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China from Inside and Out

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Smoking as Distractor

A common relationship between the successful and the world's unfortunate masses exists around the world and has transcended centuries upon centuries: The upper-class—and those who aspire to it—attempt to isolate themselves from those who are less fortunate in order to ignore the misfortune around them. By constructing differences in social practices, they are able to create that separation, allowing them to free their consciences from the world's suffering. They ultimately trade opportunities to do good in exchange for simple, care-free lives. In his collection of fictional short-stories *Taipei People*, Pai Hsien-yung explores the ways that the Taiwanese people assert their superiority—both indirectly and directly—over those with whom they do not wish to associate. The Taiwanese elevate their social stature through the hobbies and activities in which they take part, and for many of the characters, smoking becomes this method of isolation, cleanly dividing the popular from the lonely, those who are desperate for love from those who are lucky enough to find it, and the wealthy from the poor, acting as both a status symbol and an agent of change. Smoking both elevates citizens up and down the social ladder of Taiwanese society and—in some cases—creates the illusion that one is retaining social prestige when the reality may be otherwise. In Pai Hsien-yung's short story collection *Taipei People*, smoking becomes a tool of distraction that represents the haughtiness and distance the Taiwanese people must adopt to elevate and separate themselves from undesirable society.

For the Taiwanese, being associated with smoking transforms one into a more successful, prominent member of society who is also distant from others. Cigarettes are the gateway to a more glamorous life, and those who partake in them are revered by the Taiwanese masses. Mrs. Liu exclaims with awe that the woman who owns the cigarette business on their corner is “one handsome woman” (Pai 94), suggesting that the boss lady’s proximity to cigarettes makes her more desirable. During this time period, smoking was fashionable, and it was considered attractive for women to smoke. While the boss lady’s physical features contribute to her attractiveness, her relationship to cigarettes—a status symbol of the time—makes her both immensely more alluring and also unattainable; Lai Ming-sheng decides to “defer this share of [his] good fortune till [his] next life” (94), indicating that her social status makes her too intimidating a pursuit for him at present. He recognizes that he is below her in the Taiwanese social hierarchy, and thus he can only dream about courting a woman so successful and established. Cigarettes have elevated the boss lady above the ordinary Taiwanese below her, and consequently she can only garner admiration from them as they look up to her. Smoking’s role as a way to simultaneously make one seem more popular and more unapproachable is proven in a similar fashion in “A Touch of Green.” Granny notices that “young Air Force men in blue uniforms were popping them right and left with their lighted cigarettes” (62) and attracted a group of women. These men have effectively separated themselves and the women from the rest of the New Life Hall’s crowds, creating a bubble of exclusivity around them through their use of the cigarette. The only men described are those smoking; they have attracted women, and thus stand out in stark contrast from any other males in the room, which creates the illusion that they are isolated from the less fortunate Taiwanese men. Smoking—or proximity to the cigarette—

elevates people's positions in Taipei's social hierarchy and creates the impression that they are more fortunate and distant.

Smoking becomes representative of the disdain that the Taiwanese have for those less fortunate and differing in opinion. Smoking is the catalyst that initiates aloof, contemptuous analyzations of other people and the world around them. Yin Hsueh-yen, in "The Eternal Snow Beauty," blows rings of smoke as she watches the "once-mighty men and once-beautiful women" (Pai 18) with "condescending sympathy" (18). The rings of "Three Nines" smoke serve as a symbolic lense through which she criticizes those she believes are inferior to herself. In "The Last Night of Taipan Chin," Chin enjoys her American cigarette as she thinks about how to take advantage of her to-be husband. Taipan Chin—surrounded by fumes—contemplates the idea that she will not need to "lift so much as a finger to keep that old boy in his place" (Pai 122), indicating that there is a relationship between the cigarette and Chin's imperious behavior. She recognizes the inequity in handsomeness between she and her husband, and smoking seems to stimulate thoughts of how to isolate herself from him in some respects—how to keep him 'at bay.' For Wu Chu-kuo in "Winter Night," smoking prompts disgust instead of scheming. As he blows his pipe, he begins to "shake his head, chuckling to himself" (Pai 396) in disapproval as he remembers the UC Berkeley students' non-conformative behavior. He finds himself detached from the students and looks down at their actions during the riots with disapproval, and the pipe accompanies these thoughts of discontent. Pai puts a novel spin on the relationship between smoking, displeasure towards others, and isolation in "Love's Lone Flower" as he describes Dainty's ordeal with her father. Dainty laughs "drily" (244) with a cigarette in her mouth as she remembers how her father would "coax [her] into doing it with him" (244), indicating that she resents her father for allowing such activities to occur. Yet, the word "coax" suggests that Dainty

is also unhappy with her own strength of will for allowing herself to be taken advantage of in such an easy manner. Throughout it all, cigarettes seem to strengthen this sense of dissatisfaction while also creating a desire to separate herself from these thoughts. Across the multitude of different stories, smoking comes to represent a sense of condescension that is deeply-rooted in Taiwanese society.

Despite the suffering that exists in Taiwan, Pai illustrates proximity to smoking as a way to ignore the less-fortunate and live a simpler life. The Taiwanese employ cigarettes to reduce their empathy towards others. In “Glory’s by Blossom Bridge,” Boss-Lady describes Mr. Lu’s “tobacco-stained teeth” (286) and immediately continues by depicting how Mr. Lu “[pretended] not to know” (286) her, a description that suggests in part that his intimacy with cigarettes has contributed to his haughty, disrespectful behavior towards the Boss-Lady, who seems much lonelier than he is at this point in the story. Just as Spring Maid’s new position as his girlfriend makes him feel superior to others around him, smoking has added to this performance of dominance even though he might not be conscious of it. A parallel to this is seen in Pai’s piece “The Eternal Snow Beauty;” Mr. Sung finds himself “smoking furiously” (Pai 28) so that his wife does not “dare go and console him” (28). Smoking enables Mr. Sung to disassociate with his wife and—presumably—think instead about his new mistress. Just like the Boss Lady, Mrs. Sung is lonely, and she admits that she worries “[herself] to death” (28) over her husband, yet as he smokes he is able to detach himself from her feelings and forget about her solitude. His selfishness is enhanced by the catalyst that is the cigarette, and by figuratively keeping his wife at bay with the fumes, he can focus on what he cares about in the world without suffering feelings of guilt. If Mr. Sung did not smoke, his wife might think him approachable, and a lengthy conversation would ensue. Ultimately, smoking allows him to ignore his wife and make

his life undeniably simpler and easier. In “The Last Night of Taipan Chin,” a similar situation arises through which Pai reinforces this concept. After having been abandoned by her boyfriend, Phoenix collapses and cries while Taipan Chin “[lights] a cigarette, [takes] a hard drag, and [paces] around the room a couple of times” (Pai 130). Taipan Chin has every opportunity to sit next to Phoenix and console her, but from her mouth comes only smoke instead of the words that might help mentally repair the younger woman. While Chin does recognize similarities between herself and her coworker, she neglects Phoenix and consequently suggests that she is superior; she believes that her years of experience have hardened her into one who can survive, while Phoenix—due to her naiveté—cannot. The cigarette smoke acts as a metaphorical barrier between the two women, isolating Taipan Chin from Phoenix as much as possible so that she can preserve her own well-being. Chin does eventually help her friend, but the wall of smoke she creates as she temporarily forsakes Phoenix should not be forgotten. The cigarette once again serves a symbol of the Taipei people’s desire to ignore the unfortunate in the hopes of preserving themselves.

Smoking distracts Taipei’s people from the economic and emotional destitution around them, giving them a sense of superiority that separates them from the weak, desperate, and lonely. The cigarette can create a sense of social exclusivity and increases the distance between Taipei’s social classes. Through the lense of the smoke ring, people look down on others with condescension, and they attempt to isolate themselves from the less fortunate—those who may ‘bring them down.’ Through his cigarette motif, Pai speaks out against the fractionalization of Taiwanese society. Smoking is not the cause of this fragmentation, of course, but throughout the stories it becomes undeniably representative of it. Economic, cultural, and social differences will

always exist, but a world with less hauteur and more warmth would be greatly appreciated indeed.