

*On the Edge and in between: The Predicaments of Taiwanese Subjectivity Reflected
by "Cape No. 7" and Its Aftermath*

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INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND

This paper is part of my examination of the Taiwanese younger generation's interpretation of their father and grandfathers' collective memory of "Japan," long after the empire's renunciation of and withdrawal from the island. As Leo Ching observes, given the condition how Japan ceded Taiwan after their defeat in WWII, Taiwan and Japan alike lack the opportunity to engage in de-colonization. The Japanese assimilation policies implemented during the colonial days came to a sudden halt and the Taiwanese people needed to re-shape their identification to better suit the policies of the KMT Nationalist Party's pro-Chinese authoritarian regime. Before the lifting of the martial law in 1987, the KMT government, who sees Imperial Japan as an opponent during the WWII, maintained a tight grip on an anti-Japan stance, and those who could not adapt found themselves illiterate, voiceless, and barred from any substantial positions in offices. Their Japanese experience were conveyed through hushed voices or other subtle means to their children and grandchildren, who would deem their nostalgia antiquated, unpatriotic, or of little importance. However, the loosening of the grip that ensued Taiwan's democratization in the 1980s saw a surge of nativist movements, in which subject matters that were previously banned from society, could now be openly discussed. This is, however, nearly 40 years later. The excavating of memories and exploring possibilities of de-colonization now fall on the laps of the younger generation, as the Japanized generation grows old and fades out. Having been indoctrinated by KMT, compounded by an emotional factor that is inherited through tales that run in the family, means that the navigation process would be complex, varying and discursive.

The 80s started a trend in Taiwan New Cinema. Directors like Hou Hsiao-hsien and Wu Nien-chen made it an objective to restore Taiwanese memories back to the public's historical consciousness. Their films fared well in prestigious international film festivals, and subsequently came to represent strong voices regarding Taiwan's suppressed past. However, they performed poorly in box offices, and the reach of their messages is limited. Nineteen years after Hou Hsiao-hsien's canonized *City of Sadness*, in 2008, Wei Te-sheng swept Taiwanese movie-goers off their feet with his romantic flick, *Cape No. 7*. Not only is his commercial success is a deviation from his art-house power predecessors, instead of centering the plot on historical events, but also the film's use of Taiwan's colonial past to serve as a mere backdrop foiling an accidental romance and a coming together of a local band. The colonial past, which is presented in the form of seven unsent love letters from a Japanese teacher to his Taiwanese pupil during the end of WWII, received little actual screen time, but sparked so much conversation regarding "national dignity," and "desire to become re-colonized" that it, too, could be read as a national allegory.

Cape No. 7 is romantic comedy that evolves around the coming together of a music band, whose one-time mission is to serve to foil a Japanese star in the town's coming beach concert. The male protagonist, A-ga, is a frustrated musician who fails to make a name for himself in the big city. Begrudgingly he returns to the countryside and lands a job delivering mail, which was secured by his stepfather, a local gang leader who also serves as a town representative. His band, put together in a brash, hurried manner, consists of local folks from different ethnic backgrounds. Their varying age, drastically different musical styles, complete with personal emotional baggage

illustrate the challenges the mishmash group faces as a band. Workwise, among A-ga large heap of deliberately neglected mail lies an undeliverable packet from Japan, penned to a Kojima Tomoko and an antiquated address that no longer exists. The packet of love letters lay in quiescent existence until the band manager, a Mandarin-speaking Japanese girl also named Tomoko, discovers them in A-ga's room and urges him to restore them to their designated owner.

Cape No. 7 differs from its predecessors that tackle the Japanese topic, but does not deviate from the New Cinema tradition so much in its lending voices to the marginalized, and inviting post-colonial interpretations. I will use *Cape No. 7* and the swarm of discussions in the media that ensued revolving around its "Japanese" element to discuss the progress (or lack of) of de-colonization and the possibility of finding reconciliation between the tug-o-war between Taiwan's own Chinese nationalism and Japanese colonialism, and the continuing construction and reconstruction of a Taiwanese identity.

IN BETWEEN: HYBRIDITY

The film opens with a man narrating in Japanese: "December 25th, 1945. The sun has completely set. I can no longer see the island of Taiwan." We find out that he is the voice of the Japanese teacher, reading the first of his seven unsent letters to his love interest, a Taiwanese girl named Tomoko. The sun has set completely, signifying the colonial power of Land of the Sun has come to an end. The well-dressed teacher sits on the deck of the Takasagomaru vessel, crowded with other equally neat but depressed passengers as they embark on the journey of repatriation. The camera moves to modern day Taipei in the next scene, and we see the angry protagonist, A-ga, slamming his guitar against a lamppost and cursing: "f*** you, Taipei," before he sets off on his motorbike, southbound, to Heng-chun, A-ga's home and a small coastal town that sits on the southernmost tip of Taiwan. The two men both embark on a journey departing Taipei: for the Japanese teacher, he is being re-centered as he travels back to his empire; for A-ga, this spatial movement de-centers him, pushing him further towards the edge of the island. A-ga's motorcycle passes through the historical landmark of a citadel known as the West Gate. His crossing the threshold of the stoney gate delimits his departure from the political and socio-economical center that is Taipei. The delimitation of this border underlines that he has come to the other end, a place that has been marginalized both historically and geographically.

The sense of dispersion is not limited to A-ga's narrative alone. Shortly after, a small bus comes to a screeching halt before the same gate, and we meet Tomoko, a Japanese ex-model who also has little luck establishing her career and finds herself undertaking odd jobs in Taiwan. Tomoko clambers off the bus, takes a look at the gate, and signals by waving the bus through: "Can do, can do!" She cries. A Taiwanese bus driver also clambers off, takes another look and rebukes: "No can do," and decidedly takes an alternative route. The West Gate was constructed during the Qing Dynasty to fend off intruding Japanese troops. An influential film blogger finds this scene evocative of a belligerent Japan empire (Lan Zu-wei), and see the driver's refusal of forcing the bus through as a rejection of unscrupulous import of foreign cultures, as well as an act of protecting Taiwan's cultural legacy. However, he notes that this Sino-centric viewpoint might be lost on most of the audience, since the

history of Heng-chun and the gate is an obscure tidbit. It seems ironic that he plants the burden of warding off the influx of foreign cultures squarely on the shoulders of a peripheral town whose history remains unfamiliar to the mainstream. Not to mention Wei's depiction of the marginalized town shows that it is consisted of residents and visitors from multi-ethnic, multi-cultural backgrounds, and that there is no single, uniformed legacy to "protect."

Multi-cultural exchange has long been embedded in the small town of Heng-chun (or say, Taiwan), and hybridity is self-evident and ubiquitous on all levels, as captured in *Cape No. 7*. When the young Tomoko presents the band with aboriginal marble charms she purchased for the members, and explains the sort of good fortune that comes with them, the band's only octogenarian and self-proclaimed "national treasure," Mou-bei, takes his own Goddess Mazu charm from within his shirt and wonders out loud: "I already have this. Wouldn't the deities start fighting?" The aboriginal-born Loma assures him, in Mou-bei's own Hoklo dialect: "Why would they? Everyone is family." This hybridity reflected in the band members' religious beliefs, where purism is usually applied in the most extreme terms, is an ultimate manifesto of the nation's heterogeneity. If Taiwan New Cinema represents a coming to terms with the dissimilarity that would hopefully resolve historical affliction and differences, *Cape No. 7* seems to be following the same trajectory in spite of being a commercial production.

CHINESE NATIONALISM and JAPANESE COLONIALISM

Another similarity *Cape No. 7* shares with Taiwan New Cinema and other Taiwanese art productions, is the attention drawn to the portrayal of the "Japanese." The image of the "Japanese colonizer" here differs greatly from its portrayal in previous Taiwanese-made and Hollywood films that tackle this period. In previous films, the image of wartime Japanese are either portrayed as brutes that treat its subjects unfairly, or faceless masses with little personality, a mere part in compliance with its state apparatus. In Wei's creation, the Japanese colonizer takes the form of a man of education, filled with remorse towards his Taiwanese subject, and capable of seeing his "subject" in a positive, even romantic light. And more importantly, he conveys in his letter an attempt to distinct himself from the imperial system: "I am but a poor teacher. Why must I bear the cross for the faults of an entire empire?" In this context, the viewers are able to humanize a part of the colonizing apparatus, and even empathize with his sense of powerlessness.

For critics who read the film from a nationalistic perspective, the characters represents their nations, and their relationship with one another symbolizes a state-to-state relationship. Hence, the relationship between elder Tomoko and her teacher prematurely ended by repatriating polices at the end of WWII, depicts "Taiwan's longing for Japan's love." Sociologist Chen I-chung (陳宜中) sees *Cape No.7* as an accusation against KMT's "China," whose intrusion upon Taiwan's historical timeline tore apart the two lovers. He describes the two Taiwanese/ Japanese relationships in the film as a "Taiwanese yearning to be recolonized," and further reminds his readers that the token "Chinese" or "mainlander," is absent in a film that makes it a point to write in characters from multiple ethnic backgrounds. From these points he drew two doubts: a) does this yearning for "Japan's" love indicate that the

reconciliation between “Taiwan” and the “Republic of China” is not within the foreseeable future? And b) since the young generation chooses Japan over China and paints a former colonizer in such romantic light, what’s to become of the Taiwanese subjectivity?

Chen I-chung’s doubts over Taiwan’s identity formation voices the questions of those who are preoccupied with a fixed nationality, those that “upholds the continuity and sovereignty of a tradition and culture, and perceives no problem in the internal differentiation of that particular community” (Ching 194), that one must choose one cultural heritage over another, and stick with it. Despite that Wei includes the Hoklo (A-ga and Mou-bei), the aboriginals (Loma and his father), the Hakka (Malasan), the Japanese (Dada and Tomoko) in his effort to present the hybridity of Taiwanese society, Chen’s essentialist bewilderment: “the Chinese is absent” really underscores the ramification between the multiple camps of the “Chinese,” especially when in fact Hoklo and Hakka are, ethnically speaking, Chinese.

Interestingly, a politics scholar Hsu Chieh-lin (許介麟) criticized that *Cape No. 7*’s success owes much to Japanese support, and commented that the love letters scripted by a Japanese “rambled on about his nostalgia for his previous colony.” In an interview, Wei said he had penned the letters himself, first in Chinese, and had them translated into Japanese. The letters are narrated in Japanese throughout the film, reiterating the Japanese teacher’s remorse and request for his lover’s forgiveness for jilting her. “I am not deserting you, I wish to spare you agony,” the teacher says in one letter, and “Please forgive me and my cowardice,” in another. These words of penitence surely deviate from the general observations in reality that the Japanese government has not yet come to terms with its roles and behaviors during the war. As Leo Ching pointed out in *Becoming Japanese*, “Japan’s subordination to American imperialism [...] freed Japan of any responsibility regarding the dissolution of its empires.” (186) And as most recently observed in Osaka’s Mayor, Toru Hashimoto’s brash comments on the comfort women issue (BBC News, May 14th, 2013). Contrary to essentialist/ nationalist observations that the popular film panders to Japanese sentiments, the fact that the fictional letters spawned from a Taiwanese author, who mimics the language of a former colonizer and puts words of apology in his mouth, is an arbitrary trespassing on the subaltern’s part. Here, the Taiwanese screenwriter/director takes the initiative and attempts speak for the silent Japanese empire.

The subaltern has spoken, and he channels the voice of the dominant culture. We can hear the Japanese colonizer’s narration of his remorse, and at the same time we are well aware that the film is a Taiwanese production by a Taiwanese director, and that the director is conveying “Japanese” emotions by mimicking a “Japanese.” Hsu and Chen’s concerns may lie in that the Taiwanese gaze towards the “Japanese” would only reflect its own “otherness,” which further pushes itself into the periphery, but they overlook the its potential for deconstructing and decontextualizing the commonly expected notion of “Japan.” Moreover, they also lack “an apprehension of colonial consciousness” and the need to constantly construct and deconstruct taken-for-granted cultures, nationalities, and identities to form one’s own identity.

ON THE EDGE: NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

The band's on stage performance is the grand finale that the storyline has been escalating to. When A-ga leaps on stage, he leads the crowd in a countdown before the sun sets into a completely dark sky. This image echoes the first lines of the Japanese teacher's love letter: "The sun has completely set." Contrary to the melancholic tone in the letter, the setting of this sun marks the commencement of the concert that the band has been preparing for. The crowd is ecstatic, and emotions run high as A-ga belts out an upbeat ballad about the pursuit of dreams.

The crowd calls for an encore, but A-ga's band's short repertoire runs out of songs to perform. As the band members relinquished their instruments and prepare to descend the stage, Mou-bei, who has been waiting for an audience, breaks out his yueh-qin, a traditional string instrument that the others previously voted off the band, and strums the notes of Robert Schubert's *Heidenroslein*. He gives a solo performance with his traditional music until one by one, his band rejoined him and delivered the Mandarin Chinese version of this 18th century German Ballad. Standing backstage listening in is the Japanese singer Atari Kousuke (中孝介), the actual star of this show. He exclaimed: "I know this song too," and joined A-ga in his song. Upon Atari's debut on the stage, A-ga takes a step out of the spotlight, but Atari pulls him back by locking their arms together. Side by side they continue the song, but in different tongues, A-ga singing in Mandarin Chinese, Atari in Japanese. This juxtaposition of two men, unsurprisingly, invited accusations of and compliments on the "reconciliation between Taiwan and Japan" in not only the Taiwanese media, but also online forums in Hong Kong and China, as well as for a Japanese column writer, Arai Hifumi, who remarks that the concert, for her, symbolizes "the funeral for Taiwan's Post-colonial era" (28).

Heidenroslein, or *The Wild Rose*, is an ultimate example of cross-cultural exchange. It has its origin in Germany, but has grown roots everywhere else around the globe. It is in fact so inscribed into Wei's consciousness that prior to making of *Cape No. 7*, he believed it to be a Taiwanese children's song. His choice of *Heidenroslein*, whether he is aware of it, is a manifestation of a foreign culture's seamless integration into a local culture, so seamless that it has lost all its exoticism. Could this be the ideal result for the search of a Taiwanese identity? With internal dynamics welded into each other, can the negotiation between imperialism, nationalism, and colonialism be resolved?

This "melting pot" idealism does not seem like it is going to happen soon.

A-ga and his band's performance well received, the film ends with a feel-good factor. But if we have been reading the formation of the band as the formation of Taiwanese subjectivity, we cannot help but wonder: what becomes of the amateur, mishmash band after this one lucky strike? Where is Taiwan going? After *Cape No. 7*, films in search of Taiwanese identities performed well in the box office. The titles *1895* (2009), *Monga* (2010), *Rainbow Warriors: Seediq Bale* (2011), and *Din Tao: Leader of the Parade* (2012) *David Loman* (2013) (which means important figure in a gang) are self-evident, as the new generation of directors weave their narrations around themes with strong local flavors, like gangster culture, religious festivities, while continuing *Cape No. 7*'s example of incorporating scenes or languages that are

distinctively vernacular (the dialogues in *Cape No. 7* contained Hoklo, Hakka, aboriginal dialects, as well as Japanese and a sprinkles of Mandarin Chinese). This concentration on the marginalized, in my own opinion, represents a desire to make a legitimate claim to something particular, something more than a product of hybridity and ambivalence. The position of the very marginalized almost guarantees that it filters out any influences that are foreign, and carve out an exclusively Taiwanese subjectivity. However, Leo Ching warns against the advocating of “the oppressed other in exclusive marginality,” which, by accessing the marginal through marginality, circumvents the possibility to apprehend the asymmetrical power relations that prompted the process of marginalization in the first place. Rather than underscoring the status of “otherness,” he urges the “apprehension of the colonial consciousness” and understanding that both the colonized and colonizer are deeply involved and intertwined in “the construction and destruction of cultures, nationalities, and identities, although within drastically asymmetrical power relations” (190)

CULTURAL LIMINALITY

Chen Ru-shou summed up Taiwan’s cultural experience with three characteristics: dispersion, ambivalence, and hybridity (1994). Given the complex matrix of Taiwan’s multi-ethnicity, history of colonization by various imperial powers, and the subsequent endlessly repetitive process of constructing, destructing, and renewal of its subjectivity, the Taiwanese identity seems to be perpetually “in progress.” On the surface, it was en route to “becoming Japanese” prior to KMT’s arrival in 1945; before Japanese assimilation, learning the Chinese classics was integral to establish oneself; and at present, it seems Taiwan is preoccupied with identifying the vernacular in search of a subjectivity free from foreign pollutants. The only perpetual certainty for the Taiwanese is, historian Chen Fang-ming notes, that, due to its geo-political marginal status, the Taiwanese are in for a tradition to struggle against a central power.

This predicament of being “stuck” in a liminal status can be found in *Cape No. 7* in the form of the seven undelivered letters, and the rainbow, a prevalent image in Wei’s films. The love letters, when scattered about in A-ga’s bedroom, are trapped in liminal space before they could reach their rightful owner, the elder Tomoko. Before the letters could reach her, they were read by the Japanese teacher’s daughter, intercepted by A-ga (who fails to understand its significance), and then “rediscovered” by the younger Tomoko. However, before reaching their recipient, the letters are mere words on paper, their emotions bound by paper and ink and their messages suspended. Their meaning is only released when they arrive at their destination.

In the end of the film, Kojima Tomoko finally receives the sixty-year-old letters. As her hands open the packet that contains the letters from her now-deceased lover, her face is concealed from the viewers, making it impossible to read her emotions. Although Wei let the Japanese teacher’s voice permeate the film, he does not let this particular subaltern speak. Her reaction is left to the imagination of the audience, thus preserving the air of ambivalence between the imagined Taiwan/”Japan” relationship.

In his films, Wei frequently uses the image of the rainbow to convey the connection of two different ends. Utilized to signify the bridging of differences and the process of

crossing over to reaching the *other* end, the rainbow appears when the lovers converge, and when A-ga toughens up for his performance and becomes a true warrior, according to aboriginal legends. In my opinion, Wei's rainbows also convey a sense of cultural liminality: that before reaching the other end, one's existence is indeterminable and therefore suspended. And to read *Cape No. 7* as a national allegory, one cannot avoid this sense of in-betweenness as the Taiwanese identity oscillates between Chinese nationalism, Japanese colonialism, and its own internal dynamics. Nevertheless, despite that the term "liminal" suggests a neither-nor situation, it also implies that at the end of the transit, there is a destination to be reached. The rainbow, after all, is also a symbol of hope.



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