

Chia-rong Wu
Assistant Professor of Chinese
Rhodes College

Tales of the Ghost Island:

A Haunting Literary Review

Zero Chou [Zhou Meiling], critically acclaimed Taiwanese director of *Splendid Float* [Yanguang sishe gewutuan] (2004), *Spider Lilies* [Ciqing] (2007), and *Drifting Flowers* [Piaolang qingchun] (2008), faced an utter box office failure with her costume drama film *Ripples of Desire* [Hua yang] in 2012. With her career high budget of NT\$150,000,000 (about US\$5,000,000), Chou was able to assemble a starry cast from Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong. Revolving around an isolated island of ghost haunting and leprosy, the film tells an unusual story about pirates, merchants, and courtesans. It is important to emphasize that the abject islanders are constantly described as lost souls and lone ghosts [guhun yegui] in an unlawful world roughly set in the late Ming period. The film focuses on twin courtesan-singers Snow [Bai Xiaoxue] (Michelle Yan-Hsi Chen) and Frost [Bai Xiaoshuang] (Ivy Yi-Han Chen) at the brothel Flower House. Whereas Snow falls for music instructor Mr. Wen Xiu (Joseph Cheng), Frost develops a secret love relationship with a young pirate named Scarface (Jerry Yan). Snow is later diagnosed as a leper and scares Mr. Wen Xiu away. Much more sophisticated than Snow, Frost plots to seduce and marry Master Li (Zi Jun Mao), a wealthy tea merchant from mainland China.

Near the end of the film, a twist appears while the audience find out that Frost is the one with leprosy, rather than Snow. Because of an inexplicable connection between the twins, Frost's symptoms of leprosy are shown on Snow's body as well. After knowing that Frost is a leper beauty, the frightened bridegroom Master Li leaves without a trace on the wedding night.

Another storyline highlights how Master Hai (Simon Yam), the head of the pirates on the ghost island, falls in love with Master Li's wife Zhen Furong (Xiao Ran Li). Yet, all the love relationships in the film lead to a tragic end. Betrayed by Zhen Furong, Master Hai is hunted down by mainland constables. Then Mr. Wen Xiu regrets for leaving Snow behind and cries himself blind. Afterwards, Mr. Wen Xiu makes an endless journey as a storyteller telling tales about the Leper Island and the menacing Ghost Ship of the pirates without knowing that Snow has started a peaceful life in a remote village. As for Frost, she is exiled on the sea due to her leprosy, but is eventually rescued by Scarface. However, the final scene of the film shows Scarface alone with his crew of pirates at the seashore without the appearance of Frost. Consequently, this ambiguous ending echoes the other two failed love relationships. It is true that *Ripples of Desire* has a lot of potential. Unfortunately, the film came under fire because of poor directing, awkward acting, and stilted dialogues.

Despite its box office failure, *Ripples of Desire* clearly coincides with the ghost island narrative that has been developing for decades. With the representation of the haunted and diseased island, Zero Chou's film not only points to the dynamic between the mainland and the ghost island, but also projects a political allegory in response to Taiwan's marginal position in the international network. The ghost island here is arguably a symbolic title of Taiwan, which will be further elaborated later.

The phrase "ghost island" originates from the Japanese folklore *Momotaro (Peach Boy)*, in which Onigashima (Ghost Island) is the living place of demons. Of course, Taiwan was not associated with this negative term in the very beginning. As a new nickname of Taiwan, the phrase "ghost island" first emerged as a social media bomb in 2009. It all started with a series of provoking articles written by an online blogger named Fan Lanqin. Fan Lanqin turns out to be an

alias used by Kuo Kuan-ying [Guo Guanying], who was a Toronto-based Government Information Office (GIO) official when the news spread. Kuo's political agenda is crystal clear because his pen name Fan Lanqin sounds the same as "Close to Pan-Blue" in Mandarin. Pan-Blue Coalition is a political union of several parties, including KMT, and the term "Pan-Blue" comes from the political party color of KMT. As a matter of fact, Kuo's use of the phrase "ghost island" first appears in Issue 208 of *Unitas Magazine* [Lianhe wenxue] in 2002, but he did not attract so much attention back then. As *Taipei Times* reports, Kuo expresses his pride as one of the "high-class mainlanders" and refers to local Taiwanese people as "taibazi" ("Taiwanese rednecks") and "wokou" ("Japanese pirates").¹ Some other statements of Kuo's even glorify the notorious martial law implemented after the February 28 Incident. Confronting heated local consciousness, Kuo finally lost his post and privilege as a civil servant due to his misconduct and racist words of defaming Taiwan/Taiwanese.

The 2009 "ghost island" incident has indeed left an indelible mark of disgrace on Kuo Kuan-ying so that he is labeled as a stigmatized racist and derided as a "high-class mainlander" for his controversial remarks. However, one has to remember that this incident is not an individual case. Kuo's "high-class" angle actually represents the collective mentality of conservative mainlanders that has existed in Taiwan since 1945. While the local awareness of Taiwan is rising, Kuo's reckless act tackles an untouchable taboo. Ironically, the ghost island identity seems to match local people's view of Taiwan and becomes extremely popular in public domains. Since 2009, the term 'ghost island' has widely been used in internet blogs, major media, and contemporary music.² In response to the marginality of Taiwan, 'ghost island' still carries its negative connotation and functions as a self-depreciating or self-deriding expression from the nativist perspective of Taiwan. It is interesting to note that what Kuo does wrong is justified by the

counter-power against the political authority. As the alleged leader of Pan-Blue Coalition, President Ma Ying-jeou won the democratic election in 2008 and again in 2012, but the KMT government has been overwhelmed by such issues as China's continuous threat, large-scale economic depression, local talent outflow, and territorial disputes with Japan and the Philippines. President Ma's approval rate even dropped to his all-time low, less than 20 percent in 2013. As a mainlander, Kuo's negative statements indeed hurt the feelings of Taiwanese people; however, if a native Taiwanese calls Taiwan a "ghost island," it turns out to be a trenchant criticism of the ruling party about their inefficiency in handling domestic problems and international conflicts. With its popular new title, Taiwan's spectral identity has been confirmed.

The pivotal question here is – "What is ghost island literature?" It must be underscored that "ghost island" is not a brand new identity for Taiwan in literary production. This concept has been gradually developed in the past few decades. Reflecting upon Taiwan's history of trauma (and diaspora in earlier cases), ghost island literature is heavy with brutal deaths, dark shadows, and haunting ghosts. Whereas the English word 'ghost' refers to the returning dead, its corresponding Chinese character 'gui' seems to be more complicated in terms of forms and uses. Of course, ghost island literature is not simply a subset of the traditional Chinese 'zhiguai' genre with the presence of specters. With a unique historical timeline, it extends the scope of the strange in general along with the ghostly, the ghost-like, and the shadowy in postmodern scenarios. In the chapter entitled "Second Haunting" from *The Monster That Is History* (2004), David Der-wei Wang traces the literary images of monsters and ghosts in his visionary analysis of the historical and literary narratives from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. As Wang claims, "The continued reappearance of ghosts" can be regarded as "a reminder of the incessant calamities of Chinese history."³ The ghost haunting is thus associated with the return of the

repressed memories of the past. Wang further points out that Chinese literary production as a whole at the end of the twentieth century have made manifest “the ghostly effects of déjà vu, of uncanny re-visions of the past.”⁴ Following Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology, Wang indeed makes a good connection between history and spectrality in the field of Chinese history and literature. In his discussion of the “second haunting,” Wang takes into account two diverse fictional works of Taiwan: Chu T’ien-hsin’s [Zhu Tianxin] novella “The Old Capital” [Gudu] (1997) and Lin Yiyun’s “Mission: Ghost Hunt” [Zhuogui dadui]. Wang addresses intriguing facets of phantasm of Taiwan and relates literary writing to the ghostly return and fin-de-siècle phantasmagoria respectively. However, to further discuss the topic of spectral representation, it would be beneficial to delineate Taiwan’s unique historical course along with ethnic consciousness under the umbrella of ghost island literature.

Connected with Wang’s scopes of Chinese diaspora and phantasmagoria, the ghost island narrative of Taiwan focuses on the cultural loss and ethnic conflicts in a translocal view. The trope of ghost haunting in Taiwanese literature is thus affiliated with the notion of ethnoscape with profundity. In Taiwanese literature, ‘gui’ can be associated with the lost souls of the dead, ancestral spirits, imperialist foreigners, and even social/sexual outcasts. On top of that, ghost island literature prompts readers to examine the haunting effects of history and multiethnicity in modern Taiwan. It is also worth considering that Taiwanese writers from different ethnic groups represent diverse haunting experiences. Readers can see in the specific language and structure of each writer the sensitive cultural connotations and transitions. Taiwanese fiction is Mandarin-Chinese-based in combination with local dialects like Taiwanese Hokkien⁵, Hakka⁶, and Austronesian languages⁷, thus piecing together various faces of ethnic haunting. On one hand, Taiwan has long been labeled as a hybrid zone where its inhabitants need to cope with cultural

diversity in relation to its Chinese cultural linkage and (post-)colonial experience. On the other, the ethnoscape of Taiwan hinges on the shifting cultural identities among different local groups, such as nativists, mainlanders, and indigenous people. As a result of its historical and ethnic complexity, Taiwan turns into the foundation of ghost island literature resonating with haunting ethnoscape. For that reason, one has to recognize and acknowledge the mutual relationship between literary texts and collective consciousness through a historical lens while engaging the issues of the ghostly return. To provide a literary review of ethnic haunting, the following section analyzes mainland and nativist writings.

It is true that David Der-wei Wang's discussion of the "second haunting" in the Chinese cultural context is inspiring; still, Taiwan deserves a more detailed investigation of its own ghost island narrative. It would be interesting to observe how the focus of ghost island literature gradually shifts from Chinese diasporic ambivalence to nativist concerns. Back in the 1960s, Chinese mainland writer Sima Zhongyuan, whose real name is Wu Yanmei, has started to earn widespread fame with assorted tales encompassing diasporic memories and Chinese ghost traditions. As his pen name suggests, zhongyuan, or central plains of China in Mandarin, is the core of Sima Zhongyuan's writing. Like Sima Zhongyuan, Pai Hsian-yung is known for his diasporic narrative. Although Pai does not directly delineate a world of ghosts, his writing is loaded with historical haunting shadows. His father Pai Ch'ung-hsi [Bai Chongxi] was a famed military general of the KMT. Born in Guilin, Guangxi Province, Pai moved with his family from China to Hong Kong, and finally settled in Taipei, Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War. Themes such as exile, wandering, reminiscence, and sentimentality permeate Pai's oeuvre with "a desire to return to some terrain of idealized Chineseness."⁸ While placed along with the historiography of Taiwan, Pai's literary works display a unique cultural and ethnic positioning in the name of

Chinese diaspora and nostalgia. Pai's collections *Taipei People* (1971) and *New Yorkers* [Niu yue ke] (1974) can be cases in point.

Another notable writer in the same category as Pai Hsian-yung is Chu T'ien-hsin. As a second-generation mainland writer born in Taiwan, Chu deviates from Pai's desperate diasporic longing for China and accounts for Taiwan's cultural ambivalence towards China and Japan. Chu's writing demonstrates multicultural diversity in the fluid public space and the individual mindset, and in this way shifts to a cross-cultural mix in postmodern and postcolonial contexts.

Apart from Pai Hsian-yung and Chu T'ien-hsin's mainland connections, nativist writers provide a wide range of topics in relation to the social and political conflicts in Taiwan. ideologically perceptive writers like Li Ang further promoted the local consciousness and snapped readers to attention with haunting accounts of sensitive, traumatic events like the February 28 Incident. One has to understand that Li Ang's ghost island narrative is brought to a higher level with her novel *Visible Ghosts* [Kandejian de gui] (2004), one recent notable endeavor in the category of ghost island literature. This fictional work depicts Taiwan as an island of spectral history and recounts the correlation between historical trauma and ghost haunting via five female ghosts' stories. (Yenna already presented a great paper on *Visible Ghosts* at the AACS conference last year, so I am not going to repeat that.)

I simply want to highlight the fact that this ghost island narrative still occupies a place of importance in contemporary Taiwan. Gan Yao Ming's 2008 novel *Killing Ghosts* [Sha gui] can be viewed a significant product following the trend of ghost island narrative. Based on the magical setting and characterization of Gan Yao Ming's *Killing Ghost*, there are three important dimensions worth discussing. First, this novel reveals the historical complexity of Taiwan in face

of Japanese and KMT controls. It is clear that both Japanese colonizers and KMT soldiers/agents are described as cruel and violent. Nevertheless, there is one romanticized side about Japanese colonialism as well. While the novel describes how Japanese imperialists brutally kill Taiwanese and rape women, it also leads readers to the constructed reality about how Taiwanese people work with their Japanese masters and immerse themselves in the colonial setting. Pa's close relationship with Kano Takeo can be a case in point. Another notable example would be the story of "The Bell of Sayon," which is based on a true tragic accident in 1938. In the story, an Atayal girl carries the luggage of her esteemed Japanese teacher, who is being sent to war. On the way, Sayon, whose full name is Sayon Hayon, falls off from a log bridge. The tale of Sayon has been represented in various artistic works, including songs, fiction, and film. The reason is that this story is seen as "a representative work of imperialization movement period literature."⁹ To further exploit Taiwan's labor and natural resources, the full support from Taiwanese people would certainly help Japan to fulfill its ambition to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In Gan's novel, the adapted film of Sayon's tale still dazzles its Taiwanese audience. The warm feelings, even for a short period of time, between Taiwanese and Japanese narrated in the novel actually derive from the historical account that the Japanese rule in Taiwan was less brutal than what could be observed in other Japanese colonies in Asia, like Korea in particular. No wonder some Taiwanese "espouse a gentler view of the Japanese colonial experience."¹⁰ More recent evidence would be Taiwanese people's generous donation to the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011. This form of emotional attachment is subtly embodied in Gan's *Killing Ghost*.

Second, Gan conducts a complicated ethnographic approach few literary works produced in Taiwan have done before. In *Killing Ghost*, the substantial impact of imperial Japan on Taiwanese people is carefully depicted. After all, it was the "Japanese administration" that

“brought Taiwan as a whole under central control.”¹¹ The Japanese colonial setting also intersects with the multilayered ethnic identities of Pa. According to Ian Cook and Mike Crang, our “world” can be “[mirrored],” “constructed, understood, and acted upon” by means of ethnographic encounter.¹² In a similar vein, Gan’s mixture of magical writing and historical account is laden with ethnographic functions because it is sophisticated enough to project ethnic details. While dealing with the cross-cultural identities of Pa, Liu Jinfu, and even Kano Takeo, this novel brings the ethnic dimension to a higher level. Of course, one should not forget that the author also casts Dr. Hanaoka Ichiro in his story. As a real historical figure, Hanaoka Ichiro was actually an aborigine who served as a police officer and commit suicide in the Wushe Incident during the Japanese colonial period. Hanaoka’s suicide was caused by his cultural ambivalence between aboriginal Taiwan and imperial Japan. Hanaoka Ichiro’s story has been adapted into Taiwanese TV series *Dana Sakura* (2003) and Wei Te-sheng’s blockbuster film *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* (Part I ad Part II, 2011). In terms of intertextuality, the appearance of Hanaoka in Gan’s novel reinforces the magnitude of multiethnicity. Although Gan’s novel makes manifest a great number of ethnic issues and historical imprints, it actually dilutes the scarring process of Japan’s colonization of Taiwan. Through Gan’s magical writing, *Killing Ghosts* reads funny, bizarre, and strange in response to the shifting ethnoscape of postcolonial Taiwan.

Third, it would be difficult to leave out the topic of body politics in the literary analysis of *Killing Ghost*. One’s body can serve as a political arena loaded with individual experiences, sexual desire, and (cross-)cultural traits. In this regard, Pa surely functions as the best medium in the discussion of body politics. As the narrator of the novel remarks, “[Pa] is a freak. There are always spectacles on his body.”¹³ In the very beginning, Pa emerges as a superhero. Though

mentally frustrated by his cultural complexity, Pa seems to be invincible as the strongest and bravest warrior. It is notable that Pa's divine power is questioned and challenged with time. From the Japanese rule to the KMT reign, Pa loses one eye and one arm. As cleverly defined by Michael Landzelius, "disability" refers to "physical constraints," and the "impaired bodies" are constructed "as disabled and disempowered."¹⁴ At this point, Pa's disabled body not only reflects his personal disempowerment but also links with the historical wounds of Taiwan, thus combining the individual experience with the collective mentality. Another interesting case of body politics is concerning the little indigenous girl Lawa and her father Youmin. In order to stop her father from being recruited by the Japanese army, Lawa puts her arms and legs around her father for years. Eventually, Lawa's and Youmin's bodies are united as one. It is not until Japan loses the war can their bodies be separated. Here, Gan uses his magical writing to depict a strong wish of a daughter in defiance of the historical tragedy.

Towards the end of *Killing Ghost*, Kano Takeo, Liu Jinfu, and Ghost King die one by one, leaving Pa behind. It seems that Pa cannot start a new life as long as he is bound up with the ghost figures from the past. Although Pa moves to Taipei and lives in a haunted house after the war, he decides to return to his home village in the end. His final return also answers the calling of the native soil. At the close of the novel, Pa still feels confused and lost without a clear sense about his current positioning. However, the author narrates that Pa simply needs some time to "digest" before his "departure" at dawn.¹⁵ Therefore, the ending of *Killing Ghost* signifies an upcoming new beginning ... after all of the ghosts are killed.

Gan's ghost narrative leads readers through a fantastic journey from political taboos to a historical core of forgetfulness and remembrance. Through the cultural dynamics of visibility and invisibility embedded in the strange characters and spaces, writers like Gan probe into the

issue of local emplacement and show multiple magical sites of the nativist soil. Therefore, this type of contemporary native writing creates a unique spatial narrative that involves the local histories, religious practices, political mechanism, and cultural re-imagination of Sinophone Taiwan.

In Taiwanese literature, ghostly return continuously surfaces with a calling from the past and a conduit to emotional yearning for faraway homeland. Hence, the cultural tropes of haunting, longing, and lingering are popular topics deeply rooted in Taiwanese literature. Transitioning from Chinese diaspora to nativist calling, ghost island literature involves personal mourning and collective trauma vis-à-vis delicate historical sensibility. Taiwanese literature has been proven subversive and deconstructive in representing individual takes on historical moments of upheaval. In this sense, writing becomes a conscious (and unconscious) act refuting a singular view of Taiwan's history. It would be difficult not to assume that Taiwanese writers answer the calls of the dead with a resounding ghost narrative regarding a crew of adrift, anguished, and disillusioned figures inept at fitting in. Wrapped in the trove of ghost island literature, a nativist or localist agenda gradually takes over and continues to show tinctures of loss and pain. Placing spectrality and ethnoscape side by side, this paper guides its readers through the haunting shadows of the past and the present, including diasporic nostalgia, multicultural dilemma, and spectralized nativist discourse.

Even though this paper is not a comprehensive study detailing all forms of haunting in Taiwanese literature, it helps to reconsider cultural and ethnic subjectivity in relation to historical trauma from selective angles. Indeed, the traumatic marks embedded in the ghost island narrative clearly point to the haunting past. Therefore, Taiwanese literature is associated with a form of

ghostscape, as if the spirits of the dead still lurk in the dark and moan, “We’re here. Don’t forget us!”

Notes

¹ Hsiu-chuan Shih, “Kuo Returning from Toronto to Explain Offending Articles,” *Taipei Times*, March 15, 2009, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2009/03/15/2003438537>.

² Independent band LTK Commune [Zhuoshuixi gongshe] released an album entitled “Files from the Ghost Island Society” in 2012.

³ *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 263.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁵ Taiwanese Hokkien, or Taiwanese, is the most popular dialect spoken by local Taiwanese, Chinese mainlanders, and even aborigines.

⁶ Hakka is a Chinese language originally from southern China.

⁷ Austronesian languages are also known as Formosans, which refer to the languages of Taiwanese aborigines.

⁸ Groppe, *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China*, 83.

⁹ Sakujiro Shimomura, “Reverse Exportation From Japan of the Tale of ‘The Bell of Sayon’: The Central Drama Group’s Taiwanese Performance and Wu Man-Sha’s The Bell of Sayon,” in *Taiwan Under Japanese Colonial Rule, 1895-1945: History, Culture, Memory*, ed. Ping-hui Liao and David Der-wei Wang (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 282.

¹⁰ Manthorpe, *Forbidden Nation: A History of Taiwan*, 177.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹² *Doing Ethnographies* (Norwich: Geobooks, 1995), 11.

¹³ *Killing Ghost*, 380.

¹⁴ “The Body,” in *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, ed. James S. Duncan, Nuala C. Johnson, and Richard H. Schein (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 286.

¹⁵ *Killing Ghost*, 440.