

Taiwan literature in Japanese: works of colonial, diasporic and contemporary writers

Chinese has been the language of power and authority in Taiwan since the 17th century except for the 50 years of the Japanese colonisation (1895-1945). During this period, Japanese was the official language and the lingua franca in Taiwan. The Japanese era was a considerably shorter period than that of Chinese influence, but it is important because Taiwan's transition to modernity took place during this period (particularly the 1920s and 1930s) and it has significantly shaped contemporary Taiwanese society. The world of Taiwan literature has long been multilingual and these traditions continue into contemporary Japanese-language literature through the writing of a few excellent authors.

Literature in the Japanese era

Towards the end of the Japanese era, stories based on accounts of Japanese colonists became available. Hamada Hayao's *Nanpo Imin Mura*, which focuses on the harsh lives of Japanese colonists in a remote part of eastern Taiwan, won Taiwan Bungakusho (Taiwan literary award) in 1943. Born and raised in Sendai, Japan, Hamada migrated to Taiwan as a teacher after completing a Bachelor degree in Japan. Nishikawa Mitsuru's *Taiwan Jukan Tetsudo*, written for the literary magazine *Bungei Taiwan* from 1940 to 1944, also reveals colonial history, through the lens of the Taiwan-wide railway network building project, completed in 1908 and upgraded throughout the Japanese era. Although Nishikawa was not part of this project, his novel reflected the collective experiences of the Japanese people in Taiwan.

The notion of Taiwan as a united concept developed during the Japanese era (which paradoxically led to the independence movement from Japan), and those active in the independence movement expressed in opinion pieces and literary magazines such as *Taiwan Seinen*, established in Tokyo in 1920. Led by Lin Hsien-Tang, whose views represented the 'colonised' rather than the colonisers, *Taiwan Seinen* largely published views opposing Japanese colonisation and in support of Taiwan's independence movement. Lin himself expressed such a view in *The Diary of Lin Hsien*. As in *The Diary of Lin Hsien*, many publications in *Taiwan Seinen* were

written in Chinese.

In 1937, due to Japan's increasingly nationalist stance, all Chinese language media in Taiwan were banned. By then, many younger Taiwanese generations had been educated in Japanese and were fluent in it. Widely read literature included Yang Kui's *Shinbun Haitatsufu*, Lu Heruo's *Gyusha*, and Long Ying-Zong's *Papaya no aru Machi*. Long's detailed descriptions of the harsh living conditions of the colonised Taiwanese people fitted particularly well into the active Japanese proletarian literary movements of the time that revealed the slave-like working conditions and traumas of Japanese factory labourers on mainland Japan. Like Japanese blue-collar labourers, colonised citizens were seen as second-class, and both had the shared experience of disadvantage with no end in sight. Writing in Japanese was a powerful tool that enabled Taiwanese voices to travel further in an era when Japan was the most powerful nation in Asia. A 1941 article from the Japanese magazine *Shukan Asahi* (15 June 1941) shows there were a number of emerging Taiwanese creative writers who wrote about Taiwan's uniqueness and whose work was read by both Japanese and Taiwanese in Japanese.

The Kuomintang era and Sinicisation

Japan's defeat in WWII meant that Taiwan was controlled by the Chinese: the Republic of China (est. 1912), led by Chiang Kai-Shek and his Chinese Nationalist Party known as the Kuomintang (KMT), which assumed governance over Taiwan. Consequently, Japanese lost its official language status in Taiwan and Chinese was reinstated as the official language.

This posed challenges for Taiwanese writers unfamiliar with the imposed state language and the KMT's political stance, and who did not necessarily regard China as the 'motherland.' In 1947, the use of Japanese was banned from education in formal and informal contexts and there was growing social pressure to avoid using Japanese at all. A new wave of anti-communism grew during the martial law period, imposed by the KMT from 1949 to 1987. Dissent against Chiang's dictatorship, exemplified by the 228 Incident (1947), resulted in individuals becoming victims of the so-called White Terror, by which anyone who stood against the KMT could be sent to a political prison on the remote Green Island for 're-education' classes and to carry out hard labour. The martial Law era was tough for those who had written in Japanese. Lin Hsien-Tang, for instance, sought refuge in Japan in 1949 and never returned, passing away in 1956. Long Ying-Zong penned his debut novel *Papaya no*

aru Machi in Japanese in 1937, working as a banker for the most of his working life, and after his retirement he transitioned to writing in Chinese and published *Du Fu zai Chang'an* during the 1980s.

The crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in 1979 known as the Kaohsiung Incident was a pivotal event that catalysed Taiwan's path toward democracy and greatly influenced writers in Taiwan. In 1987, Chiang Ching-Kuo, son of Chiang Kai-Shek, lifted martial law after 38 years, allowing opposing views to surface through media channels. Taiwanese writers explored the convergence of diverse voices and experiences, emphasising plurality and diversity. According to scholars Chia-Rong Wu and Ming-Ju Fan, Taiwan literature entered a new phase, in which writers in Taiwan explored the complexity of Taiwanese subjectivity and identity. However, this exploration did not lead to a resurgence of Taiwan's Japanese-language literature, as writers of novels did not usually dedicate themselves to mastering Japanese, a foreign language.

An exception is Li Kotomi. Born in 1989 in Taiwan and growing up as a consumer of Japanese culture and goods, she commenced studying Japanese during her teenage years, later relocating to Japan for graduate school and securing employment there. Eventually, she emerged as a novelist writing in her acquired language, Japanese. Her penname consists of a Chinese family name and a Japanese given name, even though she has no ethnic connection to Japan. In the context of Taiwan's literary history, Li's decision to write in Japanese is not unusual, and certainly not un-Taiwanese. However, unlike historical Taiwanese authors who received their education in Japanese during the colonial era, Li was educated in Chinese, yet has opted to express herself in Japanese because she was inspired by Japanese literature and language.

Li showcases Taiwan's linguistic history by writing in Japanese and subsequently self-translating into Chinese for Taiwanese readers, demonstrating true bilingualism, while also challenging binary concepts of translation.[1] She also endeavours to expand Taiwan's *tongzhi* (queer) literature. Her stories feature both Taiwanese and Japanese characters, presenting a queer perspective not only from Taiwan but also of her generation in East Asia. Li's 2018 novel, *Hitorimai*, has been translated into English as *Solo Dance*, and her 2021 novel, *Higanbana ga Saku Shima* received the 165th Akutagawa Prize, a highly esteemed Japanese literary award.

Li's success is widely acknowledged in Taiwan, illustrating that contemporary Taiwan literature can thrive when written in Japanese. In fact, Li's impact may not

have been as influential in Taiwan and beyond had she written solely in Chinese. Her choice to write in Japanese significantly amplifies Taiwan's presence within Japanese literary networks and has been described 'mutual affection' in the Japanese media.

Taiwan diaspora literature in Japanese

Unlike Li who chooses to write in Japanese, there are contemporary Taiwanese writers who write in Japanese as their strongest language. Higashiyama Akira received the 153rd Naoki Prize (another popularly recognised Japanese literature award) in 2015 for his novel *Ryu*. Despite his Japanese penname, he is a Taiwanese national. Born in Taiwan in 1968, he moved to Japan at the age of five and retained his Taiwanese passport instead of naturalising as Japanese (Japan strictly enforces a no dual/multi-nationalities policy).

Reflecting on his family background, Higashiyama offers a viewpoint more aligned with *waishengren* (a term which in the past has referred to mainlanders who arrived in Taiwan in post Japanese era and their offspring), not *benshengren* (a term which in the past has referred to those who moved to Taiwan before and during the Japanese era and their offspring). Even though distinguishing between these two groups of people is no longer common, the concept is important to Higashiyama and his novel.

Ryu is set between 1975 and 1985 during Taiwan's martial law era when Higashiyama grew up. *Ryu* presents a grim narrative, reflecting the tension of the era and delving into the negative experiences of individuals. Furthermore, the novel intricately explores the complex historical journeys and perspectives of *waishengren*. The main character's school life, friendships, fleeting romances, and his deeply rooted identity linked to the lived histories of *waishengren* who originally migrated from China to Taiwan with the KMT are interwoven into the narrative.

This portrayal sends a strong message, a reminder that the *waishengren* narrative of a people living in exile, nostalgic for their homeland, was once an essential ideological element of the Republic of China on Taiwan. The younger Taiwanese generations are likely to perceive that Higashiyama's depiction as historical and not representative of contemporary Taiwan literature, but his work nevertheless explores Taiwan's distinctive past.



President Tsai Ing-Wen and the 153rd Japanese ‘Naoki Award’ writer Higashiyama Akira, August 1, 2016. Credit: WikiCommons.

A similar ‘hybrid’ method is used by Wen You-Rou, who predominantly writes autobiographical novels. Wen was born in Taiwan in 1980, moved to Tokyo when she was three years old, and still lives there as a Taiwanese national. In addition to her experience as a migrant, she is upfront about being from a *benshengren* family. Reflecting her background, the main theme of her stories reveals how different generations of Taiwanese have different relationships to different languages, especially among diasporic families. She and her grandparents speak Japanese, but for different reasons; her parents have limited Japanese language skills but are fluent in Mandarin and Hokkien (which is one of the national languages of Taiwan initially developed in pre-Japanese era and still spoken by a very large majority of people); Wen’s parents can speak in Hokkien with their parents, but she cannot. Due to the influx of people through stages of immigration and colonisation, as well as the policies imposed by various political forces governing Taiwan, it is a multicultural country in which hardly anyone is monolingual. To Wen, Taiwan’s pluralism makes Taiwan as uniquely Taiwan. This pluralism is extended to Taiwan’s Japanese language diasporic literature. Higashiyama has a *waishengren* view and Wen has a *benshengren* view, and both are Taiwanese views.

Yoshida Shuichi's *Ruu*: Can a Japanese novelist write Taiwan literature?

Yoshida Shuichi, born and raised in Japan with no familial ties to Taiwan, captures contemporary Taiwanese identity manifestly separate from China. Yoshida, a recipient of the 127th Akutagawa Prize in 2002, published his novel *Ruu* in 2012. Based on true accounts of the building of Taiwan's High-Speed Rail system modelled on Japan's Shinkansen, *Ruu* uncovers the connections forged between Japanese and Taiwanese individuals, intricately weaving multiple heartwarming stories of love and friendship. As the storyline unfolds, nearly every main character finds their path to a happy conclusion, coinciding with the official launch of the high-speed railway in 2007. Despite encountering differences and occasional disagreements between Taiwanese and Japanese, the overarching collective ambition for the project's success by modifying the Shinkansen system for Taiwan unites them, because all are ultimately working for Taiwan.

The novel was adapted into a television series in 2020 through a collaboration between Taiwan's PTS and Japan's NHK TV stations. The joint production aimed to underscore the deep friendship between the two countries, serving as an expression of Japan's gratitude to Taiwan after Taiwan donated 260 million USD to lead the world in relief donations following the earthquake and the consequent major nuclear accident in Fukushima on March 11, 2011.

One might assume that Yoshida, as a Japanese national, would face immediate disqualification from being considered a writer of Taiwan literature. Examining *Ruu*, however, his narrative bears striking resemblances to Wei Te-Sheng's *Cape No. 7* (2008), which is the most watched domestic film in Taiwanese cinema history. The movie delves into romances spanning colonial and contemporary eras, portraying romantic relationships between Taiwanese and Japanese, to explore Taiwan's quest for its own identity. According to scholar Mark Harrison, *Cape No. 7* emphasises Taiwan's historical and present connections with Japan, notably excluding references to China. Harrison argues that this narrative aligns with the 'post-martial law reaction against the Sinicization of politics, education, and culture in the KMT era,' which represents a significant facet of Taiwan's identity formation.

Both *Cape No. 7* and *Ruu* offer 'an absence of China' and a 'feel-good' essence, allowing readers and viewers to forge emotional connections with the characters as they embark on poignant journeys together. *Cape No. 7* is often celebrated as pivotal

in conveying Taiwanese identity, and because the narrative and themes of *Ruu* present a comparable resonance, it makes it difficult to exclude *Ruu* from being 'Taiwan literature'. Although Yoshida is not a Taiwanese writer, *Ruu* is potentially a Taiwanese work that is written in Japanese.

Concluding remarks

Taiwan's history is complex, marked by multiple phases of colonisation and migration, leading to ongoing cycles of identity formation and re-formation. Taiwanese identity is not imposed, but rather a construct that individuals develop based on their unique relationship with Taiwan.

Since the lifting of martial law in 1987 followed by the abolition of the Betrayers Punishment Act in 1991 and the revision of Article 100 of the Criminal Law in 1992, the Taiwanese people finally gained freedom of expression after decades of repression, leading to writers and other creative professionals in Taiwan expressing their individual perspectives of Taiwan. This has transcended Taiwan's borders, resonating with Taiwanese diaspora.

Chinese has been the most dominant language in Taiwan for most of the last 400 years, but the historical significance of the Japanese language in Taiwan's modern history is profound. Moreover, contemporary narratives penned in Japanese, such as those written by diasporic writers and Li Kotomi, demonstrate the pluralism of Taiwan literature. This diversity mirrors Taiwan's current state, where individuals value and exercise their rights to free speech and expression. For this reason, Taiwan literature can be written in any of the languages that are significant to Taiwan and its people, including Japanese.

[1] Ma, Yahia, and Tets Kimura. 2024. "Self-translation, Rewriting, and Translingual Address: Li Kotomi's Solo Dance." *Journal of Literary Multilingualism*, vol 2 (forthcoming).

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Image: A young woman reading in a bookshop in Taipei, 2020. Credit: weichen_kh/Flickr.