

*Americanism and Japanese Post-Colonial Influence on Taiwan: On Zhenho Wang's  
"Portraits of Beauties/Americana (Mei Ren Tu)"*

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Abstract

Three years after U.S. switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to P.R.C. in 1979, Wang Zhenho's novel, *Portraits of Beauties/Americana (Mei Ren Tu)* was published in January 1982. In the twenty seven years under U.S. custody (1951 to 1978), the English language had attained the status of ideological supremacy--a cultural and social capital--through which and with which one can qualify as an elite member. Hence, the political severance between U.S. and Taiwan was a disillusionment of the American Dream and a segregation of the better other. Wang's novel was thus a satirical attempt to criticize this Americanized ideology. Wang declared --"*Mei Ren* (Beauties) means those Chinese who idolize *Mei Guo* (America),... and *Mei* (beautiful) is also the ironic antithesis of *Chou* (ugly), which describes those inhumane and profit-oriented people" (203). While Wang's theme in the novel is serious, his language is satirically bizarre, polyphonic, and laughter-bound. English words are thrown into Mandarin utterances of those who regard themselves as socially and culturally more prestigious. A name or noun in English that is neutral in meaning is purposefully geared toward derogative Mandarin characters bearing similar English sounds. Though Mandarin serves as the overall medium, one finds that Wang actually juxtaposes: 1) classical Mandarin and colloquial Mandarin; 2) many "mandarinized" terms of Taiwanese dialect that actually came from Japanese in colonization period; and 3) accented Mandarin(s)--with a Hong Kong tinge (Cantonese) or other local nuances from various provinces of mainland China. This critical trial aims to elucidate the ideological ruptures clashing among those different languages, which are interwoven into its plot, naming scheme, and characterization.

It must therefore take into account not only the direct producers of the work in its materiality (artist, writer, etc.), but also the ensemble of agents and institutions which participate in the production of the value of the work... (Bourdieu, 1996. p. 229).

## Historical Context

Let me begin with March 18, 2011. On this day, former U.S. Secretary of State, Warren Christopher died at the age of eighty five. Thirty three years prior to his death when he was fifty two, Christopher experienced at Taipei a most horrible night of shock due to a vehement youth protest that surrounded his motorcade. The year was 1978 in Carter's Administration and the date was December 26. Christopher was dispatched to negotiate future modes of substantial cooperation between US and Taiwan after a decision had been made that US would switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to mainland China. In fact, the official breaking of the news had reached Taipei in the midnight of December 16, 1978. Christopher's arrival was ten days after that—a period of time enough to brew social frustration and desperation! On his way from the airport to Grand Hotel, Christopher's motorcade was surrounded by youths who "pasted mud, splashed paint, threw eggs, placed national flags on the limousines, stepped on the roofs and hoods of the cars, and broke the glass in several [cars]" (Fallows 2011). The aftermath was huge, as President Chiang Ching-kou later admitted:

If I were to say that the change has no damaging effect at all, that would be wrong.... The two weeks after Dec. 16 were the most unstable period. The stock market dropped, and the exchange rates between the U.S. dollar and the New Taiwan dollar on the black market rose to NT 43 to \$1. Domestic and foreign investors seemed to be reconsidering their investment (Jacobs, 1980, p.84).

This was the historical context from which Wang Zhenho's<sup>1</sup> *Portraits of*

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Wang romanized his own name as Zhenho. It should have been Zhenhe instead of Zhenho, according to pinyin system, which is the most widely used romanization system today—but for ideological reasons, not adopted by Taiwanese government in the past. Wang, hence, romanized his own name according to Wade-Giles system, which was back then also popular. My discussion adopts Ping-yin system (except Mr. Wang's name and the name of President Chiang Ching-kou—which should have been *Jiang Jing-guo* in Ping-yin).

*Beauties/Americana (Mei Ren Tu)* had sprung out. In the twenty seven years under US custody (1951 to 1978), the English language had attained the status of ideological supremacy--a cultural and social capital--through which and with which one can qualify as an elite member. Good English ushered in a better job with a higher pay and the likeliness to become an American in the long run.

### **Purpose and Plot**

Hence, the political severance between U.S. and Taiwan was a disillusionment of the American Dream and a segregation of the better other. Wang was acute in sensing this ideological idolatry. In fact, he qualified as one of those elite members. But his conscience as a novelist put him to a broader social perspective. *Portraits of Beauties/Americana (Mei Ren Tu)* was first published in January 1982. Wang explained that<sup>2</sup>:

“Mei Ren (beauties)” means those Chinese who idolize Mei Guo (America) and regard themselves as more prestigious; on the other way around, “mei (beautiful)” is also the ironic antithesis of “chou (ugly),” which describes those inhumane and profit-oriented people (203).

Hence, mirror-like by way of reflection, Wang’s story is told through the perspective of one of the silent *people* in the majority (who are usually the neglected ones in lower social strata). The narrator is a country youth named Xiao-lin--though very often Wang’s narrative lapses into all-knowing omnipotence. This limited omnipotent viewpoint serves as a centrifugal force to counteract the centripetal vanities of inhuman wishes. Jean-Jacques Gautier once commented on Herb Gardner’s *A Thousand Clowns*, saying:

He [Herb Gardner] makes us laugh, he amuses us, he has wit, the gift of a repartee, a sense of farce; he cheers, he relieves, he enlightens, he enchants [...]; he clings to humor as the last weapon against conformity [...]; above all, he wants people who surround him *not to be ashamed of laughing in*

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<sup>2</sup> My English translation is based on the 1982 edition (in Chinese) released by Hong Fan Publishing, Taipei. (Taipei should have been *Taipei* in pinyin system. However, for many set terms that have been steadily recognized, the norm in translation is to just to keep the way it is).

*a world in which a laugh is the object of suspicion* (1963 cited in Bourdieu, 1996, p.163).

What has been said about Herb Gardner is equally applicable to Zhenho Wang. Through farcical laughter pushed to the extreme, Wang is inviting his implied readers (in Wolfgang Iser's term) to reflect on the twisted reality. This novel contains two chapters. The time setting in chapter one is vaguely located in the summer of 1978 whereas in chapter two, the author clearly indicates that the time frame covers only two days—from June 20<sup>th</sup> (Wednesday) to June 21<sup>st</sup> (Thursday) in 1979. The narrator, Xiao-lin, comes to Taipei to attend night school (senior high) and works at an airline company in the day time. Chapter one unfurls between the juxtaposition of those caricatured women and men in the airline company and Xiao-lin's financial crisis in getting a loan to help his farmer brother get married. Chapter two, likewise, develops between two entwining themes: 1) a protest against Jimmy Carter by signing one's name on an already typed letter and 2) the sudden death of one good man and subsequent resignation of the other in the airline company— Xiao-kuang and Lao-zhang.

### **Naming Scheme**

It is important now to delineate the linguistic scenario in Taiwan before English further diversified the already kaleidoscopic phenomenon. To begin with, Japanese as the official language in colonial time did not slip away. It had turned much of itself into the vocabulary of Taiwanese dialect (Min Nan Hua), which is a vernacular (marginal and dominated). In succession to Japanese, standard Mandarin became the official language after 1949--with accented provincial variations that came with KMT regime. Though English was never an official language in Taiwan, its ideological supremacy was (is) hegemonic enough to slip into the above languages and left a mark. While Wang's theme in the novel is serious, his language is satirically bizarre, polyphonic, and laughter-bound. English words are thrown into Mandarin utterances of those who regard themselves as socially and culturally more prestigious. To begin with, the abbreviated name of the Airline Company, UPT, bears similar sounds in Mandarin as "Liu Bi-ti" (Running Nose). Under this arching attempt, English names and nouns are purposefully rendered and twisted to pun with Mandarin in similar sounds with degrading meanings. For example, Dorothy is rendered into Mandarin as "Dao La-ji" (Dumping Trash). Her lover's name, Rocky Dong, is phonetically transcribed into Mandarin characters to mean "La-ji Tong" (Trash Bin). Other examples include: T.P. Gu (Ti Pi-gu) to mean *kicking the ass*; Douglas to mean

“Dao-guo-lai La-shi” (to go upside down in bowel movement); Nancy (Lan-shi) for *corrupted corpse*; Vincent (Wen-sheng) for *diseased student*; office (Ou-hui Shi) for *vomiting room*; English (Ying-Guo Li-xi) for *British interest*—in monetary sense; baby (Xiao Bei-bi) for *the contemptible little one*; Benz (Ben Si) for *stupid to death*. To be succinct, a chart is provided below.

English	Mandarin Romanization	Twisted Meaning in Mandarin
UPT (Airline)	Liu Bi-ti 流鼻涕	Running Nose
Dorothy	Dao La-ji 倒垃圾	Dumping Trash
Rocky Dong	La-ji Tong 垃圾桶	Trash Bin
T.P. Gu	Ti Pi-gu 踢屁股	<i>kicking the ass</i>
Douglas	Dao-guo-lai La-shi 倒過來拉屎	to go upside down in bowel movement
Nancy	Lan-shi 爛屍	<i>corrupted corpse</i>
Vincent	Wen-sheng 瘟生	<i>diseased student</i>
office	Ou-hui Shi 嘔穢室	<i>vomiting room</i>
English	Ying-Guo Li-xi 英國利息	<i>British interest</i> as in banking
baby	Xiao Bei-bi 小卑鄙	<i>the contemptible little one</i>
Benz	Ben Si 笨死	<i>stupid to death</i>

On the reverse, sometimes the punning goes from English as the source language to the target language. Instead of saying directly “Ta-ma-de (damn it)” when cursing in Mandarin, the employees would use English abbreviation--T.M.D. Furthermore, Japanese name is also included into the linguistic arena. One Japanese customer’s name is “江笠光比古” and Wang pokes fun at it, too:

As if he is kicked on the ass, T.P. Gu (Kicking the Ass) jumps up from his chair, slams on his desk with full force and says: “I’ll be damned! Of all the names to select, and this Japanese will have ‘江笠光比古’ as his name—‘Jiang-li Guang-pi-gu’ (encourage someone to bare one’s ass)!”

“Ya! This goes with the Japanese tradition!” Dan-Ni-Er (Daniel) bites on a ball pen as if he, too, is holding tight to a tradition and says, “Japanese women in the past did not used to wear underpants. With economy so slow everywhere in the world and everything is being cut down, to go without underwear might be just the thing to do” (1982, p. 8).

As is evident, Wang's satirical strategy is extreme. A name or noun in English that is neutral in meaning is purposefully geared toward derogative Mandarin characters bearing similar English sounds.

### Characterization

In terms of characterization, the highbrows are depicted as either idolizing everything American or promiscuous, most of whom are both! One of the ladies is named Grace Hu.

In English, Grace denotes virtue and chastity but, this lady proves to be antithetical. Her given name in English is thus rendered as "Zhen-jie Hu" (Chaste Fox) in Mandarin. While "Zhen-jie" is a fair rendition, her family name, Hu (neutral in meaning when referring to a person's last name), is twisted to a different character bearing the same sound to mean *fox* with a cunning connotation. She takes birth control pills daily without fail, even when her husband is away in the States to qualify residency requirement for a green card. And she is not afraid to reveal it. She never wears bras and enjoys the ensuing attention and flirting. After Daniel finishes poking fun at the Kanji (Chinese characters) in the Japanese customer's name--江笠光比古 (Jiang-li Guang-pi-gu' /to encourage someone to bare one's ass), Grace is depicted as "giggling so hard with her free-flowing big tits coming out as in a homerun! Kicking-the-Ass (T.P. Gu) and Daniel's two pairs of eyes are out of control again, fixing on her running breasts in salutation" (1982, p. 12)! In a different passage, Xiao-lin remembers a comment from T.P. Gu (Kicking the Ass), who once made fun of the pair--Dorothy (Dumping Trash) and Rocky Dong (Trash Bin):

A guy from Reservation Division—T.P. Gu (Kicking the Ass) often teases the pair naughtily:

Well, who would have thought of that! 'Trash Bin (Rocky Dong)' has finally found someone

'Dumping Trash (Dorothy)! One is exerting his proper use as a thing and the other is performing

her rightful duty. What a perfect match (1982, p. 5)!

Many people in UPT Airline are eager to become Americans. For example, Douglas' family members are all in the States and need money from Taiwan every month. Since each remittance to the States would allow only a small sum, Douglas needs to



borrow I.D. cards for surrogate accounts, so that he can accumulate to the desired sum. By punning on the name of Douglas--“*Dao-guo-lai* La-shi” (to go *upside down* in bowel movement) , Wang is also satirizing the fact that now *Taiwan is assisting America*, which is the other way around in the time of U.S. custody when *America was assisting Taiwan*. In the past, the situation was “Mei-yuan” (America assisting); now it is “Yuan-mei” (assisting America).

In contrast to the above batch, the narrator, Xiao-lin is filial and hard-working; he comes from the country, the bottom social stratum, and strives to make his way through education system in Taipei. Because of not having enough family income, Xiao-lin’s oldest brother has to marry a girl under the condition that he would live with the wife’s family and have a future son or daughter bear the wife’s family name. The second brother wants to look for better opportunities in a big city, but their father wouldn’t allow since their family needs extra manpower for farming. The second brother thus stays and falls in love with a brothel girl, who promises to marry him but needs ransom money to dissolve her contract. The family had expected the money to come from papaya harvest that year. But, as luck would have it, the papaya trees all died of a contagious virus. This is the plight that Xiao-lin is caught; his father plans to take a train to Taipei and get whatever help Xiao-lin can possibly offer. Xiao-lin’s only hope is a loan from his roommate, Xiao-guo, who also comes from the same town but gives up early on the education system. He drops out after only one year in the night school (junior high) in their home town and comes to Taipei to learn Japanese so that he can work as a tour guide. Xiao-lin’s intention in asking for the loan undergoes an odyssey. He knows that Xiao-guo has his tricks in getting extra money from the tourists, but Xiao-guo is a spendthrift, who goes after all the fashions of Taipei that sometimes does not even pay the rental on time. After much ado, Xiao-lin gives all his savings to his dad and sees him off at the train station. That night Xiao-guo comes home late and sees Xiao-lin crying; he asks why and then takes out a check of twenty thousand N.T. dollars. This sum of money was originally intended for a second-handed car to be showy and fashionable, but Xiao-guo gives it all out to help his friend. In truth, this check was from a bi-sexual male deputy manager in Xiao-guo’s tourist company, whom he had played hard-to-get with for quite some time and had just slept with earlier that night. Xiao-lin’s stress is thus relieved—but at a cost too dear and satirically warm against a commoditizing urban locale.

## Polyphonic Diction and Ideological Ruptures

At a closer scansion, one would find that Wang’s linguistic complexity extends even to his diction and syntax—not just naming. Though Mandarin serves as the overall medium, one finds that Wang actually juxtaposes: 1) classical Mandarin and colloquial Mandarin (with sub-cultural terms); 2) many “madarinized” terms of Taiwanese dialect that actually came from Japanese in colonization period; and 3) accented Mandarin(s)--with a Hong Kong tinge (Cantonese) or other local nuances from various provinces of mainland China. Before I proceed further to translate some selected passages for illustration, a disclaimer has to be placed first. Even for a trained Mandarin reader, the original Mandarin text is not readily accessible—if he or she does not speak or understand Min Nan dialect, not to speak of not having a sharp ear for Mandarin in different provincial accents. My English rendition is thus destined to lose some original nuances; it would be more or less like taking a picture of a sculpture, as it were.

After Xiao-guo shows up suddenly in UPT Airline to persuade Xiao-lin to be his roommate, Xiao-lin looks up, compares his own shabby outfit and Xiao-guo’s fancy attire, and feels ashamed. Wang depicts: *Sighting* Xiao-guo so *fatly geared*, Xiao-lin *precipitately* feels *himself so downright poor and rustic!* To be fair about translation, the Mandarin original is provided: 視小郭這款穿戴，小林忽地感到自己好生寒儉 (19)! In plain Mandarin, Wang could have said: **Seeing** Xiao-guo’s **fancy outfit like that**, Xiao-lin **suddenly** feels that **his own wearing is so shabby**. However, instead of “Kan-jian” (seeing), Wang adopts a verb of more ancient touch—“Shi” (sighting); in place of “Chuan-cheng Zhe-yang” (to wear fancy outfit like that), Wang uses “Zhe-kuan Chuan-dai” (so fatly geared); an adverb of archaic tinge, “Hu-di” (precipitately) replaces what could have been a more colloquial term--“Hu-ran” (suddenly). And finally, Wang writes “Zi-ji Hao-sheng Han-chuang” (himself so downright poor and rustic) to substitute “Chuan-de Hen Sui-bian” (his own wearing is so shabby). Hopefully the two different ways of English translation serve to elucidate Wang’s bizarre diction and syntax; it blends both archaic and colloquial modern usage. For brevity, please see the following chart.

Hybrid Style		Plain Style	
Mandarin	English	Mandarin	English
Shi	sighting	Kan-jian	seeing
Zhe-kuan Chuan-dai	so fatly geared	Chuan-cheng Zhe-yang	to wear fancy outfit like that



Hu-di	precipitately	Hu-ran	suddenly
Hao-sheng Han-chuang	so downright poor and rustic	Chuan-de Hen Sui-bian	his own wearing is so shabby
Sighting Xiao-guo so fatly geared, Xiao-lin precipi- tately feels himself so downright poor and rustic!		Seeing Xiao-guo's fancy outfit like that, Xiao-lin suddenly feels that his wear is so shabby!	

Secondly, I will give an example of where Japanese has come into play through Min Nan dialect, which is a spoken variation from standard Mandarin in writing, but is transcribed back to mimic the localized sound changes--with special nuances that de-familiarize and re-territorialize! For example, one night Xiao-guo returned from Bei-tou (a hot spring resort and red-light district in Taipei), where he took some senior male Japanese tourists for fun. Accidentally, he saw T.P. Gu (Kick the Ass) taking Grace Hu (Chaste Fox) to a hotel. Grace's swinging big tits suddenly became a scene as well as an object of both envy and desire. Xiao-guo reported to Xiao-lin:

Those gals for sale stared at Grace's big tits; everyone's eyes were reddened with envy, and wished that

they could take Grace all in with just one bite. Those "Ou-ji-shang" (おじいさん/old men), dame it,

all looked with mouths watering and kept repeating-- "A-nou-nie" (あのねえ/well), A-nou-nie" (あの

ねえ/well), Taiwanese "Weng-na" (おんな/woman), "Nang-ba-wan" (number one), "Nang-ba-wan"

(number one). The hell with it! Japanese English is damned stinky. What on earth is "Nang-ba-wan"

(wan in the 4<sup>th</sup> tone to mean No. 1)? If you ask me, "Lan-pa-wan" is more like it [a Taiwanese twist

with Lan-pa meaning *penis* and wan in the 2<sup>nd</sup> tone to mean *balls*] (25-26).

Thirdly, I will highlight Wang's play with accented Mandarin. The major example is Mandarin with a Cantonese tinge, largely through the depiction of Xiao-kuang, an overseas Chinese from Hong Kong for college education and stayed for work after graduation. In chapter two, the Deputy Executive, "Tie Guang-guang" (Eunuch Tie), wanted each of the UPT employees to sign on an already typed letter to protest against Carter Administration for discarding Taiwan. Xiao-kuang was quite reserved about this event:

“Did yao (you) shee (see) liz (this) letter closely?” Xiao-kuang looked up and glanced at everyone. His

elegant thin finger pointed at the letter on Chaste Fox’s (Grace Hu’s) desk.

“Liz (this) letter has a

problom (problem).”

“A problem?” Daniel bit on his ball pen and looked at Xiao-kuang curiously.

“A beg (big) problom (problem)!”

Taking the ball pen off his mouth, Daniel mimicked Xiao-kuang’s Cantonese Mandarin: “Has a beg (big) problom (problem)? Are yao (you) masdagen (mistaken)? Liz (this) letter is well worded just like a Newsweek article. I suppose it must have been drafted by a foreigner. A Chinese could never have written something so authentic” (121).

I tried to imitate the Cantonese sound changes in Mandarin by misspellings so as to foreignize the subtlety for English readers. Particularly, I want to point out that, by mimicking Cantonese accent in Mandarin, “Zhe” (which means *this*) is purposefully twisted to a different character with a similar sound—“Zei” to mean *thief*. In the English domain, the best I can manage is to use *liz* at where *this* should be. Next, in line with accented Mandarin, I will give another example, but it is not specific as to what provincial variation it is. After “Tie Guang-guang” (Eunuch Tie) had heard that Xiao-kuang was not willing to sign on the letter, he said:

“Xiao-kuang, yo (you) handsome boy, na (no) need to panic! Me, yours truly, ask all to sign on the

letters just to attract media attention, *just to make the papers, that’s all*. The message is that, as a

foreign [American] company, we also care about national event. *That’s all* [italics are English as it is

in the original Mandarin text] (123).

Please note that I have used *na* instead of *no* to reflect the Mandarin sound change from “Bu” (don’t) to “Ba” (stop)—from “**Bu**-yao Jin-zhang” to “**Ba**-yao Jin-zhang,” which means *no need to panic*.

In sum, let me focus on the ideological ruptures in the linguistic amalgam. Though Wang’s novel is narrated through Xiao-lin’s perspective, a careful reader shouldn’t miss the authorial intention. For one thing, the point of view often lapses from the

third person to an omnipotent one to show that, though Xiao-lin sees the world around him, he is only a helpless part of the engulfing whole. Next, the heteroglossic narration disrupts the distinction between domination and subordination in the ideological hierarchy—English being the top-notch; Mandarin (with accented provincial variations) being the middle; and Taiwanese dialect (with Japanese tinge) being the bottom. However, the life force comes most vividly in the reverse order. When Taiwanese dialect is brought in to describe Xiao-lin's poor family condition, it arouses pathos against the overall Mandarin background; when localized Japanese tinge comes with *mandarinized* Taiwanese dialect, it erupts with sexual connotations. The scene of those senior Japanese tourists going to Bei-tou for prostitution is exemplary, which further suggests that Taiwan was once a prostituted land under Japanese colonization. In terms of the archaic and colloquial style mix in Mandarin, it vaguely suggests a sense of nostalgia, which is reinforced when English is thrown in for punning. And finally, the recurrent sexual references of tits, balls, nakedness, homo-sexuality, and promiscuous relations are carnivalesque in a Bakhtinian sense to challenge the social, cultural, and political *nomos proper*.

## Conclusion

In one place, Dorothy (Dumping Trash) who wears heavy make-up complains to Xiao-lin about how tired she is because of heavy work load—in fact, there isn't much to do! Wang describes her in the following manner: “These ladies are all of such sort—as if by nature, they love to put on make-ups, blackening their brows and reddening their lips, just to exaggerate the truth” (1982, p. 4). Regretfully, Wang seems to have shown himself as a chauvinist. But he might not have to be—if we understand that he is just demonstrating the lack of subjectivity of Taiwanese society as a result of successive dominations one after another. The oppressed *status quo* is re-presented in a patriarchal system, under which the female body has to put on make-up to cover the naked truth. The real authorial intention is a return to subjectivity. In a different context when Grace Hu (Chaste Fox) is flirting with her male colleagues, she refers to herself as a mother.

“‘Stop that smooth talking with me, **your mom!**’ she exhorts, but her voice sounds to mean just the

opposite: ‘It is O.K. Just pull it all out from your heart’” (1982, p.8)!

Please note that a mother role naturally engenders variegated social relations—not just a woman in the male/female dichotomy. In truth, what sounds to be the opposite

is not just the indication in Grace's voice. It is in the orchestrated multiple voices of Zhenho Wang. Or maybe I should reverse the order by addressing him as Wang Zhenho, which is the customary way when Chinese people are called in Mandarin—last name going first and first name going last! Yes, the first name is a *given* name, and it goes last in the Mandarin setting. Hail to thee with all due respect--Mr. Wang Zhenho!



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The logo for the International Association of Arts and Humanities (iafor) is centered on the page. It consists of the lowercase letters 'iafor' in a light blue, serif font. The text is enclosed within a large, faint, light blue circular arc that is partially obscured by a larger, semi-transparent red circular arc that also surrounds the text.





