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SINO-NOIR OF SERIAL KILLERS AND DISMEMBERMENTS

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Abstract

In a Chinese society with low crime rates, why do TV series savor the genre of Sino-noir of serial killers and dismemberments? Ritualized bloodletting during nightly bingeing signals a psychological displacement from one's terminal condition, cowering under that which cannot be named—the dictatorship not so much of the proletariat as of the Party secretariat. Sino-noir on serial killers honors the Party while having it on, spoofing it. The obligatory "Chinese characteristics" hinge on the horror of body mutilation, mirroring a schizophrenic China not only divided against itself but in denial of any such division. The argument zooms in on Shuang Xuetao's novella of *dongbei* (northeast or Manchuria) noir, "Moses on the Plain," which chronicles how woes and crimes befall hapless characters fated to float or even drown during Deng Xiaoping's liberalization, as many State-subsidized factories in northeastern China folded, creating massive unemployment and misery. Part of China, particularly coastal urban areas, boomed, while other parts, such as the Northeast's heavy industry, went bust, a schizophrenic fissure within the body politic. In the 8-episode TV series, *Why Try to Change Me Now*, director Zhang Dalei adapts Shuang's novella told from multiple perspectives into a tour de force in slow cinema, drawing from cinema verité with non-professional actors, natural lighting and sound, an almost stationary camera, and minimalist acting. The argument then concludes with the 16-episode TV series *Who Is the Murderer* capitalizing on the triple entendre of "ba" for the father, the hegemon/bully, and the end.

Keywords: *retranslation, Sino-Noir, Serial Killers, Dismemberments, Shuang Xuetao, "Moses on the Plain"*

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In the current Chinese society with relatively low crime rates and hardly any gun violence, why do TV series savor what I can only describe as a genre of Sino-noir of serial killers and dismemberments? Ritualized bloodletting during nightly viewing/bingeing signals a psychological displacement from one's terminal condition, cowering under that which cannot be named—the dictatorship not so much of the proletariat as of the Party secretariat. Instead of having the cake and eating it, Sino-noir on serial killers honors the Party while having it on, spoofing it, while exposing, despite heavy (self-)censorship, the bloodiness under the Maoist Red Sun long after Mao. Indeed, seriality turns deadly in Chinese TV dramas featuring modern serial killers and dismemberments in *Why Try to Change Me Now* (2023 based on Shuang Xuetao's 2016 novella), *Who Is the Murderer* (2021), *Talking Bones* (2018), *Dr. Qin* (2016), and more.[i] Most of these TV series and films, such as Fruit Chan's *Dumplings* (2004), are subtitled in English, lest the Anglophone audience find them unintelligible, indigestible. Instead of the mantra of "China Dream" or Chairman Xi Jinping's sweet dream, the TV screen serializes, not in so many words, the perennial return of nightmare from one spectral Mao.[ii]

Whereas the Hong Konger Fruit Chan in *Dumplings* displaces the existential angst northward, demonizing northern China's comfort food as delivery devices for elixirs with fetal stuffings, how does China manage to do that when it feeds on itself? Hence, an obsessive degree of self-reflexiveness, emplotted as serial killers and dismemberments, clues the viewers to the whodunit in the trending TV genre of Sino-noir, particularly the police procedural, in a police state. Simultaneously a manifestation of repression and a projection of mass paranoia, the heinous crime of dismemberment goes back a long way to Chinese internalization of violence.

Despite the exponential multiplication of Sino-noir on serial killers and dismemberment, this dish may come across as far rawer and more of a provocateur than any main courses, for it touches on a raw nerve of the so-called Chinese Century. Apologists with Chinese affiliation or with vested interest in China can explain away China's endocannibalism thus far. Fruit Chan, they would argue, is yet to be decolonized, detoxed from British contamination. Theoretically, such errant ways of the past have all been remedied, corrected by Communist China. To say otherwise is to court disaster, unless one tells the truth obliquely, like Shuang Xuetao's *dongbei* (northeast or Manchuria) noir. During the post-Mao or Deng

Xiaoping era, China's economy was liberalized to allow private enterprises to compete with State-owned businesses. As a consequence, many State-subsidized factories in northeastern China folded, creating massive unemployment and misery. Part of China, particularly coastal urban areas, boomed, while other parts, such as the Northeast's heavy industry, went bust, a schizophrenic fissure within the body politic. Shuang Xuetao authors a quintessential novella of such dongbei noir, "Moses on the Plain" (平原上的摩西), where woes and crimes befall hapless characters fated to float or even drown in the dark undercurrent of time. The Chinese setting notwithstanding, Shuang's perennial motif of Christianity gives the story its name, alluding to Moses's miracle of parting the Red Sea in the Exodus. Consistent with Sino-noir's chronic touches of the West, so much so that the novella's namesake suggests its Western provenance, Shuang et al. practice Occidentalism that lends an exotic, neurotic, even psychotic aura to the police procedural, in Xi Jinping's favorite slogan, "with Chinese characteristics."

Yet the policeman protagonist Zhuang Shu in the novella is no Moses, nor is his long-lost acquaintance and crime suspect Li Fei ever to be delivered from perdition. Shuang's open ending displays a mise en scene of the two estranged yet intricately linked characters in their respective boats adrift on the city lake. Fei informs Shu of a gun in her bag and beseeches him to part the water like Moses to reach her, the dare shrouding her desperate plea for help. Shu banters, as his irreverent self is wont to do, that he can instead transform water into land, while letting drop on the water the cigarette package with the brand name "The Plain" his mother Fu Dongxin drew decades ago with a childhood Fei as the model. A gesture so facetious and paradoxical that it amounts to a child's game! Had Shu treasured this keepsake from his absent mother the artist, his childhood friend the model, and, implicitly, his father who successfully marketed the cigarette brand, how could he have discarded it so off-handedly into the lake? Had Shu kept it in his jacket's inset pocket, next to his heart, how could he fling it away like an inside joke, if not to, subconsciously, own up to the futility of any gesture of deliverance?

The cigarette wrapping features Fei as a young girl "sitting on the kang . . . throwing three shagai bones, which hung in midair like stars" (196). Rather than simplifying and anglicizing the subject at hand, literally, as "dice," Jeremy Tiang preserves some original flavor in his translation of Shuang Xuetao's mot juste, *galaha* (嘎拉哈), a Manchurian word for the game with sheep or goat anklebones. Hence, northeastern China's economic spasm and social unrest are to be resolved

by wedding a biblical story from afar with an ethnic minority's local game. Bones like stars hanging midair would elicit a knee-jerk reaction from the communist readership over the Red Star flying in the national flag as well as decorating all official documents from Resident Identity Cards to wedding certificates. Intangible stars symbolize white bones, though, as much the communist propaganda's erstwhile martyrs elevated up high as present-day desperadoes and villains fallen through the cracks of a market economy, buried below. Animal shagai bones implicate players' longing for good fortune on the corpses of livestock, which were deboned and cooked on fire like the kang, brick bed heated by fire throughout the wintry night of the northeast. Flames keep us fed and warm, the lack of which incenses us, impelling us down the road of vengeance against uncaring, non-sharing fire keepers, albeit rhetorically and circuitously. The genre of dongbei noir enables vocalizing regional pain with minimal inflaming of the authority, since it involves misbehaving (misbegotten?) "children" along the outlying borderlands rather than their "Father" in the metropolitan center of Beijing, Shanghai, and the like. Given the shared namesake of *bei* or north in Beijing (capital in the north) and dongbei (northeast), the genre of dongbei noir manifests
but the dark underbelly of Red China, or, the other way around, the bloodiness splattered across a dark continent.

Fei acknowledges that despite not knowing "what playing shagai had to do with plains, the name [of "the Plain"] sounded good" (196). The gap between aerial shagai in fact and the plain in name is just as wide as that between a piece of paper floating over a body of water. Fu's naming fantasizes suturing irreconcilable differences, such as air and earth and water—even fire. Sent down to the countryside to be reeducated, Fu Dongxin is the artistic daughter of a professor of philosophy abused by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution so much so that he was never able to teach again, leaving him deaf in one ear. Fu herself is likewise irreparably "burned" and scarred, escaping the reality of family and motherhood into books, preferably Western and Russian. The tormentors of Fu's father only stopped because Li Fei's father, Master Li, also a Red Guard at the time, stepped in. By contrast, a fellow group of Red Guards led by Zhuang Dezeng, Fu's husband and Zhuang Shu's father, cornered a close friend and colleague of Fu's father and beat the victim to death. As much happenstance as any toss of shagai bones, such casualties from the historical conflagration flare up momentarily in Fu's confessions to Master Li, who advises putting to rest the horror of the past. This

may be the unspoken reason for Fu's dissociation from Zhuang Dezeng and Shu, who takes after his father, as well as her willingness to mentor Li Fei after work, sealing the youngsters' fate together, despite their long separation.

Shagai bones are not the only objects Li Fei throws in the air. Inexplicably, the young Fei seems to be a born firebug, a compulsive arsonist, obsessed with playing with fire: "I turned [Shu's] matchbox into a fireball. I'd been holding in the urge for so long, I didn't even care that I'd scorched the skin off my fingers" (Shuang 161). Fei's forbidden "urge" incinerates the entire story, if not the entire history—His (Mao's) story—conjuring up China's *ressentment* against the world, having suffered through "a century of national shame" as a sub-colony, in the Founding Father Dr. Sun Yat-sen's word, as well as against itself, the old feudal China and the undead body parts that haunt. An innocent girl, like the debut of the People's Republic of China, is born with the blood of the mother who died in labor or with that of millions of Chinese under Mao the person as well as under Mao the specter.

The fire motif recurs in the five robberies of taxis in the winter of 1995, all ending with strangled drivers and their cabs torched, which the adult Shu investigates as a police officer. Matches light cigarettes, a stub of which the plainclothes police officer Jiang secreted in his pocket before his death at the hands of Master Li, a laid-off bench worker, who smoked The Plain. Indeed, the story chain smokes from matches to cigarettes to the plain to water. To bait the serial killer, Jiang disguised himself as a cab driver and bummed a cigarette from his passenger Master Li, leaving behind the sole clue to the serial killer's identity. Yet Master Li would not have resorted to violence in this particular case had Li Fei not feigned stomachache in the first place. Fei hid a can of gasoline intended to set ablaze the Chinese herbal medicine clinic to kill two birds. Master Li's close friend Sun opened the clinic with the money intended originally to support Fei's schooling, hence depriving Fei of further study she so dearly loved. In addition to avenging herself, Fei also wished to keep her word to Shu for the spectacle of Christmas "fireworks," which Shu utterly forgot (Shuang 194). The botched semi-robbery led to a truck slamming into the taxi in the unlit road, since Officer Jiang forgot to turn on "the hazard lights," causing a rollover and the amputation of Li Fei's injured leg (Shuang 158). A chicken or egg blame game: Li Fei's promise to Shu or her irrepressible impulse lurching toward Thanatos? Master Li's camaraderie to the clinic owner or his revenge against a cold, indifferent China? A reformed Shu's duty as a police officer or his self-indulgence and erasure of Fei? Officer Jiang's faux pas on the road

to crime-busting or the nation's leadership in the driver's seat busting China itself—serial crushing and sacrificing of little people, with Jiang in a coma for three years and Fei with a fake leg? The dongbei noir is a symptom of China's physical and phantom pain.

In the 8-episode TV series, *Why Try to Change Me Now*, director Zhang Dalei adapts Shuang's novella told from multiple perspectives into a tour de force in slow cinema, drawing from cinema verité with non-professional actors, natural lighting and sound, an almost stationary camera, and minimalist acting.[iii] The TV series skirts any reference to the Cultural Revolution, except the briefest of hints as Fu Dongxin was once sent down for reeducation and her professor father unable to return to teaching afterward. Although divorced from history, the slowness of the series manages to pile up tensions, culminating in the reunion on the lake. Li Fei in episode 8 not only claims to have a pistol on her person but points it at Shu to compel the Mosaic miracle, only to shoot herself in the end. This climax comes after Li Fei's confession to Shu by baring her prosthesis, echoed by the prominent streak of white hair that signals, in a land of uniformly black or dyed hair, premature aging individually and dy(e)ing collectively, "infected" by the degradation of her evil father (figure 1). While Fei's sole streak of white contrasts with her black hair, the source of Fei's decay, Master Li, sports a full head of gray hair, silhouetted by the black hairs of the officers wrestling him to the ground on the lakeshore, as he witnesses Fei's suicide (figure 2). Master Li's gray hair signals not only what Zoe Brennan terms the Gothic "abject" and "demonic old person" (104-108) but it conjures up A. DeFalco's "association of old age with decline and death" (2).

Figure 1: The daughter's prosthesis & streak of white hair in episode 8 of *Why Try to Change Me Now?*

Figure 2: The serial killer father apprehended after witnessing his innocent daughter commit suicide in episode 8 of *Why Try to Change Me Now?*

Purged of any firebug inclination in Shuang Xuetao's Fei, Qiu Tian who plays Fei in the TV series gives a magisterial performance of the torn psyche, a reluctant accomplice in her father's crime, a disabled victim suspected of serial killings. Qiu Tian excels in such borderline characters, amply illustrated in the 2023 TV series *Fearless Blood* (歡顏) where she plays a tormented Nationalist spy in disguise as a Communist messenger's fiancée during China's civil war. Through fleeting shades of microexpression on her face, the minute fluctuation in her elocution punctuated by well-timed, exquisite cracking, Qiu Tian enacts beautifully the doubleness of the Communist-Nationalist agent as well as the victim-perpetrator of dongbei noir. Such talent capturing fringe, volatile characters stands quite alone in China's popular entertainment fetishizing *gaofushuai* (tall rich handsome) for males and *baifumei* (white rich beautiful) for females.[iv] On the screen, faces, bodies, and minds have been mass produced by the industry of cosmetic surgery and the assembly line at Beijing and Shanghai drama schools. The former procedure routinely shaves cheek bones off broad Mongolian faces and bleaches, whitens exposed body parts, in essence eating oneself—excess bones, skin pigments, and whatnot. Within mushrooming Chinese TV series, from the police procedural to romance, from historical fantasy to the *chuanyue* (time travel) Sino-fi, the uniformity of monstrously pretty looks and scripted acts constitutes true horror, true crime to a viewership of one billion strong with inimitable richness and diversity, which are deflected rather than reflected. Mushrooms pun on hallucinogens that lull consumers to automaton insentience; aberrant glitches like Qiu Tian or Li Gengxi

shock, leaving an aftertaste of young virtuosos from art cinema. It is anybody's guess as to whether these rare early blooms will ever mature and flourish in the extravagant Sinoscape of show biz that happens to be a cultural desert in subjects deemed "unhealthy," let alone tabooed, by the State.

Wide apart are two boats, land and water, the cigarette package and the emptiness it enshrouds, not to mention the Chinese title, "Moses on the Plain," and its English translation, *Why Try to Change Me Now?*, à la an English pop song by Frank Sinatra. Such incontrovertible distance repeats itself in the two most conspicuous fathers, two doppelgangers despite their contrasting images. The black-haired entrepreneurial Zhuang Dezeng rises in "socialism with Chinese characteristics," whereas the white-haired skilled laborer Master Li falls into robbery and crime. One *Ba* (爸 father) flies above the plain of China with the ring of the double entendre of *ba* (霸hegemon, tyrant). The other Ba sinks below the water with the stench of *ba* (罷 to cease, to remove, to end). Even within one single word 霸, the positive connotation of a hegemon flips into the negative of *baling* (霸凌), bullying, as on school grounds or in cyberspace. Out of Mandarin's four tones for nearly every sound, all three ba-s (father, hegemon, and cessation) even agree in their fourth tone, as in bà. The bipolar father swings between a benign potentate and a dead end, between a red Beijing and a noir Northeast.

These triple ba-s or fathers are quite literal in the 16-episode TV series *Who Is the Murderer* (誰是兇手) featuring Zhao Liying, Xiao Yang, and Dong Zijian, aired in 2021. Zhao plays Shen Yu, a psychiatrist who grew up under the shadow of a missing father, who used to work at a mental hospital, suspected of having committed serial murders. These young female victims are invariably displayed as art objects, with smiles on their faces under the influence of muscle-relaxing drugs used at the hospital. In their death throes, they are paralyzed and made to smile into a clock counting their last moments. This clock comes with a girl with golden locks eerily evoking the young Queen Elizabeth's profile, or a number of fair maidens and Goddesses on Western currency (figure 3). Such is the infectious power of China's Occidentalism, the counterpoint to the West's Orientalism. To rephrase the title to Joseph Conrad's 1911 novel, under "Chinese" eyes, a thing of beauty—white femininity—accentuates, intensifies the sadism of a native death. Viewers learn of the clock from the eyes of the young officer Leng Xiaobing (Xiao Yang) before he drifts into unconsciousness from a blow to the head. Pistol in hand earlier, Leng is too scared to pull the trigger, resulting in the death of the teacher and patron to a

young Xia Mu (Dong Zijian) as well as the death of Leng's fellow officer. Sulking near the crime scene, Xia lives with the guilt that he could have saved his teacher and surrogate mother, just as Leng does. Now a police officer bent upon hunting down the serial killer, Xia desperately masks what the show calls posttraumatic stress disorder, repeatedly hyperventilating and fainting at the mere sight of blood, even pig carcasses dangling at a slaughterhouse.

Figure 3: The serial murderer's clock with a Western female head in episode 11 of *Who Is the Murderer.*

To divert the police in pursuit of her missing father, Shen Yu goes to great lengths to frame a mentally fragile patient, coaching him to confess to details of the serial murders. In episode 7, her efforts seem to have paid off. After nearly two decades, she believes she finally receives a telephone call from "Ba," as the subtitle in Chinese indicates (figure 4). Unbeknownst to Shen, the silent, non-responsive caller is her father's one-time patient and now a professional photographer, who has assumed the role of Shen's father after having murdered him, besides a string of young female customers who had "betrayed" him by taking their wedding photographs at the photography studio. The chosen profession of photography exposes the serial killer's deep-seated mania of shooting, arresting the organic life of his subjects, favoring death that seizes any change. Shen Yu, likewise, suckles from the father imago, despite her growing doubt. As figure 5 of a receipt illustrates, the serial killer's studio is called Hongguang (紅光 Red Light) with a red star logo, its bottom half off-frame. This cinematic flashing in passing of the symbol of China, and only

part of it at that, implicates not just the fatherland but also the Founding Father—the Red Sun of Chairman Mao.

Figure 4: A call from the alleged Ba (father) in episode 7 in *Who Is the Murderer*.

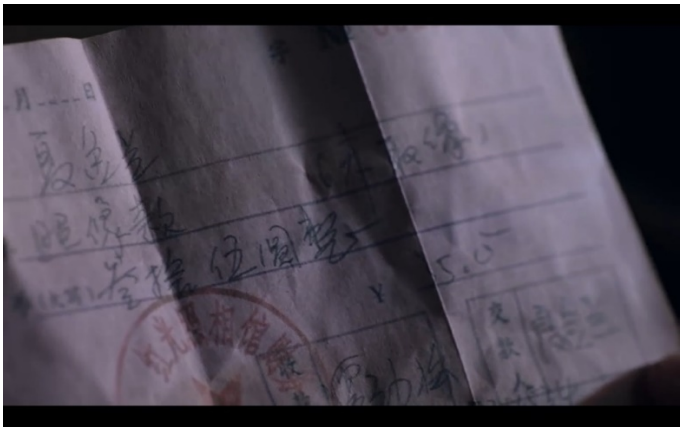

Figure 5: Red Star Photography Studio receipt in episode 14 of *Who Is the Murderer*.

With the aid of police officers—the good Ba or the people's fathers—as well as the wisdom of the Father of Psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), which Shen Yu consults at length, she begins to unravel her decades-long fallacy of a family reunion. Her own investigation digs up the photographer stalking her every move since high school, such as his name right next to hers on this library card for *Inferiority and Transcendence* (自卑與超越) (figure 6). Bingo for Shen Yu and for China's transformation from East Asia Sick Man to Superman!

Occidentalism in TV series favors certain Western icons alchemizing inferiority into superiority, W. Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* being one of them, conceivably owing to the leap of faith from a cheap round coin discarded on the ground to the round luminosity in the sky, complemented by China's fascination with the Moon Goddess, Chang'e. Maugham's novel has been alluded to offhandedly in many a TV series in recent years.

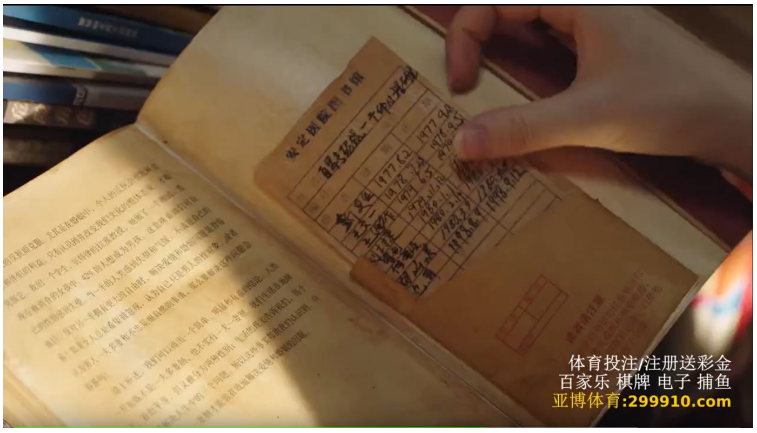

Figure 6: The library card for *Inferiority and Transcendence* in episode 14 of *Who Is the Murderer.*

Alfred Adler's *What Life Should Mean to You* (1931) is another of the "People's Choice," not to mince words. By extracting and tweaking Chapter 3's title, "Feelings of Inferiority and Superiority," in Adler, translators rechristened the book as *Inferiority and Transcendence* in its Chinese-language version in the 1970s Taiwan and in the 2010s China, both periods of social upheaval and deep anxiety—Taiwan from being denied diplomatic relationships world-wide and isolated; China from angling for global supremacy. Chinese-language publishers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait agreed on doing away with Adler's moralistic, preachy title and opted for the titillating binarism of altered states of consciousness. The Chinese title spans the dialectics of alpha and omega, of historical inadequacy and contemporary hubris. Adler contends, "Behind every one who believes as if he were superior to others, we can suspect a feeling of inferiority which calls for very special efforts of concealment. It is as if a man fears that he was too small and walked on tiptoe to make himself seem larger"

(50). That Adler himself is of small stature and suffers from what Hertha Orgler calls "organ inferiority" of rickets and frailty testifies to the correlation of high theories of the mind and deep pains of the body (74-83). The psychotic photographer thus "transcends" his sense of inferiority by means of serial murders that overpower the victims, outwit the police, and take on the appearance of a fugitive father to keep Shen Yu on a leash over decades. Shen Yu's cry of ba into the void of the telephone triples into her loving father, the tyrannical sadist, and the cease and decease of serial killings and her lifelong dream.

After the feast of Sino-noir TV series, what's next for dessert? Given the PLA military exercises of blockade and incursion swarming Taiwan's territorial waters and airspace, and given the historical lot of Wu Zhuoliu's *Orphan of Asia* (1946), the delicacy to sate China's sweet tooth would most likely take the form of desertification of the democratic Taiwan, arguably after desertion by the US, a reprise of Hong Kong after desertion by the UK.[v] Here is another puerile wordplay from one of the island's born (bogus?) diasporic orphans, bogus because of diaspora, no longer native, evidenced by these very words in English that "refuse his mother tongue," as Ihab Hassan puts it regarding "true exile[s]," either the French-writing Irishman Samuel Beckett or perhaps even himself, an English-writing Egyptian (213). Born or bogus, genuine or fake, here goes the double entendre: the sp(l)itting image of de(s)sert comes as a silly joke, a last laugh, before the sandman swoops down from the sere north to sprinkle soporific sand to shut the eyes and stuff the mouths.[vi] To clown around before the curtain drops is courage enough, one of the survival skills endemic to Yeatsian "circus animals."[vii]

Or perhaps Taiwan would reincarnate one of Wu Cheng'en's sixteenth-century chapter novel *Monkey*'s demon-slaying tricks, a small stone stuck in the throat of the wolf, a little bug ready to chew its way out. Perchance it has already begun doing so with the island's recent cosplay of "Ghost Island," aka "gHost Island."[viii] The imminent giving up the ghost focuses the mind of Taiwan as the Host, a fleeting Holy Ghost that transubstantiates whatever is to befall itself, wherein the Holy Spirit impregnates. In readiness for the end, ghost islanders perfect ghost writing, literally. Taking leave of not only the motherland but also the mother tongue, "true exile" speaking in tongues unfolds, unabashedly, in the stepmother tongue of English marbled with Mandarin. A fake, phantom

Taiwanese, by the standards of nativism, heralds ghost writing untethered to the body, either a specific terra firma or a monolingual universe. So is this Ghost I(sle) the person (人*ren*) on top rising like air out of rou (肉 meat) or the one below sinking into the bowels, or both—the dead weight of a Flying *Taiwanlang* ("Taiwanese" in Hokkien) with its woe stowed away under Anglo wing? Where to land for this Ghost I(sle), or simply to crash?

Notes

i. See my Chapter 1, "The Art of Propaganda" and Ch. 3, "Gaming Reincarnation" in *Cultural Bifocals* (2025) for analysis of the 15-episode TV series *Reset* where serial bombings recur in a time loop. See Ch. 2, "Three *Bad Kids*, One Loving Killer," on serial killings in the 12-episode *The Bad Kids*. Yet another TV series on serial killing worth mentioning is *Love Me if You Dare* (2015 **他來了，請閉眼**). A returned overseas Chinese, the protagonist Simon in *Love Me if You Dare* is a criminal profiler, haunted by the serial killer "Flower Cannibal" Tommy and his copycat. A cliffhanger of a series of numbers in blood on the wall of the slaughterhouse throughout episodes 1-4 is finally decoded in episode 7 as a wry greeting, "Hi Simon [Bo]" from the serial killer. The High IQ of the Chinese superman, albeit as disturbed as Simon has been, manifests itself in photographic memory as much as in mathematical genius. Coursing through the veins of these twenty-first-century whodunit in the new Communist China is the old literati tradition privileging rote memory and hierarchical thinking. In dynastic China, committing classics to memory allowed young men to pass examinations and obtain official government posts. In Communist China, committing mathematical numbers and signs to memory allows heroes to fight crimes by parsing, categorizing, ranking, and ultimately ordering the world in the image of the authority. The eccentric and unbalanced Simon is to be nursed back to health by the love of the female protagonist, revalidating the centrality of Confucian patriarchy.

ii. Contrary to Michael Keane's 2008 prediction of "pink drama," Chinese TV series has only grown "redder" over the past decades (155). Keane looked forward to the evolution of TV dramas in the context of internationalization, at least regionally in Asia and in diaspora, predicting the rise of "pink drama" of "incorporating themes that have more cross-territorial appeal, along with the use of actors that are familiar to regional audiences" ("From National Preoccupation" 155).

iii. An intermediary, "chrysalis" stage within the metamorphosis from the 2016 novella to the 2023 TV series is the film *Fire on the Plain* (平原上的火焰 2021).

iv. For an analysis of *gaofushuai* and *baifumei*, see my Chapter 3, "The Ghost of *Guimi* from Imperial to Millennial China," in *China Pop!*

v. When asked if the US would defend Taiwan militarily if the PRC launch an invasion, 55% of Taiwanese interviewees believe the US would, while 37% believe that the US would not. See Liu Shuting's "On the Receding of Skepticism over the US in National Defense Survey." The proof is, of course, in the pudding. Who will get to eat Taiwan? Will the spirit of sharing prevail that ends with a partition, a dismemberment, with the US holding on to smaller islands surrounding the island of Taiwan, like Orchid Island, Pescadores, Pratas Islands, and such?

vi. A last laugh that lasts, just as Amadeus's that (un)closes Milos Forman's *Amadeus* (1984).

vii. Whereas W. B. Yeats writes "The Circus Animals' Desertion" from the perspective of a poet after a lifetime of summoning tropes and metaphors like circus beasts, Taiwan is one of such beasts or domestic animals at the disposal of masters, which leads to the next and concluding paragraph's allusion to *Monkey*.

viii. See my Chapter 11, "Taiwan Meets Its Unmaker: Circum-I(sle) and gHost Films," in *Cultural Bifocals* (2025). In point of fact, diasporic writers writing on Taiwan have long assumed, subconsciously, a spectral existence. Under the rubric of "ghost island literature" in his *Supernatural Sinophone Taiwan and Beyond* (2016) and *Remapping the Contested Sinosphere* (2020), Chia-rong Wu discusses prominent mainlander writer Bai Xianyong, second-generation mainlander Zhu Tianxin, feminist Li Ang, and the magical nativism of Hsu Jung-che and Gan Yao Ming, among others. In various scenarios, the sense of loss and melancholia permeate all these short stories and novels.

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