes the Aboriginal subject as the main vehicle to move the story forward. *Killing Ghosts* tells a touching story of magic and wonder and further immerses readers in the troubling sociopolitical life of the time. By examining Pa and his ghostly companions, this magical novel presents an inclusive history of Taiwan for various ethnic groups. As for *Pangcah Girl*, the novel connects its historical narrative with a sophisticated depiction of human and natural relations. To better grasp the gist of *Pangcah Girl*, it would be useful to take into account two important dimensions.

First, Gan Yao Ming's *Pangcah Girl* expresses a profound juncture between macrohistory and microhistory and brings out its vitality to the fullest. In Gan's writing, the large scale of history can be examined side-by side with smaller units of history, which include the individuals, groups, and events. In response to the postcolonial history of Taiwan, the novel addresses the cultural hybridity embodied in the two leading figures, Gu Axia and Pacilo. Pacilo's cross-cultural background is worthy of note. Whereas Pacilo's mother, Liu Sufang, is a local settler, his late father is a Japanese biologist named Ito Norihiro. Likewise, Gu is an extremely complicated figure with a Pangcah mother and an African American father. The author also hints at the possibility that Gu is a descendant of European sailors if the investigation into her ancestry tree goes a little bit deeper. The issue of the missing father(s) turns out to be a critical reflection upon Taiwanese history. Moreover, the novel is connected with a strikingly honest view of post-war Taiwan. The author has conducted some solid field research in a determined effort to properly deliver an authentic picture. Obviously, Gan's efforts are well-paid off because the

novel delivers vivid descriptions of Taiwan's logging history and industry. These detailed descriptions lead to the re-examination of Taiwanese history. While reviving the grand history of Taiwan, the author also present both popular memories for people of various ethnic roots and oppressed memories that exclusively belong to specific groups.

Second, *Pangcah Girl* presents an intertwining of humanist and ecocritical values in response to the introspection of Taiwanese history. Readers might be surprised by the literary or representational revelations in the novel that human and nature are constantly caught up in the upheavals. However, conflicts can be compensated by compromises in the process of adaptation and transformation. What the author promotes here is the sociopolitical state and natural environment of co-existence. Under the shadows of political oppression and bureaucracy, Gan's characters develop mutual understands and strong bonds. In addition to Gu Axia and Pacilo's love relationship, the author introduces a humanist spirit beyond races, nationalities, and religions. Overall, Gan's *Killing Ghosts* and *Pangcah Girl* appear to be Indigenous but not quite. The author instills in his works a magical narrative of Taiwanese history and a possibility of co-existence respectively. Through the eye of the superhero with an Aboriginal name and the Bangcah girl, an imperfect world is beautifully furnished with an overlapping of local histories, legends, and memories. Therefore, Gan opens a new door to further explore the cultural representation of Aborigines in postcolonial Taiwan.

Why is the cultural representation of Aborigines such an important issue in Taiwan? The quick answer lies in the necessity of Aboriginal subjects in the multicultural dimensions of the island. In addition to Chinese nostalgia, the preservation and celebration of Aboriginal culture have occupied a critical place in the nativist foundation of Taiwanese consciousness. As Taiwan's nativism addresses the cultural and emotional attachment to the native soil, it is

impossible to leave out the discussion on Aborigines. For hundreds of years, Aborigines have been forced to adapt to the sociopolitical order of the center, though against their tribal customs and individual interest. Under this circumstance, the traditions that maintain the equilibrium of Taiwan's Aboriginal tribes are declining in response to the brutal subjugation and gradual removal of their values.

Apart from Aboriginal literature, Han writers' works demonstrate diverse agendas that echo the cultural trend of Taiwan in a politically correct light. Unlike earlier writings that focus on the uncivilized side of Aborigines, Han people's modern writing not only include gripping but melancholic stories of Aboriginal subjects' search for identity, while losing their physical prowess and cultural glory, but it also goes beyond the sympathetic or empathetic mood from the Han angle and promotes a relatively neutral and objective way of narration, as best represented in Wu He's works. Another famed writer, Gan Yao Ming, brings his Aboriginal subjects into full play in reviewing Taiwan's colonial and postcolonial history and in celebrating a humanist and ecocritical view of co-existence. All in all, this paper provides a comparative, rather than comprehensive, approach to the cultural representation of Aborigines in an attempt to engage with a new vision of post-nativism and to draw out the evolving ethnoscape of diversity and inclusion in modern Taiwan.

¹ *Taipei Times*, "President Issues Apology to Aborigines."

² The sixteen recognized groups of Taiwanese aborigines are Ami, Atayal, Bunun, Hla'alua, Kanakanavu, Kavalan, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiyat, Tao, Thao, Tsou, Truku, Sakizaya and Seediq.

³ Chen, *Nativeness, Localization, Sense of Place*, 7.

⁴ For more information about Lian Heng's and Lai Ho's writings on Aborigines, please see Chih-chun Liu's doctoral dissertation entitled *Identity, Writing, and the Other: Han People's Writing on Aborigines Since 1980s*, pp.12-14.

⁵ Liu, "Identity, Writing, and the Other: Han People's Writing on Aborigines Since 1980s," 13.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of Taiwan's magical nativism, please see my monograph entitled *Supernatural Sinophone Taiwan and Beyond* (Cambria Press; 2016).