MIDDLE AGED, MIDDLE CLASS AND MIDDLE OF THE ROAD: ZHU TIANXIN AND THE POLITICS OF URBAN TAIWAN

Terence C. Russell
Asian Studies Centre
University of Manitoba

“The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces.”

Pierre Bourdieu

Taiwan in the post-martial law era is engaged in the process of constructing a subjective identity in the wake of a long history of colonial domination. The literary and artistic field is inevitably an important site of engagement over this issue. The question of who may lay claim to the central ground of Taiwaneseness and who is to be removed to the margins is being contested in the various media as we speak. As Bourdieu would have predicted, the terms of this struggle in the literary and artistic field are by no means solely aesthetic or literary. One finds references to history, society, ethnocultural factors and political ideology being volleyed about, often with precious little concern for the virtues of the textual artifacts themselves. Certain players obviously consider that who speaks is more important that what they speak.

Living, as I do, in the middle of the great North American Prairies, and teaching in a provincial university still barely risen from its precolonialist slumber, it is difficult to keep abreast of current events in Taiwan. The bulk of my information comes via the internet. Fortunately, Taiwan is a well-wired place and a great deal of the thrust and parry in the battle over her literary high-ground seems to finds its way onto the net. Having no access to Taiwanese daily newspapers or more than a couple of literary

1 Bourdieu, 30.
journals, I have no way of judging exactly what proportion of the total mass of recorded discourse is published on the net, but perhaps this is not the most critical issue here. What is at issue is the stridence of certain critical statements which I have found reported on web sites devoted to the examination of Taiwanese culture and literature. It seems that there is much at stake here and feelings are running very high. In response to these statements I have chosen to examine the work of one of the most oft invoked figures in contemporary literary wars, Zhu Tianxin.

A villain to some, a hero to others, judged out of context Zhu Tianxin appears to be a fairly nonpolitical, if talented writer of social fiction. No doubt, her recent work ventures into more controversial and adult subject areas, including politics, and pedophilia, but these concerns seem to be personal and writerly, rather than politically or ethnoculturally motivated. Therefore, one would have difficulty in attributing to her an agenda which was either reactionary on the one hand, or perniciously progressive on the other. Yet according to some critics, this is a misapprehension. Zhu Tianxin is viewed by some literary historians as a representative of an oppressive colonialist ruling class and her political and aesthetic positioning is seen as conservative, and even reactionary.

In this paper I hope to sort through some of the hyperbole in search of a more direct appreciation of some of the social and political concerns expressed in the recent writing of Zhu Tianxin. At the same time, I hope to shed some light on how and why Zhu Tianxin, as the supposed embodiment of colonial oppression and middle-class conservatism, has come to assume a virtually symbolic status in the struggle over the literary field in Taiwan. My frame of reference will extend outwards from an analysis of one of Zhu’s short stories, entitled “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” (Difannei zaocan, hereafter “Breakfast”) (Gudu, 83-108). This story is a good example of her views on the social,
economic and political realms of contemporary urban Taiwan. As I will try to show, Zhu is well aware of the leftist and nationalist inclinations of some of her detractors. In “Breakfast,” she responds to them with her own socioeconomic critique. Her highly ironic analysis of the situation, projected through the eyes of the so-called “new human being” (xin renlei) of postcolonial Taiwan, casts traditional readings of the political spectrum into serious doubt. In the same stroke, any simplistic characterization of herself as conservative or counterrevolutionary is challenged.

The Battlefield

The end of martial law in 1987 and subsequent progress towards genuine democracy in Taiwan meant that the “grand narrative” of the “Great Tradition” of Chinese culture promoted by the Nationalist government lost its legitimacy. In its place the Taiwanese nativist (xiangtu or bentu) movement put forward its own “grand narrative” of the history of the Minnan speaking majority of Taiwan. In the terms of the nativist version of Taiwanese history, the Nationalist forces were the last of a long line of foreign colonists. Many elements in the nativist movement seem to assume that they have the right to be regarded as the central subject of Taiwan, but they also have allowed for the development of minority narratives, or adjunct subjectivities, such as those of the various tribes of Taiwanese aboriginals or of the many Hakka people whose roots grew as deeply in the island’s soil as those of Minnan speakers. But there is another group of non-Minnan speakers about whom the nativist camp cherishes considerable ambivalence. These are the so-called “non-natives” (waisheng ren), the mainlanders who followed the Nationalist government in its flight to the island. Since many of these people were in the military or, they along with their parents, were deliberately isolated from the main populace and afforded special treatment in order to ensure their support for the Nationalist regime. Zhu Tianxin falls into this category.

2 See Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang’s “Beyond cultural Identities... also Chen Fang-ming and Qiu Gui-fen.
From a respectful distance the political and cultural problems which Taiwan presently faces appear to be the same problems faced by all postmodern, democratic societies: On the one hand Taiwan must “manufacture ... a subject which is authorized to say “we’ “ as Lyotard puts it (Haber 35), while on the other hand allow for the greatest degree of tolerance and space for the voicing of divergent and private subjectivities, for a politics of opposition in other words. In a postcolonial environment where residual animosities over historical oppression or inequity still stir the collective memory, it can be exceptionally difficult to persuade the various parties of the virtue of creating a broadly inclusive subjective identity. Allowing a completely open field of opposition in which members of the formerly oppressive group may express themselves requires a considerable measure of magnanimity on the part of the formerly oppressed.

The postcolonial social and political power struggle has found its way into the field of art and literature. Nativist critics and literary historians have attempted to assert certain political and ethnocultural values in determining which writers belong to the canon of Taiwanese literature, and which do not. However, as Yvonne Chang, among others, has pointed out, the domination of literary discourse by political and nationalistic rhetoric may be understandable, but it is not necessarily conducive to a balanced and objective imaging of Taiwanese literary history. (“Beyond.”,103) Chang proposes that a sophisticated approach to literary production must focus on questions of scholastic meaning and must avoid value judgments, especially moral value judgments (You Shengguan..., 2). In response, nativist critics, like You Shengguan, maintain that such appeals to apolitical literary evaluation are no more than a harking back to the martial-law era during which the Nationalist government strove to suppress the use of literature as a medium for resistance politics by promoting a policy of “art for art’s sake”. (Said...). You himself is perhaps the most outspoken critic of the group he refers to as: “postwar immigrant writers.” In his eyes, these mostly second generation offspring of mainland
parentage still dominate the literary scene and the media generally. Their prestige and domination of the media and the systems of social, and artistic power is so firm that You considers that they still occupy the position of colonialist rulers. (Zuchun...) He claims that they have an attitude of ethnic and class superiority and use their privileged position to disseminate their conservative, colonialist and antidemocratic views. For that reason, he argues, they deserve to be expelled from the subjective body of modern Taiwan. (Zuchun)

As the daughter of Zhu Xi’ning, a noted Shandong author and former officer in the Nationalist army, Zhu Tianxin has the basic ethnic and political pedigree of a “postwar immigrant author.” Her status as one of the marquee names of one of Taiwan’s largest publishing houses further places her in a position of privilege in the field of literature and art. One is thus not surprised to find that her name, along with that of Zhang Dachun, is one of the most commonly invoked as an example of a writer belonging to the colonial ruling establishment. But there are other reasons why Zhu, much more so than even Zhang Dachun, is held up as someone who holds an “attitude of racial superiority and looks down upon southern Taiwanese” and who is “conservative and reactionary.” (You. Chuanli...) Probably the most important is her determination to stand her social, political and artistic ground. Far from apologizing and shrinking into the background to allow nativist writers to take center stage, Zhu has fought for her right to speak as the native-born Taiwanese. In her work since the publication of “I Remember...” (Wo jide...) she has been outspoken in her criticism of those who would seek to remove her to the margins, or to exclude her from the pages of Taiwanese literary history altogether. She has also written liberally about her political views and involvements while lambasting the hypocrisy of nativist politicians who seem to have far less concern for the history and physical existence of Taiwan than she does.
These are not gestures which endear her to representatives of the nativist camp. Nor are they intended to be.

**The People and the New Human Being**

You Shengguan and Yvonne Chang seem to agree on little, but they do both identify Zhu Tianxin as a representative of the middle class. They also both concur that the middle class suspicion of ideology and politics such as is manifested in much of Zhu’s recent writing, is a covert expression of conservatism and the desire to preserve the status quo, etc. (Chang, *You Shengguan*... and You, *Chuanli*...) The fundamental difference between the two critics is that You makes a number of value judgments about Zhu’s politics and uses these as cause for dismissing her from the Taiwanese literary field, whereas Chang tries to put such value judgments to one side and address herself to the task of identifying the true position of writers such as Zhu Tianxin in that same literary field. In what follows I would like to speculate what Zhu herself might contribute to the discourse over ethnicity, class and ideology by examining one of her recent compositions. My speculations are only that, but I feel it important to allow the writer to speak for herself, rather than subject her to continued abstraction in the heated atmosphere of internet debate.

I have chosen to use “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” as the focus of my investigation. “Breakfast” is a longish short story in which Zhu Tianxin confronts the socioeconomic realities of contemporary urban Taiwan. The main theme of the story is the encounter between a thirty-something literary reporter and a forty-something writer (A) who had formerly been involved in the “social movement” (*sheyun*) during the late 1970’s and 1980’s. “A” now seldom entertains representatives of the media and has withdrawn to observer status above the political and cultural battleground. The female reporter and her former boyfriend, Xiao Ma, had also been involved in the protest activities of the
time. Almost a decade later the two find themselves on very different roads. Xiao Ma still languishes in an anachronistic dream world where the Democratic Progressive Party is perennially in opposition to the Nationalist government. The fact that he has spent the last seven years studying abroad has insulated him from a reality that the DPP has begun the road towards becoming the ruling party. The “opposition movement” which he plans to return to after completing his Ph.D. studies no longer exists. The reporter, in contrast, has abandoned her activism to join the masses of urban white-collar workers. Her world is also constructed of interwoven filaments of fantasy and hard reality, but the realities seem harder and the fantasies serve a self-preservative function.

Using the persona of this young reporter Zhu narrates a ground-level vision of the contemporary socioeconomic landscape which confronts conventional leftist ideology with the ironies of life in the age of global trade and transnational corporations and consumerism. The language of the reporter, a true combatant, and that of A, a virtual noncombatant, run parallel in many respects, but never meet in a common ground of understanding. The communication gap between A who favours traditional leftist rhetoric, and the young reporter who speaks the language of the new urban jungle is caught in the two terms, “the people” (*renmin*) and “the new human being” (*xin renlei*). “The people” is a term employed loosely in traditional leftist discourse to represent the masses of oppressed, propertyless peasants and workers. In some cases it is used as the opposite of “the ruling class.” But what does it mean in modern Taiwan with its fluid society and relatively even standard of living? The very existence of a genuine proletariat or any actual group of people clearly discernible as the “ruled” rather than the “ruling” class is difficult to establish. A and Xiaoma both have a fondness for discussing “the people” and championing their cause, but the term seems to represent abstract or artificial concept, more than real human beings. (92)
“The new human being” is in many ways also an abstracted concept, but at least it derives from observation and the lived experience of contemporary society. It was given currency by a presidential commission to study the post-martial law generation in Taiwan. In many ways the “new human being” is very closely similar to what in North America we refer to as a “Generation Xer.”\(^3\) He/she is probably the offspring of postwar baby boomers who has recently graduated from university and entered the urban workforce. Like Generation Xers, new human beings are deeply in the thrall of electronic age consumerism. They are generally apolitical and have little knowledge of and less concern for history.

A classifies the narrator as one of the “new human beings.” It is because of her curiosity about “new human beings” that she is willing to grant a rare interview to the young reporter. Not surprisingly then, the interview itself soon evolves from interview to dialogue, the topic of which is the politics, or the lack of it. With her main frame of reference grounded in the martial law era nativist opposition movement A sees Taiwanese politics in terms of “native” versus “mainlander,” colonial ruling class versus subjugated colonial slaves, left versus right. For her, the sacrifices of the resistance leaders and the injustices of the Nationalist regime still loom large as determining factors in the post-martial law political scene. The reporter, on the other hand, to the extent that she has any interest in politics at all, feels that the table has been completely reset with the end of martial law and the progress towards democracy. So far as she is concerned, the sacrifices made by nativist opposition leaders which A considers selfless and for the good of “the people,” were in fact calculated risks which have now paid off. In one exchange A is appalled with the reporter’s claim that she finds the ruling party and the opposition party more or less the same, and that she voted for the new nativist

---

\(^3\) A recent Hong Kong action movie makes this association in translating the title: “Tejing xinrenlei” into the English: “Gen-X Cops” Concerning the origin of the term “Generation X”and its meaning see Douglas Coupland. *Generation X.*
mayor mainly because of his good looks. A is unable to comprehend this lack of gratitude and political awareness;

A...continued to question me: Is that the way all of you new human beings think? Can’t you, after all, support him out of a little sense of gratitude for his willingness to make sacrifices for “the people”?

I thought A was so naive, I mean, it isn’t only marriages made for the sake of pure love that have legal force. If two wealthy families want to arrange a marriage of convenience and mutual benefit, isn’t that marriage legal too?! If all “the people” who vote for him are intelligent and selfless, if everyone always has great and saintly reasons, then that kind of society would long ago have outgrown the need for him to save it or enlighten it. Excuse me, but I still have one vote whatever my reason is. (93)

It rapidly becomes clear that new human beings such as the reporter have no patience with ideologues who attempt to hang the label “the people” on them. They don’t feel in need of being saved or protected. The leftist, anti-colonial agenda is no longer relevant to them. The reporter speculates that A and Xiao Ma persist in dwelling in this superannuated political atmosphere because it is the only place left for them. (92) They are not so much incapable of recognizing and adjusting to the new political reality as they are unwilling for fear of being confronted with the fact of their irrelevance.

Of Diamonds and Revolution

If the apolitical, ungrateful new human beings refuse to play the role of politically and economically oppressed “people”, and if the history of anticolonial struggles no longer fuel the nationalist spirit of “native” Taiwanese, (indeed if the concept of native and nonnative is no longer much of an issue) (94), then what is the new political reality? Does the new human being live in a socioeconomic utopia where there exists no necessity of further reform? While broadly satirizing the pretensions of aging Marxists, Zhu is far from sanguine about the socioeconomic plight of young urbanites such as the
reporter in “Breakfast.” She outlines the unenviable circumstances of these new human beings by cleverly rephrasing classical Marxist economic theory.

According to A New Theory of Social Economics and Political Economics,4 “…renting out one’s own labour is the beginning of one’s life as a slave.” (89) That being the case, the reporter calculates that she has been a slave for nine years, ever since she entered the work force. She likens herself to Japanese office workers who try to find some personal peace and freedom by staring expressionlessly out of the subway window after spending all day smiling, bowing and scraping before their employers and fellow workers. (88) The few stolen moments between work and the return to her “underground room” are the only time when she feels a degree of personal freedom.

The reporter further analyses her situation as being one of the nomadic urban proletariat. She feels that she may never be able to afford her own home and is doomed to move from one unsavory rental space to another. In comparison, the older generation of leftist politicians and activists seem to lead a far more comfortable life. In exasperation she chides A for her hypocrisy:

I just don’t know what you [leftists] are worried about. In comparison to us who, if we don’t live with our parents, have to roam about in this city like nomads from attic to illegal apartment, you’re already securely in possession of the positions, and the decent car and home that it’ll take us at least ten years to get our hands on…(94)

The narrator calculates that one third of her income goes to rent, while the other two thirds are spent on urban necessities like fast food, taxi fares and department store-bought clothing. She views her state as scarcely improved in essence over that of

---

4 I’m afraid that I cannot establish the author of this book, the Chinese transliteration is: Bei Kuei-er.
nineteenth century Russian peasants. In reality she has no more freedom than they since she could not afford to leave her work any more than they could leave their land.

Yet the new human being must believe herself to be free. She derives a sense of hope and the ability to carry on living from that belief. It is a question of how to maintain a belief in one’s freedom in face of socioeconomic conditions which seem more consistent with the state of bondage. The reporter struggles with this dilemma and settles on a single act of defiance. Ironically but deliberately, she decides to purchase the item which is the most quintessential symbol of what Xiao Ma would refer to as “The false human beingization of capitalist commodity aesthetics.” (108) She purchases a Tiffany diamond. This is a highly calculated and subversive act, and it appears so illogical. The narrator is well aware of the fact that by purchasing a diamond she is willingly allowing herself to fall victim to the dark forces of international capitalist consumerism. Yet such considerations are pushed aside by the power of the diamond as a symbol of freedom. The reporter has recognized that she is a member of the new proletariat and that there is no escape from the grinding oppression of poor wages, demeaning work and high living expenses. The only means of obtaining pleasure and expressing individual freedom is to consume. If to consume is to deliver oneself into the consumerist web spun by transnational mega-corporations such as De Beers and disseminated through the popular media the so be it. There is a higher purpose at issue. That purpose exists in the realm of the emotional, not the socioeconomic.

A and Xiao Ma would certainly view the act of purchasing a diamond as a submission to the very capitalist oppressors whom even the reporter has identified as her class enemies. (This despite the fact that A herself possesses a Tiffany diamond.) But the reporter, for all her cynicism and disinterest in political affairs, has broken through the stale ideological positions of conventional leftist thinkers and devised her
own novel strategy of subversion. By using money won in an office pool to obtain an item so laden with the trappings of wealth and prestige she rebels against the bonds imposed upon her by her age and social position. Zhu Tianxin describes the process by which the reporter prepares for and eventually executes the purchase in the terms of a military campaign. Tiffany’s Jewelry Company, the store where the diamond is on sale is “the castle” and her actions are planned as an invasion of a socioeconomic territory forbidden her.

The reporter is conscious of her inferior status in the urban pecking order. As she looks in the window of the Tiffany’s she feels like the little match girl in the Hans Christian Andersen story. Therefore, success in her attack depends upon overcoming that sense of exclusion as much as physically obtaining the gem. To that end the reporter must contrive to dress and act with the confidence of the store’s normal clientele. Aside from planning her wardrobe carefully, she studies the manners of the store’s customers and obtains a credit card. She notes that nobody uses cash to buy diamonds and she doesn’t want to be viewed as a bumpkin who goes into a jewelry store and asks; “Miss, how much does a pound of watches cost?” In the event, all her preparations do not prevent the feeling that she has been identified and dismissed as a “new human being” by certain of the other patrons, but this does not foil her mission. She buys the diamond ring and takes it back to her “underground room” where its indescribable radiance brings her an overwhelming sense of peace and happiness.

The New Manifesto

In “Breakfast” the young reporter and her fellow “new human beings,” living as they do in a never-never land of image-driven media, have lost all sense of history. As the reporter explains to A; “…I've always assumed that televisions were things that grew
on the walls of people’s livingrooms...and that there has never been a President Chiang
and that the People’s Progressive Party has always existed, and that Chen Shuibian
has always been the mayor of Taipei...” (95) This does not mean that they are as
politically and culturally naive as they appear to the older generation. Like their
Generation X counterparts, their understanding of economic and social reality is
different than their elders, but they do have an innate sense of inequities. In attempting
to describe those inequities the reporter is able to make use of the terms of classical
Marxism. The class struggle is seen to be alive and well, but the slaves, serfs and
proletariat of the nineteenth century have been replaced by the office workers and retail
sales personnel of the late twentieth century. The opiate of the people is no longer
religion, but media-driven consumerism. National industrial capitalism has given way to
transnational commodity monopolism. To a very disturbing degree the players have
changed, but the game remains the same.

For the purposes of this paper the question now becomes one of trying to gauge
whether this reframing of the communist manifesto represents a satire or repudiation of
Marxist theory, or an updating of that theory in an attempt to create another shade of
neo-Marxism. Or is it perhaps neither or both?

It is clear that Zhu Tianxin feels that the older generation of left-leaning nativists
have lost touch with the younger generation of city dwellers. There is a serious
communication gap between these two generations based upon a mutual inability to
recognize their respective terms of reference. The nativists are appalled that the “new
human beings” feel no gratitude for the sacrifices made by opposition movement
activists and cannot accept their apolitical and ahistorical manner of viewing the world.
The new human beings, for their part, are more in contact with the world outside Taiwan
via the image media and the internet. It is from there that they gain all knowledge and
values. “New human beings see media information as their god, and that god determines all their knowledge and values. Whatever does not exist in the information media may as well not exist. Because of this they naturally also see knowledge and erudition as something which can be discarded after use.” (99)

Zhu herself belongs to the older generation and must feel distress at the manner in which the younger generation so easily discards so many of the values which she also holds dear. Like the older nativists, A and Xiao Ma, she has become irrelevant to the children of the media. However, unlike A and Xiao Ma, who find the new human beings to be little more than an annoying curiosity, Zhu Tianxin wishes to understand and sympathize with them. To do that, she takes a closer look at the economic and social condition under which they are forced to live. Her analysis suggests that, with some adjustment, Marxism may still have the ability to describe the situation of the economically underprivileged. She invokes Marx’s The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 as well as other well-known works of classical Marxism in the course of demonstrating why the young reporter’s life is anything but free from economic oppression. For example, with reference to her rental accommodation the reporter quotes the Manuscripts:

...he cannot make this place his own dwelling, on the contrary, he lives in someone else’s house. He lives in the house of a stranger who watches him in the darkness and who will immediately throw him out into the street if he does not pay his rent...

The Manuscripts described my underground room this way one hundred and fifty one years ago. (98)

In contrast, primitive humans are considered more fortunate since, however crude their cave may be, it is their own and there they “feel as at ease as a fish in water.” (98)
In her portrayal of the economic situation of the young reporter-narrator, Zhu Tianxin seems not to be suggesting that Marxism is useless or fundamentally wrong. Her dispute is not with Marx, but with those in Taiwan who claim to be promoting change along Marxist lines with little reference to practical realities. People like A and Xiao Ma may have played a role in bringing about the democratic transformation of Taiwan, but they have allowed time to pass them by. Their socioeconomic agenda has been made into an ideological dinosaur by the onrush of globalization, by international consumerism and by a generation of Taiwanese for whom old issues of native/nonnative and of political affiliation no longer elicit the same emotional response. In that sense, their refusal to entertain more flexible interpretations of Marxism is a positive betrayal of the very people they ought to be speaking for.

Conclusion

In many ways Zhu Tianxin is A without the leftist rhetoric. In 1995 when “Breakfast” was completed she was thirty-eight years old--- middle-aged at least according to her own reckoning. She had by any standard achieved success as a writer and no doubt had reaped financial rewards as a result. This would have secured her membership in the Taiwanese middle class. Zhu had entered university just as the nativist opposition movement was beginning to achieve popularity and during her term of study she had been drawn into the vortex of campus activism.

Unlike A, however, Zhu had not entered the political fray as a supporter of the opposition nativists. Her family and educational background did not make such a move easy. Huang Jingshu has described the intensely constructed intellectual environment which existed in the Zhu household as Tianxin was growing up. He has noted the deeply influential role played by the traditionalist scholar, Hu Lancheng in the education of the Zhu children. The vision of the Great Tradition of Chinese culture created by Hu
held sway over Zhu Tianxin until after her graduation from university. (Cong Daguanyuan...) That vision did not easily accommodate the challenge of nativism and its plea for a specifically Taiwanese telling of history. Zhu resisted, but did not reject this new telling of history from the viewpoint of Taiwanese subjectivity. However, it took many years of internal struggle before she could turn the page on her earlier “brainwashing” by the nationalist party and accept a post-colonialist vision of her land of birth. This was a very difficult time for Zhu and she herself describes it as “…a self-exile, a process of seeking atonement.” (Forum, 4) She likens herself to Oedipus who, upon realizing that he has unknowingly committed the sin of sleeping with his mother and thereby brought calamity to his kingdom, pierces his own eyes and goes into exile in shame.

The final stage of her self-mortifying exile took place during the period of roughly four years prior to the publication of I Remember... in 1989. During that time she was unable to write at all due to uncertainty over what her rightful subject matter should be. The stories which she has written since that time convey a distinctly different vision of life and Chinese culture in general. The optimistic world view of the earlier work, of the so-called “Three-three” (san-san) period in particular, is replaced by a questioning of values and a cynicism about supposedly altruistic and self-sacrificing endeavours such as political activism.5 Zhu has seen the error of her uncritical subscription to the Nationalist mythology of “Great Chinaism” but has not chosen to simply throw her lot in with the nativist camp. To do so would be to repeat the mistake of uncritically worshipping an idol, something which she had just chastised herself for. In reference to nativist writers whose writing helped her see the folly of believing Nationalist party propaganda, she says, “…I originally thought that they were teaching us; “do not

5 Yang Zhao has described this shift in Zhu’s work in more detail, and with an eye to the political undertones. However, he does not accept Zhu’s contention that she has undergone a radical reevaluation of her intellectual orientation. (Liangwei chunxu...)
wantonly worship gods," but later I found out, no, no, what they were telling us in this case was, "so long as it is the right god, worshipping gods is permitted." (Forum, 5) This was something which she could not accept. It is at the same time, fairly naturally, something for which she has been criticized by nativists. (Yang, Liangwei chunxu)

In many respects, “Breakfast” is about worshipping gods. Leftist ideologues are seen worshipping at the shrine of traditional Marxism, a god which has been rendered impotent by the march of globalized economies and international capitalism. Young Generation Xers worship at the gilded altar of consumer goods, willingly succumbing to the deluded notion that freedom and empowerment may be obtained through ownership. It seems unlikely that either party will ultimate receive much solace or assistance from the objects of their veneration. As to where they might better devote their energy, this is a question which Zhu Tianxin does not attempt to answer directly.

Since her disavowal of the doctrine of “Great China” and Nationalist Party sponsored patriotism Zhu Tianxin has refused to bow down before any graven ideological images. To some, this amounts to a simple case of middle-class conservatism, support for the status quo and nonsupport for the leftist, postcolonial agenda of the nativists. What I have attempted to demonstrate via the case of her story “Breakfast,” is that Zhu is not afraid to make use of radical ideological as a tool for analyzing socioeconomic dynamics. Nor is she satisfied with the contemporary status quo. It is true that she maintains a distance from all of the characters in the story, and is critical of all. She unapologetically rejects the tenets of leftist nativism espoused by A and Xiao Ma, but she does so on the basis of their inability to address the real politic of the 1990’s, not because she feels that they threaten the status quo. Quite the contrary, she implies that A and Xiao Ma have come to be the social establishment of the 90’s.
As for the Generation X reporter, Zhu exhibits more sympathy, but does not hold this character up as a positive model for emulation. The purchase of a diamond which constitutes the climactic gesture of “Breakfast” is at once subversive and pathetic. It is a political act and an emotional act. As a political statement is announces the young reporter’s refusal to accept her status as a slave. The diamond is intended to secure her freedom just as she speculates the discovery of an especially large diamond must have secured the freedom as a female slave miner in South Africa. Her foray into Tiffany’s Jewelry Company is like a military strike in a revolutionary war. But although the diamond brings a radiant glow of hope and freedom to the reporter’s apartment, we are only too aware that this is an illusory light. The reporter is in fact much more akin to the little match girl who lights the matches she is supposed to be selling in a vain attempt to stave off death from exposure.

Based on writing such as “Breakfast” it is difficult to argue that Zhu Tianxin is either conservative or reactionary. Claims to the contrary made by certain strident nativists are difficult to substantiate in literary terms at least. I would not hesitate to classify her as a skeptic and a person who has a healthy suspicion of ideologies and political movements. Considering her popularity and prestige as a writer, it is thus understandable that political ideologues would attempt to move her to the margins of the literary power field. In many ways I endorse the efforts of Yvonne Chang and Qiu Guifen in resisting efforts to marginalize Zhu Tianxin. But I do not agree that it is necessary or desirable to divorce all political value judgments from a consideration of Zhu’s merits as a writer. What is necessary is to get down to a close reading of her work, a reading which must not be coloured by issues of family origins or previous political views. If people wish to accuse her of an attitude of racial superiority, or of being a counterrevolutionary, then let them demonstrate how this is manifested in her writing. I personally believe that Zhu Tianxin’s politics stand up quite nicely to leftist
liberal standards if only people would care to ascertain where she actually stands. At the same time, however, it is nonsensical and philistine to judge any literature on purely political grounds. This would be to lower ourselves to the level of Communist Party hacks during the Cultural Revolution. If anyone believes that this would be a good thing, may they be forever doomed to reading nothing but the Little Red Book and Hao Ran. Contemporary Taiwan is blessed with an open and democratic atmosphere in which a genuine politics of difference can thrive and grow. To begin closing down that openness by seeking to exclude people from social and artistic on the basis of any criteria whatsoever cannot but be viewed as retrograde.
WORKS CITED


Chen Fangming. “Taiwan xinwenxueshide jian’gou yu fenqi” (Structuring and Periodizing the History of Taiwan’s New Literature) Part One Lianhe wenxue (Unitas) 15.10 (August,1999):162-173.


Huang Jinshu. “Cong Daguanyuan dao kafei guan; yuedu/shuxie Zhu Tianxin” (From the Daguan Garden to the Cafe; Reading/writing ZhuTianxin)Gudu. 235-282.


“Xiang wo (ziwo) fangzhude xiongdi (jiemei) men; yuedu d’erda ‘waisheng’ zuojia Zhu Tianxin” (Thinking of my (self) Exiled Brothers (Sisters); Reading Second Generation Non-native Author Zhu (Tianxin) Zhongwai wenxue 22.2 (July 1993): 94-116.


Zuchun hexie yu quzhiminhua de bingxing bubei (Racial harmony and decolonialization are not mutually exclusive) Taiwan wenxueyanjiju gongzuoshi (Taiwan Literature Research Workshop)<http://ws.twl.ncku.edu.tw/hak-chia/i/iu-seng-kaon/chokkun-hohai.htm>(30.09.2001).

Chuanli de zaichang yu buzaichang: Zhang Songsheng lun zhanhou yimin zuojia (The presence of power and the non-presence of power: Zhang Songsheng’s discussion of post-War immigrant writers) Taiwan wenxueyanjiju gongzuoshi (Taiwan Literature Research Workshop) < http://ws.twl.ncku.edu.tw/hak-chia/i/iu-seng-kaon/ibin-chokka.htm> (10.06.2001)


“Difannei zaocan” (Breakfast at Tiffany's) Gudu. 83-108.
