

FOREWORD

Pai Hsien-yung is among the most important writers in contemporary Chinese and world literature. With a career spanning more than sixty years, Pai has created a lineup of masterpieces that chronicle the changing morals and manners of modern Chinese people since the mid-twentieth century. Of these works, *Taipei People* no doubt enjoys the foremost status.

A collection of fourteen short stories, *Taipei People* presents a gallery of Chinese mainland emigres to Taiwan after the 1949 national divide. Despite their variegated backgrounds and experiences, these individuals share one thing in common: they cannot let go of memories of their days on the mainland. As a result, the people in these stories turn their nostalgia into lived reality. Haunted by the past, the “Taipei people” take on a spectral dimension, and cast the city of Taipei as a phantasmal space.

Insofar as Pai Hsien-yung and his family were

among the exiles to Taiwan after 1949, *Taipei People* certainly bears the imprints of personal trauma. Pai's illustrious family background lends a poignancy to his portraits of lives in diaspora and disgrace. Pai created most of the stories of *Taipei People* during the 1960s, when he had already relocated to the United States. Twice removed from his homeland, Pai wrote to inscribe not only a generation of Chinese trapped in historical contingencies but also a time that has been so skewed as to make any "master narrative" impossible.

Taipei People is not to be confined only as national allegory, however — it also speaks to the modern human condition, writ large. With Taipei as the symbolic site, what Pai engages is nothing less than an inquiry into "the general paralysis," the modernist malaise that has plagued Chinese and other communities. Beyond the 1949 divide, he entertains an acute awareness of the world on the verge of the abysmal fall. This was the heyday of the Cold War, during which China was undergoing one campaign after another, culminating in the Cultural Revolution. "Our age plunges forward and is already well on its way to collapse, while a bigger catastrophe looms." "We have no way to go back any more." Resounding is the famous dictum of Eileen Chang (1920–1995), with whom Pai shares a similar existential melancholia and moral sobriety.

Much has been discussed about the art of *Taipei People* since its publication in 1971. Pai's exquisite style, subtle sensibilities, as well as his contemplation of the fate of Chinese civilization have become textbook cases among numerous readers. For his nostalgic posture and poetics, Pai has nonetheless also received labels ranging from the "beautician in the morgue" to a reactionary aesthete. But the fact that *Taipei People* is still moving us fifty years after its publication, now in multiple languages all over the world, bespeaks its lasting charm beyond political labelling.

One may ask what makes Pai Hsien-yung's fiction still so compelling in the new millennium. I suggest that it is because instead of

being a conservative, Pai impresses as a radical, one who relentlessly campaigns for the power of *qing* — feeling, sentience, love, affect — vis à vis human adversities from national vicissitudes to erotic frustrations, and from fanaticism to the doom of life and death. “*Qing* is of source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may *die* of it, by its power the *dead* live again,” wrote Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), the perennial spokesperson of the “cult of *qing*.” Little surprise that Pai Hsien-yung should make “Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream” the climax of his collection, drawing on Tang’s most famous play, *Peony Pavilion*.

Those still constrained by the myths of the past century such as revolution and enlightenment may lag in appreciating Pai Hsien-yung’s newness in our time. Amid the debris of modern revolutionary projects, Pai strives to erect the edifice of *qing* through which to ponder the ecology of humanity, its vulnerability and agency, its violation and sustainability. His “Taipei people” may appear to be failures of their times, but historical hindsight indicates that their anachronism contains a prescience about the time that had gone wrong. Their personal tragedies amount to a morality play about human frailties and perseverance.

“What is contemporary?” Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben asked in an eponymous essay at the end of the twentieth century. Citing Roland Barthes and Friedrich Nietzsche, Agamben contends that the contemporary is the “the untimely.” In other words, the contemporary is someone who refuses to conform to social norms, straddling multiple temporalities — either “too soon” or “too late,” either “already” or “not yet” — in such a way as to see “the obscurity” as arising from the folds of time. In this sense, Pai Hsien-yung, together with his characters, is “contemporary” because he holds his gaze on his own time so as to “perceive not its light, but rather its darkness,” all the while searching for some unlikely “beam of darkness” that projects onto the time yet to come.

Taipei People has often been cited as a Chinese counterpart to

James Joyce's *Dubliners* in terms of a mosaic portraiture of modern life in crisis. Joyce finds in his characters' adventures quasi-religious moments of epiphany, thus redeeming their quotidian existence. By contrast, Pai derives his vision from as much his modernist sensibilities as his adherence to the premodern Chinese belief in *qing*. In the aftermath of a century that vowed to revolutionize everything, Pai calls for the capacity to feel, love, and act, as well as the generative power arising therefrom. It is this "beam of darkness," however "untimely," that Pai sought to define and redefine in *Taipei People* fifty years ago, and that he is still engaged in today.

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EDITOR'S
PREFACE *

The stories in this book were written in the latter part of the 1960s and serialized over a period of time in the magazine *Hsien-tai wen hsüeh* (Modern Literature), which Pai Hsien-yung and other young writers founded, edited, and wrote for in Taiwan. Published in book form in 1971 under the title *Taipei jen* (Taipei People), these stories quickly established their author as a writer with a rare combination of artistic sensibilities, technical equipment, and a deeply moral purpose. The book has since won him a large following in Taiwan and Hong Kong and Chinese communities the world over. More recently, Pai's writings have been allowed into mainland China and are read avidly by a fortunate few among the youths of the People's Republic, who are starved for literature not written to the official line.¹

* The "Editor's Preface" followed by "A Word From the Co-translator" and "Acknowledgements" in this edition were originally published in the 2000 Chinese-English Bilingual edition.

That *Taipei jen* is a long time reaching the English-reading public must be attributed in part to the difficulties inherent in translation.² The title of the book, literally rendered, would in itself be misleading, since Pai is not engaged in writing polemical or topical fiction, nor is he dealing with what is called the “broad masses of the people.” What he has given us, through a series of arresting incidents, is an insight into life as endured by a handful of men and women who sought refuge in Taiwan in the 1950s, following the Communist conquest of the mainland. In this context, *Taipei jen* may be more accurately rendered as “Taipei characters.”

And what characters, in the colloquial sense, they are: from taxi dancers and sing-song girls to high-toned ladies. Venerable generals and elder statesmen, living out their days with memories of heroic exploits in the early days of the Chinese Republic. Scholars, teaching abroad or yearning to do so, while they recall their own student days of patriotic demonstrations. Old soldiers bearing battlescars from fighting the Japanese invader. Air Force widows, ancient domestics, a proud food-shop proprietress, an aging homosexual movie director. These flotsam and jetsam of the civil war the author parades before us, in language by turns plain and sparkling, sometimes raw, frequently colorful, but always finely tuned to the speech of his motley crew. Like a solitary star in the sky, he fixes a diamond-hard gaze on the Walpurgis Night that is enacted, scene after bizarre scene, in the world below.

Pai Hsien-yung belongs to a remarkable generation of creative writers that grew up in Taiwan, received university education there, and went on to further studies in the United States before producing their mature works. This group, which includes both Taiwanese and the younger members of mainland refugee families, has already given us Chen Jo-hsi, author of *The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Revolution*.³ Chen’s book, of more recent authorship and subject matter, documents daily life in the People’s

Republic during the ten harrowing years 1966–76. Pai's Taipei characters fill out an earlier and not unrelated chapter in the "trouble-ridden" history of contemporary China.

Pai writes out of a personal background rich in opportunities and vantage points for observing the people and things around him. He was born in 1937, the year of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the outbreak of war, a son of General Pai Ch'ung-hsi, the distinguished military strategist of the 1927 Northern Expedition and the War of Resistance against Japan. In 1951, General Pai retired with his family to Taiwan rather than join the Communist regime. Thus, there are autobiographical overtones to some of these stories, and in all of them we find evidences of a keen eye, of impressions tellingly registered, as the young Hsien-yung traveled with his parents from their native province of Kwangsi to postwar Nanking, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, eventually to settle in Taipei.

In his unflinching look at these individuals, exiles among their own kind, Pai Hsien-yung does not assign any blame or point an accusing finger one way or another. He notes with a high sense of irony their business-(and pleasure)-as-usual lifestyle and, not without compassion, their clinging each to a past of real or imagined glory, or rather the past that lives on in them and haunts them. His is not a political nor even a social history, but a history of "the human heart in conflict with itself," in the words of William Faulkner, who wrote about the crippled and the dispossessed of another culture.

There is something to be said for the kind of hurly-burly society that has nurtured creative talent of this caliber. It was the same kind of mixed soil that produced the first fruits of China's modern literature following the May 4th Movement. Pai, with others of his generation, is a spiritual offspring of the Western-oriented Chinese writers of the 1920s and 1930s. But time has passed and circumstances have changed, and Pai is able to display a healthier appreciation of the Chinese cultural heritage and a more serious attitude toward his

chosen craft than we see in the earlier writers.

An alumnus of Iowa's famed Writers' Workshop, Pai Hsien-yung presumably has absorbed the lessons of such masters as James and Joyce, Faulkner and Fitzgerald. His recurring theme of innocence in corruption suggests this, and his description of conspicuous consumption, of fancy foods and *hua-tiao* wine, invites comparison with Gatsby's lavish parties. But whether against a backdrop of high life or low, it is the passionate pursuit of a cherished, illusory ideal that brings humanity to his characters. For their meretricious aspirations, so much buffeted by forces beyond their control, the epigraph is equally apt that Fitzgerald wrote out of the ash heaps and the holocaust of his American Dream — "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

About half of the *Taipei jen* material was first collected, along with a couple of the author's earlier pieces, in a 1968 volume that bears the title of its leading story, "Yu-yüan ching-meng" (Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream).⁴ This poetic and evocative phrase is adopted as the title of the English edition* of the complete *Taipei jen* stories because it conveys both the nostalgia for happier days that runs through the entire work and the shock of reality that hits us at every turn.

In many ways the story "Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream" represents Pai Hsien-yung's style at its best, suffused as it is with the modern creative spirit and yet deeply rooted in traditional Chinese life and culture. The Ming dynasty drama *Peony Pavilion* is employed both symbolically and as closely woven strands in the fabric of a poignant tale. The title "Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream" is, in fact, the name of a regional opera of later date based on Scene 10, the dream sequence, of T'ang Hsien-tsu's beloved

* The English edition first published in 1982 by Indiana University Press, U.S.A. under the title *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream: Tales of Taipei Characters*.

musical play. The device of dramatic allusion, as Pai himself has pointed out, is often found in Chinese fiction, notably in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.⁵ In that classic novel of frustrated love the heroine over-hears snatches of an aria from a rehearsal of *Peony Pavilion* and is awakened to the tragedy of the evanescence of life. The same aria figures in an even more organic fashion in Pai's story. The nouveau riche Madame Tou is giving an elegant dinner party for both old and new friends at her mansion with its beautiful garden in the Taipei suburbs. One of the guests is her old friend Madame Ch'ien, who was renowned in Nanking days for her singing. The music of the opera, mixed with intoxicating wine, calls up memories and old sorrows in Madame Ch'ien with such traumatic effect that she is unable to sing when urged to by the other guests. The words of the aria, Madame Ch'ien's stream-of-consciousness recollection of the past, and her awareness of her immediate surroundings build up to a climax that highlights the thematic unity in all of the "Taipei characters."

This kind of writing, with its brilliantly allusive language, poses an uncommon challenge to the translator. A time-honored dodge in Western popular fiction about the inscrutable Chinese is to simulate their exotic speech the better to lend "authentic flavor" to fanciful concoctions. A translator of Chinese fiction does not enjoy this luxury of license because he has an original text to which he is held accountable. Still, it is legitimate to translate literally from the Chinese for the sake of verisimilitude, and admirable if one can do so without ludicrous results. Sometimes the practice makes for obtrusive affectations — to say "cow's flesh" for "beef," for instance, or "people-as-host" for "democracy." In other cases admittedly picturesque expressions are transplanted from the Chinese, but their meaning is not apparent from the context and must be explained in cumbersome footnotes. Then there is a school of thought at the other extreme that believes in matching Western idioms to the Chinese. People the world over feel and think alike, so the reasoning goes, and for every

well-turned Chinese phrase surely there ought to be an English (or American English) counterpart waiting to be uncovered and brought into play. The trouble is that to the extent one succeeds in this exercise he risks lessening for his reader the illusion of a Chinese story.

It is a testimony to the power and attraction of the *Taipei jen* stories that many scholars, both Western and Chinese, have tried their hand at translating them.⁶ In this book the translators have been both bold and flexible in their endeavor to reproduce the pungent speech of the assorted characters. They retain the Chinese idiom as much as possible, while adopting American colloquialisms, even slang, that convey the spirit of the original. In “The Last Night of Taipan Chin,” the tough-talking dancehall hostess obviously should not be made to speak standard English nor, for that matter, should she be given the spurious accents of a Dragon Lady. The same is true of the matron who narrates “A Touch of Green” and the boss-lady of “Glory’s by Blossom Bridge,” through whose eyes we follow the love-crazed schoolteacher to his pathetic end. If English is to be their medium of expression, then they must be permitted to talk freely in the idiom and idiosyncrasies of that language.

The role of the editor in such an enterprise is one of mediation: to steer the precious cargo that is the heart of the story between the Scylla and Charbydis of disparate accents and imageries, to help achieve a tone and texture of language at once natural and precise, intelligible in English and faithful to the original, that will move the reader when the original Chinese does and not cause him to laugh in the wrong place. This means ameliorating an occasional verbal *gaucherie* and eliminating incongruities that might produce the wrong effect, whether these resulted from over-fidelity to the Chinese text or too free a helping of the riches of the polyglot American tongue.

A case in point: when Jolie Chin, the “last of the red-hot mamas” in any language, exclaims her impatience for the long-deferred altar, “... just five more years — five more years, *mamma mia!*” The equivalence

here to the Chinese “wo-tê niang!” could scarcely be more exact, but we were constrained to use instead the equally serviceable “Mother of Mercy!” — at some loss, it is true, of comic vehemence — or the resulting ethno-linguistic mix would be too distracting for words!

Or a mere name can trip you up, such as that given the silent movie actor in “A Sky Full of Bright, Twinkling Stars.” Shall we translate it straight and call him “Crimson Flame,” or simply transliterate the characters “Chu Yen,” two syllables utterly without meaning to a foreign ear. Our solution is something of a compromise, just as throughout the book personal and place names are sometimes romanized and on occasion colorfully and significantly represented, in the best tradition of the *Red Chamber* translations. For Chu Yen, or “Crimson Flame,” could be interpreted further as a pun on Chu Yen for “Rouged Cheeks” — a Chinese symbol for ephemeral youth which has the weight of thousands of years of poetic literature behind it. A double footnote would have been required to unravel the author’s intentions in this one name, not to mention a host of others equally intriguing to his Chinese readers. In such instances the translation has got to suffer a little in the interest of readability, leaving something for the classroom lecturer or the future Ph.D. candidate to explore.

In one case, in the story, “Ode to Bygone Days,” the translators have adopted a truly innovative approach: they use the dialect of the American South to represent the homespun talk of two old women lamenting the decline of the once-great house in which they served. I have heard Chinese who know the United States well remark that they are reminded of their own way of life by the American South, with its soft accents and mannerly ways and the vestiges of an old culture in which the master-servant relationship played a strong role. With this in mind, the translation device — a kind of conceit, if you will — is not as strange as it may sound; and so I found it judicious to remove only a few of the more jarring regionalisms. Much of the rest

of the translation is left in what I would like to call a “universal vernacular,” without which these two nannies or any other of the Taipei characters might not be so readily and vividly realized in English.

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