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‘Better emulate the Irish resistance’: Influences of the Irish literary revival on Taiwanese literature and politics during and after the Japanese occupation

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chê khi chhiòng chū-tī tōng-siaⁿ tīt piau-póng 齊起倡自治同聲直標榜

'Let us rise together to call for self-government and in unison we shall boldly declare it'

(Tshuà 208)

As part of Taiwan's aspiration to gain recognition as an independent nation, Taiwanese media often draw comparisons between their own situation and Ireland: Politically active users of online platforms publish articles with titles such as "Taiwanese think about the history of the Irish" by Wang Chong 王充 and "Drawing lessons from Ireland's 'survival wisdom' – Can Taiwan break through the political deadlock and become a global key player?" by Liu Zhenghui 劉政暉. Literary scholars also frequently draw upon the historical parallels between Ireland and Taiwan (Fogarty, Wei 3). In response to a satirical European map renaming the Republic of Ireland as 'Taiwan' and the United Kingdom as 'Passive aggressive kingdom' (Tsvetkov 123), Professor Shan-yun Huang from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University writes, 'If Ireland may be seen as the Taiwan of Europe, then Taiwan may also be seen as the Ireland of Asia' (Huang 182). In the introduction of an anthology published in 2020, titled *Hangxiang Ai'erlan zhihou* 航向愛爾蘭之後 (After Sailing to Ireland), Professor Liang Sunjie 梁孫傑 underscores this comparative relevance in literary studies by identifying shared geographical, demographic, ethnic, political, historical, and colonial experiences, while noting that Taiwan's early interest in Ireland derived less from Irish literature itself than from a common experience of foreign domination (Liang 5).

However, literature produced in Ireland during the British colonial rule from the 19th to the 20th century is closely interlinked with the Irish nationalism and the Irish independence movements that culminated in the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921). Centuries of linguistic and cultural suppression in favour of English and Anglo-Saxonism fostered Irish feelings of inferiority and identity insecurity, compounded by disillusionment with the failed Home Rule movement and delayed unification. This prompted revivalist efforts aimed at restoring national identity and culture, such as Douglas Hyde's (1860–1949) 1893 foundation of the Gaelic League (*Conradh na Gaeilge*), as well as the Irish Literary Revival within the

broader Celtic Revival (Watson 13–34). Writers such as John Millington Synge (1871–1909) and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) engaged closely with Irish myth and society, while nationalist figures including Patrick Pearse (1879–1916), Thomas MacDonagh (1878–1916), and Joseph Plunkett (1880–1964) produced literary works – some written in the Irish language (*Gaeilge*) – that contributed to the ideological impetus behind the Easter Rising of 1916 (Malins 271–284). Later authors such as Seán O’Casey (1880–1964) and James Joyce (1882–1941) drew critical pictures of class realities and postcolonial identity after independence.

Similarly, feeling let down by the cession of Taiwan to the Japanese Empire after the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), exiled Chinese scholar Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) founded two journals in Japan to promote nationalism and democratism. In one of them, he also published a Chinese translation of the Japanese novel *Kajin no kigū* 佳人之奇遇 (Strange encounters with beautiful women) by Tōkai Sanshi 東海散士 (1853–1922) (Wu, *Airurando bungaku* 102, *Ai’erlan wenxue* 49), where the protagonist – the author himself – learns about the Irish resistance through an exiled Irish woman, which leads him to express his dissatisfaction with his own country’s colonial aspirations and lack of help towards colonised nations such as Ireland (Tōkai 34 et seqq.). A growing interest in the Irish independence movement could also be seen in Taiwanese newspapers, as Professor Wu Peizhen 吳佩珍 from National Chengchi University, who extensively examined Taiwanese newspapers from the period of the Japanese occupation, notes: From 1898 onwards, over 600 articles on Irish independence had been published in Taiwan (*Ai’erlan wenxue* 43).

In 1910, Taiwanese activist Lin Xiantang 林獻堂 (1881–1956) spoke of his frustration at the foreign rule in Taiwan and the discrimination the Taiwanese faced at the hands of the Japanese to Liang Qichao, whom he had coincidentally encountered in Nara, Japan. The latter

advised the former to ‘better emulate Irish resistance to Britain’ (*zuihao xiao Ai’erlan zhi kangying* 最好效愛爾蘭人之抗英), arguing that the Irish pursued cooperation with the British government, thereby reducing political pressure, gaining participatory rights, and thus influencing the cabinet (Wu, *Airurando bungaku* 100, *Ai’erlan wenxue* 47; Ye 520). Similarly, after the greatest anti-Japanese revolt in Taiwan, the Xilai Temple Incident (*Xilai’an Shijian* 西來庵事件) in 1915, ending in nearly 2000 arrests, 1413 charges, and around 900 death sentences,¹ Taiwanese resistance increasingly adopted political and social activism (Wu, *Airurando bungaku* 99, Huang YZ 207). Several literary scholars argue that the adaptation of Lady Augusta Gregory’s (1852–1932) nationalistic play *The Gaol Gate* (1909) published in 1916 by Japanese dramatist Kikuchi Kan 菊池寛 (1888–1948) can be seen as another outcome of the revolt. The play titled *Bōto no ko* 暴徒の子 (Son of a rebel) relocates the narrative from Ireland during the Land War (*Cogadh na Talún*) (1870s–1890s) to Taiwan after the Xilai Temple revolt (Yamauchi 105–106; Kim 42–43; Wu, *Airurando bungaku* 108).

In 1921 Lin Xiantang took Liang Qichao’s advice into action and founded the Taiwanese Cultural Association (*Taiwan wenhua xiehui* 台灣文化協會), which submitted several petitions advocating the establishment of a Taiwanese parliament, explicitly referencing the Irish War of Independence and the creation of an Irish parliament (Wu, *Ai’erlan wenxue* 48–49, *Airurando bungaku* 101; *Taiwan gikai secchi seigan riyūsho* 18–19). The same year the doctor Jiang Weishui 蔣渭水 (1890–1931), a member of the association, composed a satirical document in the form of a medical report in Japanese titled *rinshō kōgi* 臨床講義 (Clinical lecture). According to this document, a certain patient of ancient Chinese

¹ The specific figures vary across the respective sources and literature. Cf. <http://thcts.sinica.edu.tw/themes/rd101-0.php> [accessed 29.03.2026]; Wu, *Airurando bungaku* 99, *Ai’erlan wenxue* 45; Huang YZ 207.

descent named Taiwan had been suffering from physical and mental decay ever since the transition to the Qing dynasty (Qing 清, 1644–1911). He had received a defective treatment in the Japanese Empire, and his only chance of survival would be a 20-year long treatment consisting of various forms of educational activities, such as reading newspapers (Iwai 5–6). This personification of Taiwan is reminiscent of the allegory of ‘the poor old woman’ (*an tseanbhean bhocht*) – originally from a Jacobite song from 1798 – which constantly appears in Irish literature. One of the most famous works featuring the poor old woman is the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. In that play, the old woman has been robbed of her ‘four beautiful green fields’ (i.e. the Irish provinces) and states that she needs men to be willing to sacrifice themselves for her in order to reclaim them. Having persuaded a young man to fight for the freedom of Ireland, the woman is seen outside as a young girl who ‘had the walk of a queen’ (Yeats, Lady Gregory 53). Thus, Jiang Weishui portrayed Taiwan as a feeble person in need of help to engage the Taiwanese people in politics in a similar fashion to the play.

Wu Peizhen also notes that from the 1920s onwards Irish literary works were widely translated and published in Japan, facilitating their transmission to colonial Taiwan. From 1922 to 1929, another adaptation by Kikuchi Kan of an Irish play was repeatedly staged in Taiwanese theatres. The play was titled *Chichi kaeru* 父帰る (Father returns) and, inspired by Synge’s play *The Playboy of the Western World*, served to criticise traditional values (1930-*nendai ni okeru Airurando bungaku* 29–31). In 1925, Taiwanese activist Tân Him 陳炳 (1893–1947) joined the Taiwanese Cultural Association and published an article in the *Taiwan minbao* 臺灣民報 (Taiwanese Citizen journal) appealing to Taiwanese artists and writers to make use of ‘local colour’ (*difang secái* 地方色彩) and citing Irish and Scottish ‘native art’ (*xiangtu yishu* 鄉土藝術) as models for culturally distinctive literature (Chen, Su 123; Liang 6; Lin 179–180).

Another figure who greatly contributed to the dissemination of Irish drama in Taiwan was the Japanese poet Yano Hōjin 矢野峰人 (1893–1988), who had been recruited as a lecturer at Taihoku Imperial University (the current National Taiwan University) in Taipei in 1926. Not only did he promote Irish literature through translations of Irish works and monographs on Irish literature, but he also recorded his discussions with prominent Irish writers, such as W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and George William Russel (1867–1935), which he published in the magazine *Eigo seinen* 英語青年 (English language youth) from 1929 to 1930 and as an anthology titled *Henei* 片影 (glimpse) in 1931 (Wu, *1930-nendai ni okeru Airurando bungaku* 31–32, *Ai'erlan wenxue* 43–44). He even unsuccessfully attempted to recruit Yeats as a lecturer at Taihoku Imperial University in 1929 (Yamauchi 108). Wu Peizhen also attributes part of the popularity of Irish drama during this period to the establishment of the Japanese 'Peasant Theatre' (*nōmin gekijō* 農民劇場) in 1929 by Nakamura Seiko 中村星湖 (1884–1974), which was heavily influenced by Irish theatre (*1930-nendai ni okeru Airurando bungaku* 32). The influence on Taiwanese literature from that time is visible in the development of the 'Taiwan new literature movement' (*Taiwan xin wenxue yundong* 台灣新文學運動) during the 1930s (25). Wu Peizhen especially identifies a connection between the early 1930s journal *Fu'ermosha* 福爾摩沙 (Formosa)² and the Irish Literary Revival, evident in its promotion of 'Taiwanese nativist literature' (*Taiwan xiangtu wenxue* 台灣鄉土文學) and in the 'Taiwanese Society for Art Research' (*Taiwan yishu yanjiu hui* 台灣藝術研究會), founded by the journal's editors, as well as in the broader reception of Irish literature in contemporary periodicals (*Fu'ermosha* 120–121). Like their Irish counterparts, proponents of the Taiwanese nativist literature movement sought to foster

² Formosa is the name given to Taiwan by the Dutch East India Company during their colonial rule from 1624 to 1662. The name of the journal thus emphasises Taiwan's national identity that is separated from the Japanese Empire.

national identity and anti-colonial resistance through literature by emphasising local landscapes, traditions, folklore, culture, and language.

The new literature movement also involved a debate surrounding the appropriate language for Taiwanese literature, and – partly inspired by the Gaelic revival in Ireland – Taiwanese writers increasingly produced texts in the languages native to Taiwan (rather than Mandarin Chinese or Japanese), such as Taiwanese Minnan 閩南 (tw.: *Tâi-gí* 臺語) (Lee 1–7, Yip 29–30, 260 fn. 66).³ Irish drama gained even further visibility in Taiwan when Synge’s play *Riders to the Sea* (1904) was performed in Taiwan in 1930, and five years later the newspaper *Taiwan Daily News* (jp.: *Taiwan nichinichi shinpō*/chn.: *Taiwan riri xinbao* 臺灣日日新報) reported that an Irish documentary had been filmed on the Aran Islands, where Synge had been inspired to compose the play (Wu, 1930-*nendai ni okeru Airurando bungaku* 30–31). In 1933, *Formosa* published a play by Taiwanese writer Wu Yongfu 巫永福 (1913–2008) titled *Honglǜ zei* 紅綠賊 (The red and green bandits). According to Wu Peizhen, the play shows thematic influences from Kikuchi Kan’s *Okujō no kyōjin* 屋上の狂人 (The madman on the roof), where a son exposes a fraudulent exorcist. Similarly, Wu Yongfu’s play centres on a girl uncovering two impostors posing as spirits to deceive her mother. Kikuchi’s play, in turn, is based on Synge’s *The Well of the Saints* (1905), in which a blind couple lose their illusions of beauty when cured. Wu Peizhen also makes out structural parallels with Yeats’ play *The Hour Glass* (1907) – about a scholar being tasked with finding a true believer to save his life – and identifies affinities with the play *lōh-im* 落陰 (descending to the underworld) written in Taiwanese Minnan by Zhang Shenqie 張深切 (1904–1965) in 1935, in which a girl attempts to retrieve her mother from the underworld

³ Although Taiwanese languages were mainly used in Taiwanese literature during the 1960s and 1970s, Taiwanese writers, such as Lai He 賴和 (1894–1943), did use Taiwanese in poetry and literature during the Japanese occupation. See Cai 10, Jiang 2–25.

through folk ritual. That same year, the magazine *Taiwan wenyi* 臺灣文藝 (Taiwan literature and art) published a range of translated Irish poetry. The following year, 1936, the Taiwanese folklorist and linguist Li Xianzhang 李獻璋 (1914–1999) produced a collection of Taiwanese folk songs and stories, further evidencing the concurrent prospering of Irish and Taiwanese folklore in Taiwan (1930-*nendai ni okeru Airurando bungaku* 30–35).

Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, Taiwan was returned to the Republic of China under the rule of the Chinese Nationalist Party (*Zhongguo Guomindang* 中國國民黨), which immediately started taking measures to reverse the Japanisation of the Taiwanese population. The Taiwanese author Bai Xianyong 白先勇 (b. 1937) once stated that the generation of young Taiwanese after the Japanese occupation went through an identity crisis as both the children of mainland Chinese immigrants and of Taiwanese natives could not relate to the outdated values of their parents (Huang 183–184). This identity crisis is expressed in the novel *Orphan of Asia* (*Ajia no koji* アジアの孤児) written in Japanese by Hakka-Taiwanese novelist Wu Zhuoliu 吳濁流 (1900–1976) and published in 1945. In his article about Taiwanese identity and independence in the online forum *Speak Out Taiwan* (*Taiwan husheng* 台灣呼聲), a user called Li Jian 李堅 links the background of the novel to the influence of the Irish Home Rule movement on the Taiwanese Cultural Association. Indeed, the depiction of the protagonist's identity crisis in the novel is strongly reminiscent of identity issues in Irish literature, particularly of the Anglo-Irish population. The protagonist of the novel, a young scholar named Hu Taiming 胡太明 (jp.: Ko Taimei), is implied to be of Hakka (chn.: *Kejia* 客家) ancestry on his mother's side and of another uncertain Han-Chinese (*Han* 漢) ethnicity on his father's side (e.g. Wu ZL 159). Growing up under Japanese rule, he is torn between his Taiwanese identity and Japanese ideals. After initially admiring Japan and pursuing further study there, he experiences persistent discrimination that leads to disillusionment and a turn towards China, where he settles and starts a family, but ends up

being neglected by his wife and having to escape back to Taiwan after being suspected of espionage. Back home, he becomes increasingly aware of Japanese oppression and Taiwanese marginalisation and eventually loses his sanity after the death of his younger brother, who had been conscripted to fight for Japan. The very word ‘orphan’ (jp.: *koji* 孤兒) in the title signifies a sense of not belonging to either of the ‘parental cultures’ (i.e. China and Japan), a theme that can be seen, for example, in the orphaned protagonists of Elizabeth Bowen’s (1899–1973) novels (Teekell 140 et passim). The Anglo-Irish protagonist Lois Farquar in *The Last September* (1929) undergoes a crisis of identity comparable to that of Hu Taiming, navigating between the Irish working class and the English upper class, while both characters live within complex family structures that mirror their ambiguous social positions and engage in romantic relationships with members of the colonial power that further expose these tensions. In both novels, the nostalgic depiction of the homeland landscape serves as a boundary to the outside world (e.g. Wu ZL 4, Bowen 34), and their endings similarly mark a loss of identity, as Hu Taiming descends into madness – losing his reputation as a respectable scholar – and Lois is symbolically stripped of distinction through the destruction of her family’s mansion.

Huang explains that 1960s Taiwan, marked by a gap between Kuomintang nationalist discourse and lived reality, generated a renewed need for national self-definition akin to 20th-century Ireland, though in reverse order: Modernist literature had already emerged in the 1950s, most notably through Bai Xianyong’s 1960 journal *Modern Literature* (*Xiandai wenxue* 現代文學), whose contributors systematically translated and disseminated Western works. Among these, James Joyce proved particularly influential as a model of linguistic resistance, shaping key Taiwanese modernist texts such as Wang Wenxing’s 王文興 (1939–2023) classics *Family Catastrophe* (*Jiabian* 家變, 1972) and *Backed Against the Sea* (*Bei hai de ren* 背海的人, 1981), which were based on Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a*

Young Man (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and earned him the epithet ‘Taiwan’s James Joyce’ (Huang 184–186, Ceng 161–172, Kubin 268). One of the most representative modernist works influenced by Joyce dealing with postcolonial issues surrounding identity in Taiwan is Bai Xianyong’s collection of short stories titled *Taipei People* (*Taibeiren* 臺北人, 1971). Margaret Hillenbrand notes that Bai Xianyong’s *Taipei People* is conventionally compared to James Joyce’s *Dubliners* due to shared title and form (81), though critics such as Wolf Baus stress the title’s irony, as Bai Xianyong’s characters are displaced mainlanders rather than native urban dwellers (200–201). The author himself does not wholly deny influence from *Dubliners* but claims it to be limited and non-specific (Wang JM 172–173). While studies by Wu Zhenghong 吳政鴻 and Hua Xiang 華翔 identify parallels in identity crises, social conflict, and epochal ‘paralysis’, Hillenbrand cautions against reading the work merely through Joycean epiphany (10–12). Instead, she emphasises differences between *Dubliners*’ ‘semi-colonial’ and *Taipei People*’s ‘semi-colonising’ context and their respective narrative strategies (22, 27), particularly Joyce’s ‘Uncle-Charles principle’, whereby the narrative voice subtly adopts a character’s idiom while retaining distance (14, Kenner 15–38), versus Bai Xianyong’s more fluid perspectival shifts. Although Hillenbrand, citing Dominic Head, raises, but does not pursue extensively, the question of irony within this technique (14), it is precisely this latent irony that proves crucial: As seen, for example, in Joyce’s “A Little Cloud”, Thomas Chandler’s fleeting fantasy of reinventing himself as a Celtic poet exposes his self-delusion (Joyce 89–90), and in Bai Xianyong’s “Glory’s by Blossom Bridge” (*Huaqiao rongji* 花橋榮記), where the noodle shop owner’s pride in herself and admiration for Mr Lu (*Lu xiansheng* 盧先生) as two fellow Guilin natives as well as Mr Lu’s naïvety are implicitly mocked (Bai 260–293), demonstrating how Bai Xianyong adapts Joycean narrative irony to his own socio-cultural context rather than merely imitating it.

To a certain extent, influence from Irish language movements on the use of the Taiwanese language(s) can be observed from the period following the Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan right up to the present day. In Ireland, Samuel Beckett's (1906–1989) play *En Attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1952) – originally written in French – was performed in Irish under the title *Ag fanacht le Godot* in 1971 (Roche 199), and in 1990, his play *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*, 1956), also originally French, was performed in Irish under the title *Crìoch Cluiche* (Houlihan 2). Since the 1960s, numerous plays by Beckett, as well as Taiwanese adaptations of his works, have been staged in Taiwanese theatres. However, in 2004, the Taiwanese performance group Contemporary Legend Theatre (*Dangdai chuanqi juchang* 當代傳奇劇場) from Tainan staged *Fin de partie* in Taiwanese Minnan (Kao 162). In 2012, Khin-huann Li from the Department of Taiwan Culture, Languages and Literature at National Taiwan Normal University and Liam Mac Mathúna, professor emeritus at University College Dublin, published a comparative essay on the movements to promote the Irish and Taiwanese languages. Whilst they outline fundamental differences between the respective movements and their backgrounds, they conclude by calling on the Taiwanese promoters of language preservation to take greater inspiration from their 'Irish counterpart' (Li, Mac Mathúna 176–188). It should also be mentioned that in 2025, the Taiwan-based English writers Hannah Stevens and Will Buckingham published a quadrilingual collection of Scottish and Taiwanese short stories featuring Taiwanese Minnan, Mandarin Chinese, Scottish Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*), and English under the title *Tàigael* (a portmanteau of *Tàì-gí* and Gaelic). In the introduction, Stevens and Buckingham cite the shared linguistic suppression of Taiwanese Minnan and Scottish Gaelic at the hands of the respective colonisers (Stevens, Buckingham 2). The latter, like its cognate Irish, has suffered sustained repression under English imperialism (Murphy 8) and is now being promoted by language activists, with support from the government (McLeod 33). This example shows that Taiwan's engagement with Ireland

extends into a broader receptiveness to minority languages and literatures shaped by comparable histories of marginalisation, revealing affinities across otherwise distant cultural contexts.

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