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### Title

Semiperipherality and the Taiwanese American Novel

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47m241sd>

### Journal

College Literature, 50(2-3)

### ISSN

0093-3139

### Author

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### Publication Date

2023-03-01

### DOI

10.1353/lit.2023.a902217

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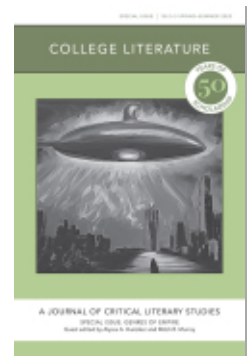
## Semiperipherality and the Taiwanese American Novel

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College Literature, Volume 50, Number 2-3, Spring-Summer 2023, pp. 212-236 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2023.a902217>



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# SEMIPERIPHERALITY AND THE TAIWANESE AMERICAN NOVEL

CHRISTOPHER T. FAN

Fiction by Taiwanese Americans has been appearing with increasing frequency since the early 1990s. This timing is primarily due to the “children of 1965,” to use Min Hyoung Song’s (2015) phrase, coming of age and beginning to write and publish. One consequence of this timing is that this fiction is strongly and self-consciously shaped by post-1965 occupational concentration and the concerns of an upwardly mobile professional-managerial class (PMC), defined by Barbara and John Ehrenreich as a “derivative class” that is “concerned with the reproduction of capitalist culture and class relationships” and, while materially aligned with the working class, is ideologically aligned with the interests of capital (1977, 14). It was in 1965 that the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act was passed, overturning race- and nation-based exclusion policies that had severely limited Asian immigration and shifting policy to privilege selected and “hyper-selected” immigrants.<sup>1</sup> From Asia, these were primarily scientific, technical, engineering, and math (STEM) students and professionals who contributed enormously to the high-income and high-educational attainment status—economic model minority status—that Taiwanese Americans as a group currently occupy.<sup>2</sup> Another consequence of this timing pertains to Taiwanese identity, which becomes a mediating term between an

American identity that is losing its appeal and a generically “Asian” identity that signifies capital and cosmopolitanism and is increasingly appealing.<sup>3</sup>

The combination of the transnational mobility of the PMC and the increasing appeal of Asia has resulted in the cathecting of return narratives. Almost all Taiwanese American fiction features narratives or motifs of return, which brings it in line with the broader emergence of fictionalized return narratives in recent Asian American literature. In these narratives, major and minor characters physically return to, or state their intention to return to, locations figured as origins: sometimes to the country where they were born, sometimes to a location where that home country *used* to be, sometimes to an ancestral or parental point of origin, and sometimes to a location that signals a more symbolic than literal return. While the depiction of return narratives in Asian American autobiography and memoir has been a mainstay of Asian American literature, the availability of these narratives to *fictionalization* heralds a significant reorientation among post-1965 Asian American authors.<sup>4</sup> Underlying this reorientation is the proliferating sense of Asia as a site that is *available* to Asian American fiction. As Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan puts it, recent decades have seen “a shift from the Americas as the primary locus of attachment to Asia as a site of possible return” (2018).<sup>5</sup> However, in contrast to, say, Korean, Filipinx, Vietnamese, and Chinese American return fiction, in which characters return to those countries of origin, Taiwanese American return narratives less frequently feature Taiwan itself as the explicit setting of return.<sup>6</sup> When they do, as in Tao Lin’s *Taipei* (2013) and *Leave Society* (2021), it is usually emptied of detail and particularity; or, as in Anna Yen’s *Sophia of Silicon Valley* (2018) and Elaine Hsieh Chou’s *Disorientation* (2022), returns to Taiwan are only mentioned in passing. Rather than Taiwan, the setting of return in Taiwanese American fiction tends to be either China or elsewhere in Asia. The abstraction of return reflects the ambiguities of Taiwan’s semiperipheral status even as it participates in a broader trend in Asian American fiction in which the psychological function of return narratives is diminished in favor of depicting the material relations traversed in the process of return. In these novels, narratives of literal return tend to be limited to subplots because they serve more central concerns about the financialization of familial relations (Koshy 2013) and shifts in racial hierarchy among a transnational PMC and power elite that Aihwa Ong calls “flexible citizens” (1999, 1).

In this article I make a two-part argument. First, that Taiwanese American fiction's situating of the post-1965 embourgeoisement within narratives of return brings into focus an analogy between the model minority and Taiwan's status as a semiperipheral country. According to Immanuel Wallerstein, semiperipheral states possess features of core states like the US and Japan, as well as peripheral states like pre-reform China. As the term implies, semiperipheral states exist in an awkward position of betweenness: "Under pressure from core states and putting pressure on peripheral states, their major concern is to keep themselves from slipping into the periphery and to do what they can to advance themselves toward the core" (Wallerstein 2004, 29). The "concern" that Wallerstein describes is analogous to the "fear of falling" in class status that Barbara Ehrenreich described as the "inner life" of the postwar American middle class: a fear that, in Asian American communities, is expressed as the "success frame" of model minoritization (1989, 6).<sup>7</sup> Taiwanese American authors attempt to fashion narrative solutions for these semiperipheral anxieties. The second part of my argument is that the aesthetic and rhetorical forms that Taiwanese American authors mobilize to register these modes of betweenness strongly tend towards racial satire and deformations of racial identity because the model minority racial form elevates race's materiality and basis in economic relations.

I will unpack these dynamics in readings of novels by two Taiwanese American authors: Kathy Wang's *Family Trust* (2018) and Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2011). In preview, a capsule illustration of the relation between race and semiperipherality can be found in Jade Chang's novel *The Wangs vs. The World* (2016).<sup>8</sup> The patriarch of the Wang family, Charles, is bankrupt when the novel opens. He sets off on a cross-country journey to gather up his children as he scrambles to pick up the pieces of his life after his cosmetics empire collapses. Traveling eastward from his repossessed mansion in Bel Air, his ultimate goal isn't a reevaluation of his place in America, as might be suggested by the road trip narrative. Instead, it's to conscript his children into the arc of an epic return narrative, which began in Taiwan and routed through the US, and whose final destination is not Taiwan but China, where Charles sees himself "living out his unseen birthright on his family's ancestral acres, a pampered prince in silk robes" (Chang 2016, 1). His bankruptcy, which he blames on a "fickle" post-2008 US, brings

into stark relief “the life that should have been his. China, where the Wangs truly belonged. Not America. Never Taiwan” (7–8). His children, meanwhile, have embraced a kind of generic Asian-ness strongly inflected with stereotypes of Chinese capital—distinctly *not* a Taiwanese identity. For Saina, a successful installation artist, the liminality of her Taiwanese identity authorizes her to put on blockbuster shows with titles like “Made in China” and “Power Drum Song”; and for Andrew, an aspiring comedian, that liminality, combined with the unfortunate fact that his upbringing in extravagant wealth has robbed him of the misfortunes that he might have drawn on for his jokes, compels him to develop his act around his admission that “Yep, I’m Asian” (188). In the novel’s final pages, Charles is on his deathbed in a Chinese hospital, his children gathered round him, when he has a revelation: “The Indians were just a tribe of early Chinese people who took a long walk across the Bering Land Bridge and ended up in a New World. The true Americans were Chinese! It was too bad it had taken him so long to remember that” (350). His ineffectual legal claim on his ancestral land holdings having left him empty handed, he revises the arc of his return with his dying words: “Daddy discovered America!” (351).

Andrew and Saina leverage an aesthetic “Asian” identity for career advantage, while their father’s fear of falling is sublated into a phantasmagoric revanchist desire. While race and ethnicity often play a significant role in Taiwanese American fiction, what’s striking is how they are thematically calibrated less to dilemmas of identity or cultural difference than to power differentials in PMC status hierarchies. In 2002, looking back on the first decade or so of the “sudden appearance of wealthy Asians” in the West, Viet Thanh Nguyen observed (riffing on Ong) that Asian flexible citizens displace the “assumption that traditional whiteness is associated with wealth and that both whiteness and wealth are to be earned over the passage of time. By putting traditional whiteness into crisis, the new Asian capital also puts Asian America as a whole—not just the model minority—into crisis in its efforts to claim a domestic authenticity that does not threaten whites” (2002, 22). The recent appearance of return narratives in Asian American fiction registers the two crises Nguyen points out here: of traditional whiteness and of Asian American authenticity. If, as I’m arguing, Taiwanese American fiction amplifies these crises, then the material conditions of that amplification can be attributed to Taiwan’s semiperipherality.

### IDEOLOGICAL UNRELIABILITY IN *FAMILY TRUST*

In Taiwanese American novels, race's materiality is often ironized via the narrative voice as an ideological unreliability. Post-1965 Taiwanese American PMC characters—like the authors who invent them—find themselves at the point of articulation of political economic tensions and regimes of racial meaning, and so experience the most extreme gravitational effects of those forces. For *The Wangs vs. the World's* Charles Wang, racial meanings and hierarchies are fleeting and contingent—not so much because race itself is immaterial but because its form-determination by material conditions is shifting so quickly:

If the billion people of China ever chose to march *en masse*, they would be overwhelming in their similarity and horrific in their differences. There would be so many variations on the theme of human that all typologies would be completely bulldozed. This was why he had never worried himself about how America viewed his children, never bothered himself over unflattering stereotypes and prejudices. What did it matter how a country full of white people saw them when the whole world was theirs? (Chang 2016, 294)

Superseding white supremacy with a kind of Han Chinese supremacy is certainly one version of the threat to “traditional whiteness” that Nguyen described. Under the narrow mores of US race-liberal discourse, the American reader does not necessarily know how to weigh one supremacy against the other, nor how to gauge the propriety of a Chinese character embracing the chaotic homogenization of his own alleged compatriots. This passage even entertains the possibility of racial forms disappearing altogether or at least losing their force beyond what Christopher Chen (2013) calls “the limit point of capitalist equality”: a speculative future—not necessarily a happy one—in which racial meanings are reconfigured if not beyond recognition, then at least into a transitional, uncanny otherness. The ideological unreliability of these racial reconfigurations is, moreover, a key reason why a common feature of Taiwanese American return novels is a trope, a kind of pincer move, in which stereotypes are simultaneously affirmed and rejected. In the above passage, Charles embraces the stereotype of the Chinese as an undifferentiated mass. In *Family Trust*, to which we'll now turn, the narrator explains about the character Linda that she “had herself avoided driving a luxury automobile for this very reason, the desire not to be seen as a stereotype” (Wang 2018, 55). Regarding the male-gendered form of

the stereotype in which labor efficiency is linked to effeminacy and asexuality, both Linda's son Fred and Charles Wang's son Andrew are portrayed as sexually irresistible yet hopelessly invisible in terms of career advancement.<sup>9</sup>

*Family Trust* grounds its satire of US race-liberal mores in the geopolitical awkwardness of Taiwan's semiperipherality. It is especially concerned with how aspects of Taiwan's uneven and combined development fractures the post-1965 Taiwanese American family. As a comic novel primarily interested in satirizing its characters' obsessions with social and financial status, *Family Trust* has no aspiration to a realism of twenty-first-century US-Asia totality. However, it's precisely in the novel's pursuit of the racial contradictions of social and financial status that that totality comes into view. At the center of the novel are the Huangs, in particular the would-be patriarch Stanley Huang, a retired engineer and dropout from a Stanford PhD program who is dying of pancreatic cancer. Would-be not only because Stanley is prone to physically and verbally abusive outbursts of anger when his patriarchal authority is challenged but also because we learn that his ex-wife, Linda Liang, a gold-watch IBM employee, was in fact the mastermind behind his supposed fortune of \$7 million. That figure isn't revealed to the reader until about three-quarters into the novel, and much of the preceding drama concerns friends' and family members' speculations about the precise magnitude of Stanley's fortune—and whether the fortune in fact still exists. Stanley's children, Fred and Kate, are in fact sweetly given to supporting rather than competing with each other, but Linda wants to make sure Stanley doesn't give an equal share to Mary, his wife of a decade (“only” a decade to those who would contest her inheritance).

The Huangs are in many ways a paradigmatic post-1965 Taiwanese American PMC family: model minorities in terms of their academic, professional, and economic success, as well as occupationally concentrated in STEM fields. Stanley and Linda, moreover, both attended Taiwan's most prestigious university, National Taiwan University, and Linda attended Beiyinu, a highly selective all-girls school in Taipei. Set in post-2008 Silicon Valley, the novel, as its punning title suggests, is interested in how finance structures intimate family relationships. Wang's studious refusal to render any of her characters *likeable* reveals in part her systematic rejection of the moral aspect of the model minority stereotype that depicts Asian Americans as passive and docile, even as her characters unabashedly



embrace the stereotype's economic aspect. A significant, shared theme in these Taiwanese American novels is a rejection of model minority passivity via the counterposition of the Asian American *asshole* and the hyperbole of the Asian American *loser*.<sup>10</sup> The Huangs certainly can't be faulted for shying away from action or expressing their opinions. It's the odiousness of their opinions in which the strangeness of the narrative voice emerges. What I aim to show is how Taiwanese American return fiction's depiction of flexible Asian American subjects often turns upon a "reterritorializing" of racial meanings, to use Srinivasan's term, that mediates the demographic emergences of Taiwan's semiperipheral status (2015, 313).

*Family Trust* features two return subplots. In one, Fred travels to Bali by way of Hong Kong to attend a prestigious business networking event called the "Founder's Retreat," an invitation-only annual gathering that brings together luminaries of Asian and Western capital. In the other, Stanley travels to Hong Kong with Mary, who consults experts in Chinese Traditional Medicine about Stanley's condition and tracks down herbal remedies. Stanley's arrival in Hong Kong carries with it none of the historical significance that might be associated with a return to China by a Taiwanese American of his generation. He's there for medical tourism as well as to close out some bank accounts. Mary's return is the most straightforward because she was born and raised in China, but Hong Kong's relevance to her has nothing to do with home, only with the cure for Stanley that might be found there. Fred was born in the US and has no personal connection to Indonesia itself, so, in a way, his "return" is at best symbolic: he is an Asian American "returning" to "Asia." Still, it's precisely his generic Asian-ness that becomes, in the context of the Founder's Retreat, a marker of ascendant social, and more importantly *financial*, capital.

Fred spends a great deal of time complaining about his invisibility in Silicon Valley, where he's a "banal paragon of the model minority, banished to an existence of mediocre achievement" (Wang 2018, 196). He's desperate to attend the Founder's Retreat because it's only there that he might finalize a lucrative business deal with two classmates from Harvard Business School, both scions of wealthy Asia-based families: Reagan Kwon and Jack Hu. As he sees it, this is his best shot to rise above his \$325,000 salary ("a pittance" in Silicon Valley) as a mid-rank venture capitalist at a mid-rank Taiwanese American firm and become "a man of significance!" (21, 196). While Fred is perhaps in this regard a kindred spirit with Charles Wang,

a key difference is the absence of national form in Fred's manifest expressions of his aspirations. Fred's return narrative, understood through a libidinal dynamic, has no distinctly Asian content. Understood as a narrative of capital circulation, however, Asia and Asian-ness are maximally significant for Fred's self-valorization. Reagan's familial connections to the Thai government have yielded him *carte blanche* decision-making power over a sovereign wealth fund, worth "multiple billions," that he calls "Opus" (189). Along with Jack's family's Hong Kong-based real estate business, Fred is to become the third leg in the scheme, directing the fund's US investments in Silicon Valley. While the Taiwanese origins of Fred's employer, Lion Capital, are relevant, Fred's specific role is not so much to carry himself as a Taiwanese American, or an employee of a Taiwanese firm, but instead to leverage his expertise as an "Asia guy"—or, as he puts it, to perform "an excellent imitation of a moneyed mainland [Chinese] businessman on an acquisition spree, armed to spend recklessly abroad" (259). Key to the scheme, in other words, is the ability of its principals to project the dizzying magnitude of "Asian" capital.

One of the two primary ways that semiperipherality is registered in *Family Trust* is in the novel's thematic association of *deregulation* with newly industrializing Asian countries like Thailand and *regulation* with developed sites like Hong Kong and the US. As Reagan and Jack explain, one of the main reasons why they're recruiting Fred is because Jack's family's Hong Kong-based firm, "Hu Land and Investment," is "pretty constrained in terms of risk" (Wang 2018, 188). Reagan's captainship of Opus is the nepotistic outcome of his family's relationship with the Thai government, in which his sister Regina serves as the Minister of Education. More fundamentally, the drama at the center of the novel—how to ensure that Stanley not only distributes his wealth equitably but also that he reports on it transparently—is itself, as the novel's title suggests, a conflict over regulation.

We can read the puzzle of the novel's annoyance over racial stereotypes on one hand, and its total lack of concern about racial group identity on the other, as a further refraction of regulation's function in enforcing the difference between legitimate and fraudulent, real and fake. The expedited strategy of granting Reagan *carte blanche* betrays the Thai government's anxiety over its lagging modernization and development. Opus's mission is "to make Bangkok the technology hub of Asia. 'Silicon Valley of the East!' or whatever. The rest of Asia is booming, everyone's getting rich, and they don't want to

be left behind” (Wang 2018, 189). As Sunny Xiang (2019) has shown, the political imperative of rapid economic development in Asia has dovetailed with a pervasive, persistent, and transnational racial stereotype of Asians—especially Chinese—as peddling knockoffs, and as themselves human counterfeits. The travel of this stereotype also manifests as “economically successful yet morally suspect diasporan” subjects like Fred, who are in a constant state of racial and gendered self-alienation (and thus strongly resemble the male losers in Charles Yu’s fiction). The political economic origins of this stereotype are efficiently portrayed in *Opus*’s strategy of investing in Silicon Valley companies whose technology they “rip off and copy for themselves” in order to foster protectionist import-substitution at home (Wang 2018, 192). As a kind of regulatory middle-ground between Hong Kong and Thailand, Silicon Valley is for that precise reason a site of amplified unevenness and distortions of formal equality, where corruption and nepotism are thinly concealed behind a veneer of liberal multiculturalist rhetoric.

In the words of an Indian American Lion employee who accuses the HR chief of “deliberately limiting Asian and Indian hires in order to meet certain diversity standards,” “some of us are more equal than others” (Wang 2018, 98). This quip emblemizes uneven and combined development’s analytic emphasis on inequality rather than difference. It also points to how uneven and combined development shapes racial meanings in a specific social context: here, a neoliberal multiculturalism whose reproduction of white domination via the performance of diversity succeeds by suppressing expressions of class conflict.<sup>11</sup> Quip launched, the HR chief “pale[s]” and the room falls awkwardly silent (2018, 96). That discomfort affectively registers the ideological unreliability of the novel’s narrative voice, which delights in puncturing neoliberal multiculturalism’s mannered euphemisms. In an exemplary scene, Kate’s boss tells her that he’s “been under some pressure, to do promotions,” and that he’s considering her for one:

Was he bullshitting her? But then Sonny wasn’t really a liar, Kate thought. He didn’t know how. “Really,” she said carefully. “Because you’re a woman [he continued] . . . Apparently, we don’t have enough! So I’m supposed to promote females. . . . The good news is, at the Labs we at least have enough Latinos and blacks. . . . It would be best if you weren’t Asian, but I can’t be too picky. . . .” (Wang 2018, 404)

Ideological unreliability emerges in the unsettling effect that this passage might have on readers who are positively predisposed to a politics of representation. Regardless of the correspondence between narrative voice and readerly expectation, this passage participates in the novel's more pervasive effort to render undecidable where the narrative voice, and ultimately Wang herself, might stand in regard to racial politics.

This mode of ideological rather than epistemological unreliability is a core feature of Taiwanese American return fiction.<sup>12</sup> What I am arguing is that its roots go deeper than what might be easily relegated to bad or incoherent politics on the part of the author or narrative voice. For Gerald Prince, unreliable narration includes ideological uncertainty; he defines the unreliable narrator as “a narrator whose norms and behavior are not in accordance with the implied author’s norms; a narrator whose values (tastes, judgments, moral sense) diverge from those of the implied author’s; a narrator the reliability of whose account is undermined by various features of that account” (2003, 103). But for Dorrit Cohn, ideological unreliability—what she calls “discordant narration”—is a unique mode in which, from a “reader’s sense,” the narrator is “normatively inappropriate for the story he or she tells,” and there is a split between the author’s intention and the narrator’s understanding of the narrative (2000, 307). For Cohn, the origin of this discordance—in the “reader’s sense” or the author’s intention—is undecidable. But the examples she draws from—Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*—suggest to us that ideological unreliability might be a tendency of texts authored by marginalized subjects. In the case of these Taiwanese American novelists, it appears that ideological unreliability is reflective of an internal self-division that is structured and amplified by a post-1965 contradiction between PMC class status, “Asian” racial identity, and Taiwan’s semiperipherality.<sup>13</sup>

Monika Fludernik writes, “for unreliability to be present in the text, there needs to exist a secret” (1999, 93). On a superficial level, ideological unreliability in these novels proceeds in the register of anti-political correctness announced by Kate’s white friend Camilla, who at one moment wags a finger at her and says, “Don’t pretend I don’t just say out loud what you secretly think” (Wang 2018, 423). The horizontal racial analogy implied here—that Kate’s true thoughts are best expressed by a wealthy white woman—is given

far lower priority in the novel than the shifting vertical hierarchies between various racialized characters and groups jockeying for status. Camilla, for example, unabashedly pursues Kate for friendship and apology after Kate—in a manner unbecoming of a model minority—forcefully confronts her for having an affair with her husband. An extreme frankness is broached between them, which becomes the basis for the rather unidirectional dynamic in their relationship, in which Camilla is the giver and Kate the receiver. This unevenness, homologous with their respective priorities in the novel's character system (minor, major), corresponds to a recurring agon between “white” and Asian capitalism:

Why did white people like to pick and choose from cultures with such zealous judgment? Of course they just *loved* Szechuan cuisine served by a young waitress in a cheap cheongsam, but as soon as you proved yourself just as adept at the form of capitalism *they* had invented? Then you were obsessed. Money crazed. Unworthy of sympathy. And God forbid your children end up at superior schools; then it became all about how much they must have been beaten, the investigative conjecturing over what creative instincts had been snuffed out in order to achieve such excellent test scores. (Wang 2018, 213)

These figurations of racialized (rather than racial) capitalism are central to Chang's and, as we'll see in a moment, Yu's novels as well. They also suggest, sometimes explicitly, that “white” capitalism's time is up. In this passage, Linda's intense resentment betrays the true sentiment behind her feigned sportsmanship of “just as adept.” There is no question that the Huangs consider themselves superior at capitalism; their warrant is proffered by characters like Reagan Kwon and Jack Hu (and for Linda specifically, her ostentatious friend Shirley Chang), who are unambiguously portrayed as money crazed and unworthy of sympathy.

#### **BETWEENNESS IN *HOW TO LIVE SAFELY IN A SCIENCE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE***

Return narratives are narratives of temporal fracture—limbos of various forms. Mediated through memory, the temporal and spatial dimensions in return narratives produce multiplicities of space-time. Sometimes these multiplicities bunch together; sometimes their tormented weight is so dense that they puncture space-time to create new universes, new pockets of what the characters in

*How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* call “chronodiegetic” space (Yu 2011, 14). Yu’s novel translates these vicissitudes into an SF idiom to tell a story about a post-1965 Taiwanese immigrant family and the unhappiness of their lives in Silicon Valley. While in many ways *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* is suffused with return narratives, these narratives are quite different from the realist portrayals of return in the novels above. The protagonist, Charles Yu (Charles, from here on; I’ll refer to the author as Yu), is a time machine repair technician who almost always finds his time-traveling clients returning not just to a precise place from their past but to a precise moment: their unhappiest moment. Rather than stage a literal return as in other Taiwanese American novels, Yu’s novel deepens revanchist desires to the point that they become one in the same with PMC desires for entrepreneurial upward mobility. The conflation of these desires is in large part facilitated by Yu’s stylistic deformations of genre markers, in which science fictional forms correspond quite strikingly with key tropes in irrealist “world-literature”: “modes of spatio-temporal compression,” “juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience,” “barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar” (Warwick Research Collective 2005, 17). The last here—“barometric indications of invisible forces”—is perhaps the most powerfully formulated aspect of the novel’s distinctive style.

With depictions of *literal* return unavailable, we are compelled to consider the *structural* similarities between the novel’s irrealist depictions of return and the literal narratives of return in the novels above. Chief among these similarities is that return narratives, when the sites involved differ in terms of modernity and economic development, are also time-travel narratives. Of late, argues the Warwick Research Collective, speculative fiction (defined as a development of SF traditions that are themselves “metropolitan variants of irrealism or magical realism”) has proven to be especially sensitive to these fractures, precisely in its capacity to depict heterogeneous temporalities: “We might then see . . . uneven and combined development as a form of time travel within the same space, a spatial bridging of unlike times . . . that leads from the classic forms of nineteenth-century realism to the speculative methodologies of today’s global science fiction” (Warwick Research Collective 2015, 71, 17). The irrealist presentation of melancholia in Yu’s novel stages the contradiction of realism and irrealism and in doing so registers

Taiwan's semiperipheral betweenness and its uneven and combined development with a US-sponsored Asian regional economy.

Through the idiom of SF, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* generates a maximum of ontological uncertainty about its diegetic reality, which is affectively experienced as a generic undecidability. For instance, when Charles describes his father's habit of "regularly drifting five minutes into the past," it is unclear whether this description is of literal time travel or, say, a metaphor for emotional distance (Yu 2011, 192). Both are plausible. When the novel turns to the stock convention of time travel SF, the info-dump explaining the laws of time travel, here is how the question of whether one can change the past is handled:

No matter how hard you try, you can't change the past.

The universe just doesn't put up with that. We aren't important enough. No one is. Even in our own lives. We're not strong enough, willful enough, skilled enough in chronodiegetic manipulation to be able to just accidentally change the entire course of anything, even ourselves. . . . Time is an ocean of inertia, drowning out the small vibrations, absorbing the slosh and churn . . . and we're up here, flapping and slapping and just generally spazzing out, . . . but that doesn't even register in the depths, in the powerful undercurrents miles below us, taking us wherever they are taking us. (Yu 2011, 14)

Invisible forces are as pervasive in this passage as they are cognitively indistinct. It's unclear if the reason we can't change the past is because of physical or psychological limitations. The SF law stated here—you can't change the past—spills over its generic boundaries such that realism and irrealism, coded as psychological realism and SF, "slosh and churn" together. Departing from the convention of time travel as a narrative device, established by H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), Yu's novel adopts time travel as a device for spatializing character—that is, connecting character to physical totality via the emotional-physical metaphor of "not enough." The generic "slosh and churn" in the novel undermines the reader's ability to sort out the proportional relation between literal and figurative, realism and irrealism, thus amplifying an ideological unreliability. Further agitated by the novel's metafictional conceit, this "slosh and churn" makes constantly available the possibility that the novel is in fact an autofictional account of Yu's own working through a psychological impasse.

We can observe how irrealism's defamiliarizations limn the contours of uneven and combined development's fractured space-time in a passage describing Charles's father's country of origin:

My father had originally come from a faraway country, a part of reality, a tiny island in the ocean, a different part of the planet, really, a different time, where people still farmed with water buffalo . . . where there was *enough* magic left in the real . . . *enough* magic and terror in the strangeness of family itself, that time travel devices were not only unnecessary, but would have diminished the world, would have changed its mechanic, its web of invisible dynamics. (Yu 2011, 70; emphasis added)

The idyll of the “faraway country” is a thinly veiled description of a Taiwan prior to its retrocession from Japan to KMT rule in 1945. During this period, small-scale, family-based agriculture occupied some sixty percent of the population and a feeling of “enough”-ness was perhaps possible because of the equipoise that had been afforded to Taiwan as a “model colony” of Japan’s “scientific colonialism.”<sup>14</sup> This was in systematic contrast to Japan’s brutal colonial rule in Korea. But the science fictional idiom that becomes more pronounced in the second part of the description, especially the emphasis on “technology,” registers a simultaneity of nonsimultaneous modes of production: “The technology of the day was *enough*, the technology of the sunrise and sunset, the week of work and rest in cycles, in rhythm, sixteen hours of hard rice-farming labor, the remainder of time in a day left for eating and sleeping, the seasons, the years passing by, each one a perfect machine” (2011, 70; emphasis added). As Samuel Ho has argued, by the 1940s the “scientific” industrialization of Taiwan’s agrarian economy was already well underway, and this transformation had occurred “without disrupting the traditional system of peasant cultivation” (quoted in Cumings 1984, 12). What Yu registers in this description is a structure of feeling residual to the uneven and combined development of Taiwan’s colonial status and its semiperipheral role in a broader “Northeast Asian” product cycle directed by a Japanese core.<sup>15</sup>

Charles’ description of the island/Taiwan’s self-sufficient “enough”-ness, read in contrast with the “not enough”-ness above, compresses a tale about what Trotsky called the “whip of external necessity” compelling integration into regional, global, and, in the world of the novel, multi-universal economies (Trotsky 2017, 24). Notably, the island is situated in “reality,” which, according to the novel’s lexicon, is in fact a region in “Minor Universe 31” (MU-31, where most of the novel’s action takes place) that is explicitly defined in terms of economic underdevelopment and an associated genre style (“no particular look and feel, no genre”) (Yu 2011, 77). “Reality” is contrasted



from “middle-class” and “affluent” regions of “science fictionality”: the latter naming a region and status to which Charles’s scientist father, as we’ll see in a moment, feels himself entitled (2011, 77–78). As a young man, Charles’s father emigrates from his “little island in reality” to “a new continent of opportunity, a land of possibility, to the science fictional area where he had come, on scholarship, with nothing to his name but a small green suitcase, a lamp that his aunt gave him, and fifty dollars, which became forty-seven after exchanging currency at the airport” (71). Traversing the distance from Taiwan to the (thinly veiled) US cuts a path not just through geography but through a premodern to a modern mode of production: it is the sort of “epochal” time travel, to use Laura Finch’s term, that happens in a mundane and literal way when rural migrants from a hinterland travel to a metropolitan core, and when flexible Asian Silicon Valley-based businesspeople like Fred travel to the rural resorts of Bali (2018, 387). The immigrant narrative in the novel is refashioned through this idiom as a narrative of transit through economic stations rather than regimes of citizenship and nationality: “Despite improvement in recent years, successful transition into the SF zone remains difficult to achieve for many immigrant families, and even after decades of an earnest and often desperate striving for acceptance and assimilation, many remain in the lower-middle reaches of the zone, along the border between SF and ‘reality’” (Yu 2011, 78).

The simultaneous fragmentation and compression of space and time is symptomatic of the uneven and combined development that strongly defines semiperipherality: “as if socio-historical time had been broken up into spatially separate fragments, and these fragments had then been put back together in a different order, so that phenomena that originally belonged to different times had now ended up unpredictably next to each other” (Rosenberg and Boyle 2019, 36). This fragmentation corresponds not only to the class-stratified space-time of MU-31 but also to the trope of parataxis that is found throughout the novel. *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe’s* main storyline involves Charles’s search for his father. After enduring years of professional failure and—the last straw—after failing to sell his time machine to a venture capitalist, his father absconds to an unknown point in space-time. In the final section, titled “Appendix A,” Charles returns to his childhood home, where he finds his father sitting in the kitchen “waiting inside an empty minute” (Yu 2011, 233). The section opens with an image of nested wholes, the

last of many such riffs on parataxis and supplementarity: “Look in the box. Inside it, there’s another box. Look in that box and find another one. And then another one, until you get to the last one. The smallest one. Open that box” (232). This particular riff on the “box” is meant to resonate with several earlier riffs in which boxes symbolize filial obligation (Charles’s mother’s assisted living facility is a Groundhog Day-like time loop in a replica of that same kitchen), childhood memories (“Growing up for me was a series of boxes”), interiority (Charles is a time machine repair technician who spends most of his time in a phone booth-sized machine called the TM-31), and a techno-scientific space of infinite futures (a stack of graph paper that Charles’s father opens and then asks Charles to “choose a world, any world”) (20, 21, 4, 49).<sup>16</sup> These compressed juxtapositions form a kind of *mise en abyme* of undecidability that materializes the tormented limbo of the Taiwanese diaspora’s national melancholia. In other words, these are a kind of national allegory for a Taiwanese history in which Taiwan has occupied nearly every position in the colonial relation. That history is almost made explicit through the story of the capital city of MU-31, New Angeles/Lost Tokyo-2, whose name brings into the novel’s symbolic economy two of the colonial powers that have shaped Taiwan’s twentieth-century history, as well as the trauma of two Chinas. Lost Tokyo-1 “has not been located yet . . . leaving two halves, bewildered . . . unable to understand what has happened, or if things will ever go back to the way they were, hoping its other half might someday find its way back” (60).

The melancholia of national loss suffuses the affective dimension of the novel’s irrealism and can be read as a mode of *ressentiment*, whose imaginative work, as Nietzsche argued, participates in a process of world-building that, in the novel, proceeds under the banner of “science fictionality.”<sup>17</sup> The trope of nested parataxis might correspond to Nietzsche’s description in *The Genealogy of Morals* of the “Man of *ressentiment*”: “His soul squints; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors” (1989, 38). It’s through this dimension that we can perceive another contour of uneven and combined development that turns on a racial trope: this time with an emphasis on the combination of Taiwan’s economic development with postwar America’s. Aside from Charles’s last name, and references to immigrants from “reality,” the novel has no racial markers. In one sense, this stylistic choice is an imagined solution to the awkward, in-between racial status of Asian Americans, especially regarding its

post-1965 PMC segments: a “postracial” form in which Asian Americanness is registered through the formal signatures of occupational concentration into STEM fields rather than essentialisms like racial identity, culture, or national filiation (Fan 2021). But in another sense, the absence of racial markers is symptomatic of something even more specific: an unresolved ambiguity about Taiwan’s place in modernity, which results in an unresolved ambiguity about Taiwanese American identity vis-à-vis Asian American identity. Taiwanese American identity, as Funie Hsu, Brian Hioe, and Wen Liu put it, “exists in the between,” ambiguous within the broader category of Asian American identity for the same reasons that Asian American identity is an ambiguous American racial category: the non-correspondence between racial abjection and economic success (2017, 465). As AnnaLee Saxenian has shown, much of Silicon Valley’s success is owed to Taiwanese American return narratives. The “New Argonauts,” as she dubs them (borrowing from the Greek myth of Jason’s crew that leaves from Ilocus and ultimately returns with the golden fleece), chart a path of “brain circulation” that have facilitated the technology transfers and established the supply chains that have provided the inputs and infrastructure upon which Silicon Valley and much of the world’s technology sectors depend (2006, 18).<sup>18</sup> Saxenian’s recourse to Greek mythology to characterize this conjuncture betrays its availability to irrealism.

These diasporic returns, Saxenian observes, have been multiply motivated: sometimes by a nationalistic commitment to industrialization and economic development, sometimes by a simple entrepreneurial pursuit of profit, sometimes by a combination of these factors (Ong 2006, 157–76), and sometimes by racial barriers like the “bamboo ceiling,” which is only glancingly referred to in *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* but in such a way that it snaps into view the novel’s entire structure of feeling:

I noticed, on most nights, his jaw clenched at dinner, the way he closed his eyes slowly when my mother asked him about work, . . . seeming to physically shrink with each professional defeat, . . . with each year finding new and deep places to hide it all within himself, observed his absorption of tiny, daily frustrations that, over time (that one true damage-causing substance), accumulated into a reservoir of subterranean failure, like oil shale, like a volatile substance trapped in rock, a vast quantity of potential energy locked in to an inert substrate, unmoving and silent at the present moment but in

actuality building pressure and growing more combusive with each passing year.

“It’s not fair,” my mom would say. (Yu 2011, 35)

We have here something like Langston Hughes’s sagging load, except the explosive creativity of *ressentiment*, for Charles’ father, leads not to racial resistance but to the invention of “chronodiegetics,” the theory of time travel whose proof of concept, a time machine prototype, fails to work during a crucial presentation to a venture capitalist. Another inventor succeeds in adapting Charles’s father’s theory, reaping the windfall of the ensuing world- and universe-creating industries, which include companies like “Time Warner Time” (subsidiary of Google), which employs Charles. All of this flows from Charles’s father’s *ressentiment*, a compensatory over-intellectualism that is, in Nietzsche’s words, “the womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena [. . . that brings] to light an abundance of strange new beauty and affirmation, and perhaps beauty itself” (1989, 87–88).<sup>19</sup> The “science fictional universe” of the novel’s title is the product of Charles’s father’s half-failed revenge: a return narrative similar to Charles Wang’s epic mission to return to China and retroactively discover an America that had rejected him.

Semiperipherality complicates the possibility of a stable racial identity that might bind what is depicted in the above passage as free-floating cathexis. While it’s possible to read this scene solely within the ambit of US racial politics, my goal is not to materially account for the facticity of that racial hierarchy, which should go without saying, but to ask instead how *the trope of shifting racial hierarchy, as deployed by post-1965 Taiwanese American writers* registers unequal modernity at an international scale. Charles’s father’s professional frustration is not only a personal tragedy. It is at the same time a literal depiction of the human capital dimension of Taiwan’s postwar, US-sponsored industrialization as combined with what was in the 1960s and 1970s, when Charles’s father arrived in the US, a “global restructuring” that was well underway, in which US cold war political economic priorities directed a Japan-led, regional economic development.<sup>20</sup>

Charles’s father’s *ressentiment* is a semiperipheral structure of feeling complicated by a US matrix of racial meanings. For Charles’s father, semiperipheral *ressentiment* is not only a response to racial abjection. It is also a response to an imperative of accumulation—call it model minority desire—that follows from a semiperipheral

“fear of falling.” The “jaw clenching thing” that Charles’s father often does is certainly a response to racism—but it’s also a response to frustrated professional and economic ambition. On their way to present the time machine prototype to the venture capitalist, we finally get a description of what Charles’s father is truly after:

He had made a noise, and the world heard him, and the world was coming. And just as he had always imagined, it was coming with money. Or more accurately, the promise of money. More than money. Prestige. . . . He imagined the prospect of seeing his name in trade journals, rivals and admirers whispering about what he was working on, his method of working, how he got his ideas. He imagined how the people at work would react when he quit, when a month after he quit they realized what they had let slip away, how they could never afford him now, how they had ignored him all those years, put him in the cubicle, let him inch upward, never seeing the quality of his ideas. (Yu 2011, 168–69)

Insofar as racial meanings in the US are only legible as signs of abjection, the wholehearted alignment with capital disclosed in this passage disqualifies Charles’s father’s warrant to self-identification as a racial subject. We might therefore read the novel’s post-racial form as a mode of irrealism that registers the simultaneity of racialized downgrading and a desire to move up the global value chain. Taking into advisement Jed Esty’s claim that “antirealist discourse [his term for irrealism] may be one language by which the cultural apparatus of a liberal empire absorbs the pressure of geopolitical transition” (2016, 335), the semiperipheral conjuncture of the post-1965 Taiwanese American author is one especially salient node in that cultural apparatus. What’s buried beneath post-racial form’s nested evasions of racial markers is precisely that mote of PMC class identification with capital that undermines racial meaning in the US: the “secret,” to recall Fludernik’s (1999) term, whose origins in the postwar US-Asian political economy renders the narrators of Taiwanese American return fiction both racially indistinct and ideologically unreliable.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On hyper-selection, see Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Taiwanese immigrants to the US are among the most hyper-selected and occupationally concentrated of any immigrant group: seventy percent hold bachelor’s degrees or higher, second only to Indian immigrants. Taiwanese Americans also have among the highest household incomes

- of any ethnic or racial group, again second only to Indian Americans. See Suzanne Model (2018) and the US Census Bureau (2019).
- <sup>3</sup> On the trope of the “generic Asian” and its historicity, see Jane Hu (2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Chih-ming Wang argues that recent return fictions like Chang-rae Lee’s *My Year Abroad* (2020) undermine what he calls the mode of “immigrant narration” that has for so long provided the master trope for Asian American literature, in which the US is figured as the default horizon for racial and political subjectivity. At the same time, by reversing the vector of travel, these fictions’ depictions of transnational space as, by default, structured by US-led global capitalism end up smuggling in a US exceptionalism in which “triumphant globalization may be re-scripted as the prolongation of Cold War trauma” (Wang 2021, 97–98). In a similar vein, Aimee Bahng and Erin Suzuki note that the returning narrators in R. Zamora Linmark’s *Leche* (2011) and Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* (2015) “confront the changes that US militarization and/or neoliberal global capitalism have created in other parts of the world” (2020). On the immigrant narrative, see also Min Hyoung Song (2015).
- <sup>5</sup> The meanings and ethical demands of Asia’s availability vary a great deal in how they are depicted in return fiction, ranging from the psychological and economic to revelations about the reach of US empire. In Christine So’s readings of two memoirs by sansei (third generation) Japanese American writers—Lydia Minatoya’s *Talking to High Monks in the Snow: An Asian American Odyssey* (1992) and David Mura’s *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991)—she observes that Japan is depicted as offering “a means of resolving alienation and achieving wholeness—one predicated on the exchangeability, tangibility, and materiality of objects” (2007, 74). This resolution, importantly, is offered in stark contrast to the political and cultural limitations of the US. According to So, for writers like these, “Asia, and not the United States, functions as the site for identity formation, resolution, and homecoming. Asia is used as a means of rescuing Asian Americans from the margins of United States politics and culture” (76). Patricia Chu, in her major study of Asian American return memoirs, argues that recent narratives of return register “a way to expand Asian American subjectivities and histories beyond the borders of the United States.” Chu’s primary interest is in how this expansion of subjectivity and identity is pursued by Asian American authors “in a move to reclaim or remember the Asian histories that an earlier wave of Asian American scholarship neglected” (2019, 11). She argues that return narratives primarily take the form of counter-memory and postmemory, generating imaginative correctives to dominant historical narratives and the melancholic disavowals that structure them: “these accounts perform rhetorical work akin to trauma therapy” (40). Elsewhere, Chu examines return narratives in fiction from 1965 to 1996, arguing that Asian American literature “has always been deeply, inherently transnational,” despite cultural

- nationalist disavowals of Asia and the transnational (2021, 280). On recent Indian and South Asian return narratives, see Srinivasan (2015; 2018).
- <sup>6</sup> Some exceptions in Taiwanese American fiction include Shawna Yang Ryan's *Green Island* (2016) and Francie Lin's *The Foreigner* (2008). Examples of direct return narratives are many and include Sonya Chung's *Long for This World* (2010), Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), and Elaine Castillo's *America Is Not the Heart* (2018).
- <sup>7</sup> On "success frames" and the puzzle of the cultural influence of post-1965 Asian American model minoritization, see Lee and Zhou (2015).
- <sup>8</sup> Here I signal my regret that I was unable to incorporate into this article Elaine Hsieh Chou's novel *Disorientation*, which was published in Spring 2022, after this article was drafted. It is perhaps the single best illustration of how Taiwan's semiperipherality conditions complex and unresolvable forms of racial identification and disidentification, and how the unrealism of those forms lends itself to satire.
- <sup>9</sup> Fred "had no difficulties attracting women" (Wang 2018, 24) and Andrew explains, "Girls like me. . . . No, I mean it, they really, really like me" (Chang 2016, 188). Another example of the pincer move would be Anna Yen's *Sophia of Silicon Valley*, which tracks the title character's exemplary performance as an employee whose loyalty, sharp tongue, and aggressiveness facilitate her rapid rise through the ranks of various Silicon Valley firms: "Wow," one character says to her, "You certainly do go against the stereotype of meek Asian girls, don't you?" (2018, 13). Notably unironic about the neoliberal and multiculturalist contradictions that provide fodder for Wang's and Chang's novels, *Sophia* ends with a burst of patriotism that transports the model minority to the forefront of US-led global capitalism. Surveying a lobby full of flowers and condolences sent to Ion (a thinly veiled Tesla Motors) after a group of employees dies in a plane crash, Sophia is overwhelmed: "A sudden rush of patriotism caught me off guard as I realized Ion wasn't just about profits and losses, stock options and employment agreements. It was about solidifying America's position as a leader in the automotive industry by bringing the world's first electric car to market" (326). Sophia's loud-mouthed refutation of the model minority myth powerfully compliments and amplifies her economic nationalism.
- <sup>10</sup> A mini-archive of Taiwanese American losers would include Francie Lin's *The Foreigner* (2008), Ed Lin's novels *Waylaid* (2002) and *David Tung Can't Have a Girlfriend Until He Gets Into an Ivy League College* (2020), and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2008).
- <sup>11</sup> On the periodization of US official anti-racisms and distinctions between "liberal multiculturalism" and "neoliberal multiculturalism," see Jodi Melamed (2011).
- <sup>12</sup> Monika Fludernik defines "ideological unreliability" as a mode "where the narrator propounds a world view which is not shared by the reader. . . .

- The line between emotional and ideological unreliability is extremely vague” (1999, 77). It is one of three major modes of unreliable narration, the other two being “factual inaccuracy” and “lack of objectivity” (75).
- <sup>13</sup> In an adjacent context, Sunny Xiang has demonstrated how the trope of the unreliable narrator in Chang-rae Lee’s 1995 novel *Native Speaker* mediates the US Cold War cultivation of reliable Asian allies through the resurgent figure of the “Asian human” (2014, 277).
- <sup>14</sup> As Bruce Cumings notes, “colonial administrators remarked that what could be done with economic incentives in Taiwan required coercion in Korea” (1984, 11). On Japan’s “scientific colonialism,” see P. Liao and D. Wang (2006). On the psychological, libidinal, and racial dimensions of Japan’s scientific colonialism, see Wu Zhouli (2006).
- <sup>15</sup> Along these lines, I’m inspired by Jeehyun Choi’s generative question: “Do Japan’s peripheries produce a distinct kind of peripheral literature?” (2018, 452). On peripheral realism, see Colleen Lye and Jed Esty (2012) and Ericka Beckman, Oded Nir, and Emilio Sauri (2022).
- <sup>16</sup> The best reading of Charles Yu’s nested boxes is found in Warren Liu (2015).
- <sup>17</sup> Critical accounts of *ressentiment* in minority US politics can be found in Wendy Brown (1995), Judith Butler (1997), E. San Juan, Jr. (1991), and Rebecca Stringer (2000, 263–64).
- <sup>18</sup> Foxconn and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company are perhaps the most high-profile examples.
- <sup>19</sup> Accounts of *ressentiment* differ on the question of the ability to externalize negative affect. In Max Scheler’s famous account, *ressentiment* is defined by its inability to externalize. Brown writes: “*Ressentiment* in this context is a triple achievement: it produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt; it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt; and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt). Together these operations both ameliorate (in Nietzsche’s term, ‘anaesthetize’) and externalize what is otherwise ‘unendurable’” (1995, 68). See also Scheler (1994).
- <sup>20</sup> On “global restructuring” and its effect on post-1965 Asian immigration to the US, see Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng (1994).

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