

## ***“Snaps of a Childhood Revisited: Music and Taiwanese Identity”***

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What is Taiwanese identity? For sure, Taiwanese culture has never been mono-cultural; hence, Taiwanese identity is never singular. Its last four hundred years of history tells of tumultuous political changes, the impact of which is profoundly cultural—or should we say, multicultural. The local issue in Taiwan has never been far away from the global. The global nature of the Taiwanese context, underscored in this conference, is, by no means, a new phenomenon in Taiwanese history and culture. As the fifteenth generation of a Taiwanese family, I have come to understand that my family story is not merely a personal, private one. My very “local” growing up was intricately bound up with the not so local character of the island. In other words, one can say that Taiwan’s local character would not been what it is without its long, gradual history of globalization. The globalization, paradoxically, deepens the localism in Taiwanese identity; at times, it seems that incorporating global features is one to insure the continuation of the local Taiwanese culture. In this exploration of Taiwanese identity, I would like to offer some reflections and take you on a journey to moments of my childhood and consider, through these few “musical” moments, both the local and not so local character in Taiwanese identity.

One of the earliest memories I have of growing up in Chunan in the 60s—trivial as it may seem—embodies a tale of the survival of Taiwanese consciousness. It took place on one of the our visits my mother and we kids made to our maternal grandparents, who lived some ten minutes of walk away from our own house, in the downtown of Chu-Nan. On this particular evening, some time before dinner was ready, we grandchildren were all sitting

quietly with my grandfather, the patriarch--and the voice--of the household, watching on TV the half-an-hour variety show, which was mostly people singing. Then, at the announcement of evening news to be followed, a grunt shot out of my grandfather, "Turn off the TV." Uncharacteristically commented my grandfather, a man of few words, "The news is but gibberish."

This seemingly uneventful episode somehow made a big impression on me, a mere five-year-old, especially considering that most of those visits were like a huge blur between getting ready to leave home, the strolling through the main street of Chunan, and the steam of my grandmother's cooking. In my young mind, it was, indeed, a very peculiar occasion. For my childhood was insulated from any passionate opinion by a shield of verbal silence about politics.

That is to say, I pretty much grew up without newspapers, except for some four, five year of subscription we had of *Kuo-yü Ru-pao* ("The Mandarin Daily," a journal for children). However, our house was never without printed matters. The truth is that there were always books and journals in the house. Son of illiterate parents, my father, with seven, eight years of schooling by the Japanese in the 30s, was nevertheless an avid reader, and he kept on reading books and journals--in Japanese. Although politics did not seem to be part of the discourse of the family, there was music. As if in lieu of words of passion, my father played incessantly whatever records he could get hold of—largely Japanese. Those were some of the bright and light moments of the childhood when my father got together with cousins singing, forgetting themselves, often in nostalgic tunes. In a twisted way, for me, things most Taiwanese are inevitably accentuated or colored in Japanese. It is no wonder that my first nursery rhymes were all Japanese—until I started kindergarten. Then whenever my

mother was in her pensive self, she sang to herself “*Yü-Yeh Hua*” (“The Flower in the Rainy Night”) softly, full of nostalgia.

Then when we finally had our television set in the early 70s, my parents almost never had on the TV at the news hour. When in middle school we were taught about the propriety of ideal citizenship, which necessarily engages itself by participating in the political discourse, I wondered about the lack of culture in my family. Why would my grandfather say that the news was but gibberish? The occasional questioning of my family, in hindsight, helped deepen the rift, psychological and cultural, between my family and me—as we were so comprehensively shrouded in the absolutely-no-politics silence. Until fairly recently, whenever revisiting these snapshots of my childhood, I had typically interpreted this absence of political engagement and discussion as a marker of a working class Taiwanese family—politically indifferent and uninterested.

Is it simplistically so or truly so? My interpretation, in many ways, exposes my internalization of the conscious and systematic *déclassement* of the Taiwanese, which many a Taiwanese like myself have suffered for four decades (1947-1987) under the Kuoming Tang rule. In my case, the political implication of these snapshots of a childhood did not emerge for me way after I left Taiwan, in 1987—the watershed year of the politics in Taiwan. My re-learning of the Taiwanese history in the twentieth century and my re-examination of my growing up in Chunan did not begin until I relocated myself in another land—in fact, not until I started challenging the canon I had been fed in my study of literature.

Closely re-examined in light of the twentieth-century Taiwanese history, of course, these scenes from the mid-60s to the 70s are not about how a certain class of the Taiwanese behaves. Instead, they together paint a picture of pains and sorrows of Taiwanese people forced to mute themselves under Nationalist oppression. My grandfather’s blurting out

news being gibberish was one passionate comment to the KMT-controlled news broadcasting. By and large, the silence or absence of political discussion around my childhood was a legacy of and reaction to the 1947 tragedy and the white terror that followed. At the same time, the silence was a conscious act of resistance; it was used strategically by the Taiwanese like my family to express their willful absence from the current discourse.

Last March 18<sup>th</sup>, I called my mother to wish her happy birthday. Full of excitement, my mother asked me if I knew what day it was in Taiwan. I had totally forgotten that it was also the day of the presidential election in Taiwan, although I had been following it closely from all the possible sources I could get here in the States. Then, my mother went on with her analysis of the candidate she had voted for: Chen Shui-Bian. When I hung up, something stirred and moved me deeply, for I realized that for the first time my mother and I had a discussion on politics. I had thought that my mother was not capable of such a discussion! Moved by this experience, that same day I called my sister, who lives with my father in a different part of Taipei. On the phone, there was excitement and exhilaration in everyone's voice about the election and the prospect of having the first elected Taiwanese president, although the result would not be out for many more hours. I had not known that my family was so proudly Taiwanese, and I had thought that my family was not interested at all interested in current affairs!

Had there been no post-1987 Taiwan, I probably would have never known this about my parents, who had been so reticent about almost everything (except our education) while we were growing up. It seems to me that during those years, in the absence of meaningful discussion, music became a powerful means of self-expression and for their release of frustration when many Taiwanese people were denied access to printed matters

for expressing themselves. It helped the Taiwanese survive the Nationalist repression of the island consciousness and maintain a cultural identity that would have otherwise been wiped out. My mother's dreamy humming of "Yü-yeh hua" and my father's playing Japanese songs have a new meaning to me now; music was a way to say what they were not allowed in words.

Indeed, turning to music that often was not so Taiwanese was one strategy that Taiwanese like my grandparents and parents adopted to survive the Nationalist repression of the Taiwanese consciousness—or localism. In the 50s and early 60s, when Taiwanese music was largely censored or banned, the Japanese folk and popular music was embraced and appropriated by many Taiwanese into the local musical scene. Chen Yü-Hsiou, in her Yin-yü Tai-wan (The Centennial Music Taiwan, 1895-1995), calls the popular music of this period "hybrid" ("Huen-hsueh"). Hybrid or indigenous, for Taiwanese like me whose first nursery rhymes were Japanese and who were later fed both at home and outside with much Japanese music, in spite of our Nationalist indoctrination, this music has become the emotional space where our Taiwanese sentiment perched.

More than two decades later, after having been away for a decade in a different continent, when I listened for the first time to Tsai Chen-Nan, I was deeply moved his profound expression of that emotional space. His sentiment is unmistakably Taiwanese—Tsai has been championed by many as a godfather-like figure in Taiwanese music today. His last CD album (1996) title, "Nan Ge" ("The Southern Song"), plays with Tsai's status and name. "Nan Ge" is the southern song—implicating Tsai and Taiwan (his first name means "to restore the south"). "Nan Ge" is also homonym of Brother Nan, as he is often referred to by his friends. Yet, when closely examined, Tsai's music betrays a multicultural, not so wholly local character--which has always been the character of things Taiwanese. For

example, while his “Ye Mei-kue” (“Wild Rose”), “Mu-chin de Ming-tzu shih Tai-wan” (“My Mother’s Name is Taiwan”), and “Tai Chieh-nü” (“The Chaste One”) are equally Taiwanese sentimentally, the tune of “Ye Mei-kue” is Japanese and “Tai Chieh-nü” straight from “The House of the Rising Sun.”

What then is Taiwanese music? What is Taiwanese identity, the survival of which owes much to its music? In a simultaneously multiple contact zone like Taiwan, its music and identity are necessarily products of transculturation, a term used by ethnographers to describe “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 6). In the Taiwanese instance, the music that carried its people through the worst moment of its history is necessarily a multicultural one, embodying both the local and the global.