

Fifty Years of Ghosts

Chapter 4: Fifty Years of Ghosts

Observer Commentary

Temporal anomaly in human discourse: Taiwan's 50-year period under Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945) is simultaneously: – Too long (mainland position: “Japanese occupation was foreign oppression, yet created distinct Taiwanese identity—proof that cultural engineering works”) – Too short (Taiwan position: “50 years of Japanese rule doesn't make us Japanese, so why should 75 years of separation make us not-Chinese?”) – Erased (both positions minimize this period when inconvenient to narrative)

Actual historical data: Japanese colonial period was longest stable administration Taiwan had experienced prior to 1945. Previous administrations: – Qing Dynasty rule: 212 years, but characterized by limited control, frequent rebellion, peripheral status as “frontier territory” – Dutch colonization: 38 years (1624–1662) – Spanish colonization: 16 years (1626–1642) – Kingdom of Tungning: 22 years (1662–1683)

The Japanese period was 50 years of intensive state-building: infrastructure development (railways, highways, ports), educational system, legal system, census and population registration, public health infrastructure, industrial development.

Result: By 1945, Taiwan had functional modern state apparatus. This infrastructure persisted after Japanese departure and formed foundation for ROC administration.

Paradox: The Japanese period that both mainland and Taiwan prefer to minimize actually created the institutional substrate that enabled post-1945 political development, including the eventual democracy that now defines Taiwanese identity.

Observation subject: Lin Xiaowen's grandmother (maternal), age 81, born 1944 in Tainan during final year of Japanese rule. She represents the transitional generation that experienced Japanese colonization as children and ROC rule as adults, providing living memory of system discontinuity.

Her memories are fragmentary and emotionally complicated—characteristics of colonized populations’ relationship to colonizer.

Human Narrative

Lin Xiaowen visited her grandmother every two weeks, taking the high-speed rail from Taipei to Tainan on Saturday mornings. The journey took 96 minutes, the train traveling at 300 kilometers per hour through landscapes that shifted from urban to rural to urban again: the densely packed concrete of greater Taipei, the rice paddies of the central plains, the sugar cane fields approaching the southern cities.

Her grandmother—Amah in Hokkien—lived in a small house in Tainan’s old district, a neighborhood of narrow lanes and Japanese-era buildings that had somehow survived the modernization that had bulldozed most of the city. The house itself dated to 1935, built in the Japanese style with sliding doors, tatami rooms, and a small interior courtyard.

Xiaowen found her grandmother in the courtyard, tending to her orchids. At 81, Amah moved slowly but remained sharp-minded, her memory for distant events clearer than her memory for yesterday’s meals.

“Xiaowen, you’re here. Have you eaten?”

“I ate on the train, Amah.”

“Then eat again. I made your favorite.”

This was ritual: Amah always had food prepared, regardless of whether Xiaowen had eaten. Refusing was pointless. They went inside, where the table held multiple dishes—braised pork, stir-fried vegetables, fish soup, rice.

They ate together, Amah asking questions about Xiaowen’s work that she wouldn’t fully understand the answers to, Xiaowen providing simplified explanations. Then, after the meal was finished and tea poured, Xiaowen said: “Amah, can I ask you about when you were young?”

Her grandmother’s expression shifted slightly—a wariness that always appeared when the past was mentioned.

“Why do you want to know about old times?”

“I’m trying to understand... what it was like when things changed. When the Japanese left and the mainlanders came.”

Amah was silent for a long moment, sipping her tea. Then: “You want to know if we were happy or sad when the war ended?”

“Were you?”

“I was one year old when the war ended. I don’t remember the Japanese leaving. My first memories are already after—when the mainlanders had come.”

“But your parents told you about it?”

“My father did. Sometimes. He didn’t like to talk about the past, but sometimes he would.”

Amah set down her teacup and looked out the window, where afternoon light filtered through the courtyard’s bamboo.

“My father was born in 1910, during the Japanese time. He went to Japanese schools, learned to read and write in Japanese, spoke Japanese better than Hokkien. He worked as an accountant for a Japanese company in Tainan. He told me that when he was young, he wanted to be Japanese—really Japanese, not just Taiwanese under Japanese rule. He studied hard, followed all the rules, believed that if he was good enough, the Japanese would accept him as equal.”

“Did they?”

“Of course not. He was hontōjin—native islander. The naichijin—people from Japan proper—always had better positions, higher salaries, more respect. My father could do the same work, but he couldn’t have the same status.”

Amah paused, then continued: “But he still respected them. He said the Japanese made Taiwan modern. Before Japanese rule, Taiwan was backward—bandits in the mountains, diseases, no schools, no trains. The Japanese built everything: railroads, schools, hospitals, irrigation systems. They made laws and everyone had to follow the laws. My father said that before the Japanese, you couldn’t trust that tomorrow would be like yesterday. After the Japanese came, you could plan. You could build a future.”

“So he was sad when they left?”

“Not sad. Relieved, maybe? And hopeful. When the war ended, everyone said Taiwan was returning to China. There were celebrations. People hung ROC flags. My father said people were excited—we would finally be treated as equals, as Chinese among Chinese, not as colonized subjects.”

“But that’s not what happened?”

Amah’s face darkened. “The mainlanders came, and they treated us worse than the Japanese had. At least the Japanese had been competent. The soldiers who arrived from the mainland in 1945 were... my father said they looked like beggars. Undisciplined, poorly equipped. They stole things. They took over houses and businesses. The government officials who came were corrupt. Everything the Japanese had built started to break down—the

trains stopped running on time, the hospitals ran out of medicine, inflation destroyed people's savings."

"And then the 228 Incident?"

Amah nodded. "February 1947. I was three years old. I don't remember it, but everyone who lived through it remembered. A woman selling cigarettes was beaten by government agents. People protested. The government opened fire. Then the army came from the mainland and killed thousands. My father's brother—my uncle—was among them. He was a teacher, educated, spoke Mandarin because he'd studied it to prepare for 'returning to China.' The soldiers shot him anyway. Because he was Taiwanese."

Xiaowen had heard this story before, in fragments, but never in such detail.

"After 228, my father stopped talking about being Chinese. He said the mainlanders proved that we were different. We thought we were the same people, separated by 50 years. But 50 years was enough. We had become different."

"Different how?"

"The Japanese taught us to be on time, to follow rules, to keep things clean. We learned to value education, to save money, to plan for the future. The mainlanders—the ones who came in 1945, 1949—they brought chaos. They had lived through warlords and civil war and Japanese invasion. They didn't trust institutions. They didn't plan for the future because there was no future, just survival day to day."

Amah poured more tea for both of them. "I'm not saying the Japanese were good. They were colonizers. They treated us as inferior. But they built systems that worked. When the mainlanders came, they inherited those systems and let them decay."

"Did your father ever regret the Japanese period ending?"

"He never said so directly. But I remember once, I must have been a teenager, there was something broken—I don't remember what, maybe the bus schedule or the trash collection—and my father said: 'If the Japanese were still here, this wouldn't happen.' Then he looked angry at himself for saying it."

"Why angry?"

"Because he wasn't supposed to feel that way. The Japanese were the enemy. We were supposed to be grateful to be rid of them, grateful to be returned to China. But sometimes the enemy you know is better than the savior you don't."

They spent the rest of the afternoon in the courtyard, Amah teaching Xiaowen how to properly care for orchids—the specific watering schedule, the humidity requirements, the careful pruning. It was a skill Amah had learned from her father, who had learned it during the Japanese period when orchid cultivation had been popularized as a genteel hobby.

“Your great-grandfather was good at learning the things the Japanese valued,” Amah said. “He thought if he became cultured in their way, they’d respect him.”

“Did it work?”

“No. But he enjoyed the orchids anyway. After the mainlanders came, he kept growing them. He said the orchids didn’t care who was in charge.”

As evening approached, Xiaowen prepared to leave. At the doorway, she hesitated, then asked: “Amah, do you think of yourself as Chinese or Taiwanese?”

Her grandmother looked at her for a long moment.

“When I was young, I thought I was Chinese. We all did. The Japanese told us we were inferior Chinese, but we were Chinese. Then the mainlanders came and treated us like we weren’t really Chinese. Now people say we’re Taiwanese, not Chinese at all. But I still speak Hokkien, which is a Chinese language. I still worship at temples with gods from Chinese tradition. I still eat Chinese food—though Taiwanese style, which is different from mainland style.”

She paused. “I think I’m Taiwanese. But Taiwanese is just a kind of Chinese that the mainland doesn’t recognize anymore. Like a child who left home and grew up differently, and when they return, the parents don’t recognize them.”

“Do you want reunification?”

“I’m 81 years old. I want peace. I want to grow my orchids and see my granddaughter. Whether we’re called Chinese or Taiwanese or something else doesn’t matter to me. But the young people—your generation—they only know Taiwan as it is now. They don’t remember when we thought we were Chinese. To them, China is a foreign country.”

“And that’s okay?”

“It’s reality. You can’t force people to feel an identity they don’t feel. The mainland can send all the missiles they want, but they can’t missile us into feeling Chinese.”

Xiaowen smiled despite herself. “I don’t think ‘missile’ is a verb, Amah.”

“Then they should make it one. They’re certainly trying.”

On the train back to Taipei, Xiaowen thought about what her grandmother had said. Fifty years of Japanese rule had created a population that was culturally distinct from mainland China—modernized, educated, with different expectations of governance. Then 75 years of separation had amplified that distinction.

She pulled out her phone and scrolled through social media. Her feed was full of arguments about identity, about history, about what Taiwan should do in the face of increasing pressure from Beijing.

One thread caught her attention: A debate about whether Taiwanese who had lived under Japanese rule were “colonized victims” or “willing collaborators.” Someone argued that those who had served in Japanese institutions or spoken Japanese fluently had betrayed their Chinese identity. Someone else countered that survival under colonial rule required cooperation, and judging historical actors by contemporary standards was unfair.

Xiaowen thought of her great-grandfather, the accountant who had wanted to be Japanese, who had learned to cultivate orchids, who had hoped that competence and cultural refinement would earn him equality. He had been neither a victim nor a collaborator in any simple sense. He had been a person trying to live a dignified life under circumstances he hadn’t chosen.

Wasn’t that what everyone was doing now? She hadn’t chosen to be born in Taiwan, hadn’t chosen the geopolitical situation, hadn’t chosen to have her identity contested by rival political entities. She was just trying to live.

But “just living” was becoming impossible. Every decision carried political weight. Applying for jobs in China meant accepting Chinese identity claims. Avoiding China meant accepting economic limitations. Speaking Mandarin vs. Hokkien, displaying certain flags, even food choices—all had become markers in an identity war she hadn’t signed up for.

Her phone buzzed. Message from Kevin, her childhood friend who had moved to Shanghai five years ago for work. They still kept in touch, though their conversations had become strained.

Kevin: Hey, saw the news about the military exercises. You okay?

Xiaowen: Yeah, we’re used to it. Just posturing.

Kevin: My colleagues here are pretty worked up about it. Lots of talk about reunification being inevitable, Taiwan needing to accept reality.

Xiaowen: What do you tell them?

Kevin: I don’t engage. Safer that way.

She stared at the message. Kevin was Taiwanese, but he worked in Shanghai, navigated mainland social contexts, probably had to perform mainland identity claims to maintain his job and social relationships. What did he

actually believe? Did he still think of himself as Taiwanese? Or had five years in Shanghai shifted his perspective?

She typed: Do you still feel Taiwanese?

The three dots appeared indicating he was typing, then disappeared. Appeared again. Disappeared. Finally:

Kevin: I don't know anymore. I'm something in between. Neither fully Taiwan nor fully mainland. Kind of floating.

Xiaowen: Does that bother you?

Kevin: Sometimes. Other times it feels like the only honest position.

The train slid into Taipei Main Station. Xiaowen pocketed her phone and joined the flow of passengers exiting.

Outside, the city's night markets were in full operation, the air thick with the smell of stinky tofu and grilled squid. Neon signs in Chinese characters advertised everything from bubble tea to karaoke. It all felt intensely Taiwanese—but also intensely Chinese, but also influenced by Japanese aesthetics, but also increasingly cosmopolitan in the way of globalized Asian cities.

What was the essential core? What made this place what it was?

Maybe there was no essential core. Maybe identity was just layers of history, compressed and complicated, and you could emphasize different layers depending on what story you wanted to tell.

Her grandmother's voice echoed: You can't force people to feel an identity they don't feel.

But what if you didn't feel any identity clearly? What if you were just confused, caught between categories that didn't quite fit?

Was confusion allowed? Or did the world demand that everyone choose a side?

Observer Commentary

Duration of narrated events: 8 hours. Information transmission across generations observed: incomplete but significant.

The grandmother organism transfers historical memory to granddaughter organism. The transmission is lossy—the granddaughter cannot access the qualia of living through regime change, only narrative approximations. But the narrative approximations carry sufficient information to shape identity formation.

Key observation: The Japanese colonial period created infrastructure and habituated practices that persisted beyond Japanese rule. This is standard for colonial systems. Colonizers impose systems optimized for extraction and control, but systems persist because they solve coordination problems. Post-colonial populations inherit colonial infrastructure and must negotiate relationship to it.

Taiwan case specifics: – Railway system: Built by Japanese, maintained by ROC, now operated by independent Taiwanese state – Educational system: Japanese model, ROC content, now Taiwanese curriculum – Legal system: Japanese civil code basis, modified over time – Urban planning: Japanese grid patterns remain visible in Tainan, Taipei

Each system layer contains embedded assumptions from its origin period. The current “Taiwanese” identity is partly built on Japanese-era institutional foundations, creating cognitive dissonance: How can one claim pure Chinese civilizational continuity while inhabiting institutions designed by Japanese colonizers?

Mainland position: The Japanese period was anomalous interruption of Chinese continuity, to be minimized or erased.

Taiwan position: The Japanese period was formative and cannot be erased, but also is not definitive. Taiwanese identity incorporates Japanese influence without being Japanese.

Both positions contain partial truth. Identity is always syncretic— assembled from multiple source materials. “Pure” cultural identity is historical fiction.

Observation on the organism Lin Xiaowen’s confusion:

She experiences identity as indeterminate. This is increasingly common among populations in contested zones. Traditional identity markers— language, citizenship, cultural practice—give contradictory signals: – Speaks Mandarin (Chinese language) with Taiwanese accent – Holds Taiwan passport (separate political entity) but passport not widely recognized – Consumes media from Taiwan, Japan, US, and increasingly China – Cultural practices blend Chinese, Japanese, and Western elements

Result: Identity becomes situational rather than essential. She performs different identity claims depending on context. This is cognitively demanding but functionally adaptive in fragmented system.

However, situational identity becomes unsustainable under pressure. When forced to choose sides—which is increasingly the case—the organism must collapse superposition into definite state. This forced measurement of identity state produces anxiety observable in the organism’s internal monologue.

Regarding the friend Kevin in Shanghai:

He represents migration pattern of economic opportunity overriding political identity. Approximately 400,000 Taiwanese nationals currently work in mainland China, creating population of identity-ambiguous individuals with material stakes in both systems.

These individuals face pressure to perform mainland identity while maintaining Taiwanese identity in private. The cognitive burden of this dual performance produces the state Kevin describes: "Something in between. Kind of floating."

This floating state is treated as problematic by both mainstream positions:
– Mainland view: Must choose Chinese identity – Taiwan view: Working in China is betrayal of Taiwanese identity

But floating state may be most accurate description of reality for border-crossing populations. They are hybrid, networked, multiply-positioned. Traditional national identity frameworks cannot accommodate their experience.

Projection: As cross-strait tensions escalate, hybrid individuals will face increasing pressure to declare singular loyalty. Many will comply. Some will continue attempting to maintain hybrid status. A few will actively resist categorization.

The distribution of these responses will affect overall system dynamics.

End observation log.

[Chapter 4 Complete]