Reading Immigrants Here and There

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Living in Taipei, Taiwan as an immigrant from the United States, Taiwanese American authors have been valuable guides to the back-and-forth and in-between-ness that characterize our life. My initial introduction to Taiwan came through Taiwanese classmates and Taiwanese American churches, and this prompted an interest in Taiwanese American literature or writing by Taiwanese Americans. In the last few years, several novels have provided insights into identities split between Taiwan and the United States. None of the authors is Christian, but their expertly-crafted stories describing life between American and Taiwanese poles sheds light on the pilgrim experience of living between two places in ways that may be helpful to faith communities. The three novels each present one or more trips back to Taiwan, and how this looks at different stages of life (childhood, early adulthood, middle age). The three novels present trips to Taiwan as a mix of tourism, pilgrimage, and return from exile.

Three Novels

Taipei

The first novel I read was Tao Lin's 2013 *Taipei*, an experimental contemporary novel that met with good reviews, and which captures a restless, sometimes drugged-out protagonist who travels on book tours, hangs with friends, and conducts an anti-pilgrimage to Taipei.[1] "Paul" is a wandering novelist with a social media following, clearly based on the author. A highlight of the semi-biographical novel comes during an extended trip back to Taiwan with Erin, his girlfriend-turned-wife (they earlier marry on a whim in Vegas). (Both Lin and his ex-wife are most famous for their online lives.) Lin's fiction is famous for his extensive use of social media, and the author-protagonist adeptly narrates his story through frequent excursions describing online projects. The book has less of a narrative arc and more of a "one thing after another" sensibility. At the same time, Paul's glancing reflections on life show a sense of playful self-awareness. Most of the novel is set in the US, but it also includes an extended trip to the novel's eponymous city.

The book includes no obvious spiritual sensibility, and certainly no reflection on organized religion. Reading on Kindle, I discovered that none of these words appear in the novel—not "Christian," "Christianity," "religion," "spirituality," "Buddhism," "Daoism," etc. One of the intriguing things about the novel may in fact be how it describes Paul's back-and-forth to Taipei without recourse to any formally religious language. Similarly he abjures any formal analysis of culture as well as the stock tofu-vs-cheese cultural comparisons. He experiences Taipei the way most people do, simply as lived experience. Paul narrates his trip to, in, and from the city. The novel captures the self-gaze of the author. In chapter four, Paul and his new wife head to Taipei, booked on tickets that have them in consecutive middle-row seats. The two watch the same movie from their non-adjacent seats, perhaps a metaphor for how individuals

[1] "'Taipei,' by Tao Lin - The New York Times," accessed May 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/books/taipei-by-tao-lin.html.

try to share experiences. Chapter five describes Paul's experience of Taipei. He writes that visiting his parents earlier, "he had no concept of Taipei's size or shape or layout, only an unreliable memory of how many minutes by car separated certain relatives' apartments and department stores" (163). A non-native of Taipei, he experiences a city that is familiar but not native. He uses Wikipedia to track MRT stops and rides the bus into Taipei with his father. Paul and Erin do drugs, surf the web, eat at McDonalds, endlessly travel the Taipei MRT (metro system), have sex, discuss past relationships and contemplate having children. They consider self-produced documentaries for youtube and bicker over daily life. Paul often appears as a detached observer, watching his father talk to relatives or his teary mother turn away at the airport.

This book diverges from *Green Island* or *Dumpling Days*, which are more likely to lean towards social, cultural, and political discussion. *Taipei* stays mostly in the protagonist's head, as Paul travels through life. It offers intense analysis of Paul's inner world, but this gaze never turns towards the type of cultural or religious reflections that are such a staple of contemporary theological writing. Similarly, his understanding of Taipei as space is reflected through his internet searches and economy travel, his discussions with family he doesn't know well, and his efforts to relate to his spouse.

Green Island

Somewhat later I came across *Green Island*,[2] suggested to me by a missionary friend, stretching from the 1947 228 Massacre through the SARS epidemic of 2003.[3] *Green Island* won the Association for Asian Studies book award for creative writing. The novel is a family epic, a familiar genre, but in this case with distinctively Taiwanese characteristics. The novel opens with the patriarch of the family, Dr. Tsai, assisting a victim of the 228 Massacre. Tsai is imprisoned and his wife and daughters, the heroes of the book, have different trajectories. One daughter marries a soldier. The narrator-daughter (who goes unnamed) marries an educated Taiwanese American who has returned home, and together they head towards California, and also into the remnant, exiled Taiwanese community abroad. They're involved in efforts to advocate for human rights in Taiwanese, and sometimes suffer for their associations. They fear informants, family are ambivalent about their efforts, and they struggle with how to relate. The father is eventually released from prison, but returns home shattered. The book tells Taiwanese history as a "family story," but also one marked by conflicts, schisms, and contradictions.

Christianity appears most directly in this book, via the narrator's big sister, Ah Zhay, who has a dream-vision while sick. "Her fever broke, she went to church, and she had all her children baptized." The mother soon becomes Christian also, and so one line of the family (from grandmother to daughter to grandchildren) is Christian. The protagonist and her father struggle with how to make sense of her mother and sister's conversions. She asks, "Had Mama suffered from the same illusion? Was that why she had decided on baptism, only to find a Christian rebirth was metaphorical and she was still stuck in the one existence she had?" Christianity is seen only at the periphery in *Green Island.* On the death of his wife, Dr. Tsai is described this way: "Though the gods changed, she had always prayed for him. He had no prayer, believing

[2] Steph Cha, "In Her Novel 'Green Island,' Shawna Yang Ryan Explores Taiwan under Authoritarian Rule," latimes.com, accessed May 25, 2018, http://www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-green-island-20160221-story.html.
[3] "Q. and A.: Shawna Yang Ryan on the 1947 Incident That Shaped Taiwan's Identity - The New York Times," accessed May 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/23/world/asia/taiwan-shawna-yang-ryan-green-island.html.

only one thing from the thousands of Christian words she had said to him: *earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*" In Taiwan, Christians are a relatively small percent of the population, and conversions can divide families. *Green Island* captures these tensions well.

Dumpling Days

Finally, I encountered the children's novel by Grace Lin, *Dumpling Days* (which I later learned is the last book in a trilogy), about a Taiwanese American family on a summer trip to Taiwan. My children listened to the audio book version. They laughed over obvious misunderstandings and challenges the narrator experiences in the story. They asked for more every night until we had exhausted the six hours in four or five days.

The protagonists of *Dumpling Days* are three daughters (Lisy, Kiki, and Pacy) who try to adjust to Taiwanese life during a summer of travel. The dumplings in the title act as a mediating object allowing Pacy, the narrator, to bond with Taiwan, providing something familiar as she travels in an unfamiliar place. She's disapprovingly called a twinkie by a hostile kid at a Taiwanese American convention: yellow on the outside but white on the inside. Pacy has self-consciously rejected the Taiwanese identity pushed on her by her parents. She likes fitting in with classmates and is anxious about travel to Taiwan.

Pacy is uncomfortable speaking a (to her) foreign language, struggles with family customs, and is sometimes confused by city life. "Taiwan has the best dumplings in the world!" is a refrain repeated throughout the book. When Pacy struggles with soupy dumplings, her uncle tells her "They say if you can eat these dumplings without making a mess, you are a 'real Chinese person.'" She tries soup dumplings, wonton, shrimp dumplings, shaomai, gyoza, fried dumplings, peach buns, and mochi. Between the stretched skins and flavorful fillings, she finds a way of appreciating two cultures. Pacy concludes that "It's because we're both… We're mixed up." Dumplings are ubiquitous but also infinitely adaptable. They can be soup, snack, main course or dessert. The outer skin and inner contents can be adjusted or transformed in a thousand ways. Pacy asks "Would I want to live in New Hartford and not know that peaches meant long life or the taste of soup dumpling? Or to live in Taiwan and not know about Thanksgiving turkeys or what a real McDonald's hamburger was like?" "No," she concludes, "I'm happy this way."

The book also provides an insider telling of ancestor religion in the diaspora. *Dumpling Days* includes a playful chapter "Honoring Great-Uncle Zhuzhan," that tells about offering incense and flipping coins to see whether the recently deceased has finished eating his meal and is satisfied. In another story, the family visits a temple and Pacy's father shares about the God of Literature and the offerings that students make to him (and that he himself made as a high school student).

Three Vantage Points

These three novels are eclectic, strange bedfellows indeed: a children's novel, experimental fiction, and a historical novel. At the same time, English offerings on Taiwan and Taiwanese American returnees or immigrants are rare finds. I read whatever I see on Taiwan in English, for instance the recent biography of the theologian Shoki Coe or a missionary's account of the white terror era.[4] There's relatively little English-language scholarship on Taiwanese and

[4] *Shoki Coe: An Ecumenical Life in Context* (World Council of Churches, 2011); M. L Thornberry, *Fireproof Moth : A Missionary in Taiwan's White Terror* (Lemoyne, PA: Sunbury Press, 2011).

Taiwanese American Christianity—Carolyn Chen's excellent book *Getting Saved in America*, and Rubinstein's generation-old edited book on Taiwanese Christianity.[56] Against this backdrop, Taiwanese American fiction provides snapshots that taken together map out creative ways to understand travel between the US and Taiwan. These novels seemingly have little to hold them together aside from interesting protagonists. At the same time, it is probably possible to plot them onto the same kind of communal timeline, from the children/tweens of *Dumpling Days*, to the meandering life of Paul in *Taipei*, to the epic generational shifts in *Green Island*.

For the book *Strangers in the World: Multi-Religious Reflections on Immigration*, I contributed a chapter on "Missionary and Immigrants, Missionaries as Immigrants."[7] In that essay part of what I was trying to capture was the ways in which religious migration (the missionary experience) mirror other types of migration. In many ways our personal family experience mirrors the Taiwanese American experience. The parents speak a heavily accented Mandarin, work culture is often confusing, bureaucratic processes (taxes, visas, licenses) are challenging. Our children are visibly different (recently my daughter complained that some classmates have nicknamed her *paomian,* "instant noodles," because her hair curls like the popular wavy noodles). We do carry a whole host of privileges in this environment: white skin, fluent English, connections to US institutions, even legacy funds that cover our housing. At the same time, our kids giggle about the trash trucks that sound like ice cream trucks, we miss our native comforts (the infamous dishwasher, the expansive backyard, seats built for larger bodies), and we struggle to understand and to be understandable. Novels like these are cathartic because they capture the ordinary frustrations and larger out-of-body experiences that come from living or traveling between two visibly different places.

The homecoming trip is a staple of Taiwanese American writing. Recently I watched a Facebook friend bring her daughters to Taiwan for the first time. They loved the food, the transportation, the convenience. One child expressed joy that all the clothes fit right. The food seemed healthier. They adored the safer nightlife and the geography of Taiwan's coasts and mountains. For many of today's immigrants the possibility of continuous back-and-forth is more plausible. Daily calls on skype, dual-citizenship, and global markets allow for a more continuous cycle between the two homes.

For me, these novels written in a language I read fluently have helped provide clearer insights into our experience in Taipei. In Tao Lin's descriptions of plane and MRT travel, or Yang's descriptions of divided family religious loyalties, or in Lin's tales of childhood play, I find models for making sense of the routes we travel. Hopefully they increase awareness and also prepare us for a world that is growing more pluriform and hybrid. I often struggle to make sense of this world, and yet I am incredibly grateful for wayward artists, righteous daughters, and giggling children.

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[5] Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[6] Murray A. Rubinstein, *The Protestant Community on Modern Taiwan: Mission, Seminary, and Church* (M.E. Sharpe, 1991).

[7] Seitz, "Missionary and Immigrants, Missionaries as Immigrant," 67-80, in Hussam S Timani, Allen G Jorgenson, and Alexander Y Hwang, *Strangers in This World: Multireligious Reflections on Immigration*, 2015.

Three novels:
Grace Lin. *Dumpling Days*. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2012.
Shawna Yang Ryan. *Green Island: A Novel*. New York: Vintage, 2016.
Tao Lin. *Taipei*. New York: Vintage, 2013.