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**Remapping Taipei:  
Street Names, Political Symbolism, and Artistic Responses in Fiction, Poetry and Film  
Working Paper and Research Report  
2019 Taiwan Fellowship Program  
Center for Chinese Studies, National Central Library  
and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, ROC**

**Abstract**

Following the end of the Anti-Japanese War in 1945, Taiwan again became a province of China. In the years that followed, the Nationalist government carried out a campaign to remove all references to Japan and Japanese culture and install Chinese names and institutions in their place. This included renaming streets in the capital city of Taipei, which became the provisional capital of the Republic of China after 1949. Many of the names chosen had close ties to former and present government leaders, government policies and programs and places names in mainland China. Thus, when traversing the streets of Taipei, one became immersed in Nationalist history, policies and programs. Beginning in the 1960s, fiction writers, poets and filmmakers created works that reflected on and reacted to this highly politicized mapping and began to establish a space apart by reimagining Taipei or moving above ground level. This paper will examine how the poets Ya Hsien (Ya Xian) and Lin Yaode, filmmakers Wan Jen (Wan Ren), Tseng Wen-chen (Zeng Wenzhen) and Lai Shengchuan and fiction writer Chu Tien-hsin (Zhu Tianxin) have interrogated the street naming and mapping process in their works.

**Paper**

In 1946, the Nationalist or Guomindang (GMD) government of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) that ruled China since 1912, and its former ally in the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945), the Chinese Communist Party, entered into a civil war over control of mainland Chinese territory and thus of the Chinese nation and its people. As Nationalist military forces established themselves in Taiwan and eventually built a base to which they could retreat if threatened by Communist victory, they began to renovate the former Japanese colonial capital city of Taipei. With the need to rebuild Taiwan from damage suffered from US bombing in World War II and to expand the city to accommodate the mainland refugees pouring into Taiwan

as Chinese Communist forces gained the upper hand, Guomindang affiliated government officials began a process of renaming city streets in what they termed the “provisional” or interim capital of Taipei that would last until the 1970s as the city grew and expanded far beyond the space it had occupied under Japanese rule from 1895-1945.

The street naming strategy as it developed derives from the cultural policies of the Guomindang government. These policies actively promoted the seminal position and political doctrines of party founder Sun Yat-sen and his successor Chiang Kai-shek, implemented a restoration of Confucian values to bolster the GMD’s position as the legitimate keeper of Chinese tradition, and called for first winning and then later, after GMD defeat, the imminent retaking of the territory lost to Communist forces in 1949. With the declaration of martial law in Taiwan in 1949, the government actively promoted a conservative cultural program designed to further its own political interests. Such a policy would establish a new, homogeneous culture that would unite Taiwan’s disparate population of indigenous peoples, Hoklo immigrants from Fujian province, and Hakkanese immigrants who had come to Taiwan over the past four centuries, as well as the recent wave of immigrants from throughout China. By naming streets after Nationalist leaders, policies, and events from Republican history, by using Confucian values as the names of major avenues, and by mapping onto Taipei what amounted to a simulacrum of the China mainland by using the names of provinces and major cities from throughout the lost national territory, citizens had daily lessons in Nationalist cultural education as they traversed the boulevards and byways of the provisional capital city<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Similar street naming practices were used in many cities in Taiwan, though none was as carefully and thoroughly mapped as Taipei. Almost all cities have streets named for Sun and Jiang, and many have streets named after Confucian virtues and GMD political values. A few also have streets with mainland place names, with Jiayi in central Taiwan and Taidong on the

While this subtle means of inculcating Nationalist policies and values in pedestrians in the urban population of the ROC's largest city may have been missed by many living in or visiting Taipei, it was noticed by members of Taiwan's artistic community. Poets Lin Yaode and Ya Xian, filmmakers Wan Ren (Wan Jen), Zeng Wenzhen (Tseng Wen-chen) and Stan Lai and fiction writer Zhu Tianxin (Chu T'ien-hsin) have responded to this mapping of Taipei by seeking to bring it to our attention, subvert it and argue for an alternative space above or outside the city that transcends the network of Nationalist street names. The poet Lin Yaode reminds us of the inherently political nature of Taipei's roadways in his poem "Traffic Problems" (Jiaotong wenti, 1986), in which potential political undercurrents lie below the surface enumeration of traffic problems existing on some of Taipei's major streets. Two decades earlier in his last poem entitled "Easter," Ya Xian exercises poetic license to subvert Taipei's street system. These creative efforts pave the way for filmmakers in the post-martial law period (1987 and after) such as Wan Ren and Stan Lai to more openly and blatantly transgress the Nationalist landscape by moving above ground level to create a new space outside of and thus free from the restrictions of Nationalist ideology and dogma of street names. Finally, the writer Zhu Tianxin uses references to the ancient Japanese capital city of Kyoto and Japanese colonial-era Taipei to counter Nationalist cultural and political policies.

### **Nationalist Politics and Street-naming Conventions**

Political factors play an important role in street naming conventions around the world. In the United States, streets in Washington D.C. are named after the fifty states, former presidents and other important government leaders, and key government institutions or documents such as

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east coast having the most. Taipei is unique, however, in having these streets placed to replicate a map of mainland Chinese territory.

the Constitution. State capitals frequently feature streets named after state counties. In cities large and small streets are often named after U.S. presidents and, more recently, civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez. Before 1937 in pre-Civil War China, streets were also named after major government leaders and major cities, counties and provinces. In the capital city of Nanjing, there were both a Zhongshan Road named for Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) and a Zhongzheng Road named for his successor, Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek, whose courtesy name was Jiang Zhongzheng). The city of Shanghai had streets named after major cities, provinces and territories from throughout China including Tianjin, Nanjing, Sichuan and Tibet among others. However, in none of these cases was the prevalence and placement of streets named for government leaders, policies, values and places as thoroughgoing as it was in the postwar provisional capital of Taiwan.

On November 17, 1945, the new Republican provincial government in Taiwan proclaimed the *Directive for Renaming Streets in Cities and Counties in Taiwan Province* (Taiwansheng gexianshi jiedao mingcheng gaizheng banfa).<sup>2</sup> Section Two of this law required that all street names that memorialized Japanese people, honored Japanese military strength or in other ways had clearly Japanese names be changed within two months (Chen 402). Section Three stipulate that the new names should fall into one of four categories: names that “(1) display the spirit of the Chinese ethnos, such as Zhonghua Road, Xinyi Road and Heping Road; (2) promulgate the Three Principles of the People, such as Sanmin Road, Minquan Road, Minzu Road, and Minsheng Road; (3) commemorate the great people of the nation, such as Zhongshan Road and Zhongzheng Road and (4) be in keeping with local geography or customs and be of

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<sup>2</sup> A full text of this document is contained in Chen Weiyuan, *Taibeishi diming yu luji yan'geshi* (A history of the change and development of place and street names in Taipei) (Taipei: Taibeishi wenxian weiyuanhui, 2002), 402.

some significance (Chen 402). These principles would guide the naming of streets in Taiwan for the next forty years until the lifting of martial law in 1987.

One of the first effort at street naming occurred in October 1946 with the establishment of Jieshou Lu, or long live Jiang Jieshi Street.<sup>3</sup> In order to honor Jiang on a visit to Taiwan, the governor Chen Yi renamed what had been the Taiwan Governor General's Office during the Japanese colonial period, Jieshou Guan or Jieshou Hall (literally Long Live Jiang Jieshi Hall); at the same time, the street leading east from the building was renamed after Jiang as well.

In the years that followed, the government renamed most of the streets in Taipei. A study prepared by the Taipei Municipal Archives states that the two major streets became the north-south running Zhongshan Road and the east-west artery Zhongzheng Road.<sup>4</sup> These two streets, named for Sun and Jiang respectively, divided the city into four central districts with "streets named after cities, counties and provinces on the China mainland." Zhongshan Road became the demarcation point for dividing major roads into east and west segments and Zhongzheng Road became the point at which major north-south streets were divided into northern and southern segments. At this point, Zhongzheng Road stretched from the Danshui River in the west to Songshan District in the east. With its ties to the leader of the ROC, it was seen as inauspicious

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<sup>3</sup> This name would remain in place until 1996 when the Taipei City government under then-mayor Chen Shuibian renamed the street Katagalan Road, after one of the local aboriginal groups. This initiated a new period of street naming practices aimed at removing names with Nationalist connections and either restoring old names (Banka Road) or introducing new names based on democratic principles (Shimin Boulevard) or local Taiwanese cultural features (Katalagan Road).

<sup>4</sup> See Chen 2002, add page number. This information comes from the *Directive for the Compiling and Placement of Street Name Plates and Address Plates in Taipei City* (Taibeishi daolu mingpai ji menpai bianding banfa), which was first promulgated on July 6, 1973 with revisions in 1991 and 1998 (a full text of the law is contained in the appendices to the above work (404) and states that "Taipei City was to take Zhongshan North and South Roads as the warp/longitude and Zhongxiao and Zhongzheng Road as the weft/woof/latitude, underscoring the importance of these streets.

to divide it into sections; as a result, address numbers eventually ran above one thousand.<sup>5</sup> In 1970, the street was divided into two sections, the western portion was renamed Zhongxiao Road and the eastern one called Bade Road.

In the four districts demarcated in the postwar street plan—Datong, Wanhua, Zhongshan and Zhongzheng, the last two also named for Sun and Jiang—streets were named after place names from throughout mainland China. The placement of the names approximates their location in China: places located in southwestern China (e.g. Chengdu, Shantou, Xichang, Xizang (Tibet), Xining, Kunming and Liuzhou) are located in Wanhua district in the southwestern part of the city. Locations from the east (e.g. Ningbo, Zhenjiang, Shaoxing, Hangzhou and Jinhua) and southeast (e.g. Fuzhou, Jinmen, Hui'an and Shao'an), are found primarily in Zhongzheng district, which in the immediate postwar years made up the southeastern part of Taipei proper. Northeastern Chinese places names (e.g. Jilin, Changchun, Liaoning and Longjiang, were placed in Zhongshan district in northeastern Taipei. And cities from the northwest regions of China (e.g. Dunhuang, Jiuquan, Ningxia and Chang'an) ended up in Datong district in the northwestern portion of the city. Interestingly with the exception of the streets with mainland geographic names that continue out of these four central districts into neighboring districts, streets in other parts of Taipei without exception are free from ties to locations in Mainland China.

As a result of this policy, a proximate replication of the China mainland was mapped onto the streets of Taipei proper, the area demarcated by the four core districts. By so doing, the Nationalist government did with street names what it could not do militarily: it symbolically retook lost territory and reunified China. The absence of mainland place names elsewhere in Taipei is essential to the myth of symbolic recovery and to a remapped Taipei as a simulacrum of

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<sup>5</sup> This information was provided to me by Mr. Wei Te-wen, an expert on Taiwan's early history and on early maps of Taipei and Taiwan in September 2001.

China as it would have been had the Nationalists won the civil war and unified China.<sup>6</sup> As residents negotiated the streets of the four central districts, they symbolically traversed the lost Chinese national territory.

Other street names in Taipei also have clear ties to the Nationalist government. Some, in addition to Zhongshan and Zhongzheng Roads, were also named after Nationalist notables or allies. These include Lin Sen Road, named for a former head of the Nanjing Republican era government, Weishui Road, named after Jiang Weishui, a hero of the War of Resistance, and Roosevelt Road (Luosifu lu), named for Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Nationalist ally from World War II. Other streets were named after important policies or events, including Xinhai Road, named for the Xinhai Uprising of 1911 that would lead to the overthrow of the last imperial dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912; Jianguo Road, which commemorated national reconstruction; Xincheng Road, which recalls the New Life Campaign of the 1930s to restore morale and establish discipline among the populace and Guangfu Road, which refer to the retrocession of Taiwan to the Republic of China at the end of World War II. As heirs to Sun Yat-sen's political legacy, the Three Principles of the People (Sanmin zhuyi), the GMD founder's contribution to Chinese political philosophy, were commemorated in three parallel streets running west to east in northern Taipei: Minsheng Road, Minzu Road and Minquan Road. Calls for the patriotic support of the government are found in Aiguo (patriotism) Street (Aiguo lu). Finally the presence of streets named after Confucian virtues echo the Nationalist government's desire to establish ties to Chinese tradition in order to bolster its claim to be the heir to China's cultural and imperial legacy in an era when the People's Republic of

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<sup>6</sup>While many Shanghai street names made reference to place names in China, they were not situated to replicate their geographic locations in China. Since the naming of these streets dates from a period long before reunification was a concern, it follows that no attempt was made to remap China onto Shanghai's streets.

China (PRC) conducted campaigns to distance itself from or eliminate outright traditional Chinese culture. Confucianism also served as a tool for moral education and for establishing social order and harmony among the diverse population that now existed in Taiwan. A system of major west-east arteries is headed at the north by Eight Virtues (Bade) Road. Directly to the south run streets named for pairs of these same eight virtues: loyalty and filial piety (Zhongxiao Road), benevolence and love (Ren'ai Road), loyalty and righteousness (Xinyi Road) and harmony and peace (Heping Road).

Given these naming practices, negotiating the streets of Taipei became an exercise in moral education and political indoctrination. Not only did city dwellers have to travel across a “reunited” China, they also got to review the names of key leaders and their policies and refresh their knowledge of the proper virtues an ROC citizen should possess. Traveling around Taipei was not a meaningless or politically neutral act, at least as intended by those who established street naming policy—the resulting names were too freighted with political significance.

Poet, fiction writer, and essayist Lin Yaode (1962-1996) hints at the challenges of traveling Taipei’s streets in his 1986 poem “Traffic Problems” (Jiaotong wenti):

Red light/Aiguo East Road  
/speed limit 40 km per hr  
/yellow light/Minzu West  
Road/left turn  
prohibited after 6 am or before  
9 pm/green light/Zhong  
Shan North Road/horn honking  
prohibited/red light/Jianguo  
South Road/ road work in progress please  
detour around construction/yellow light  
/Roosevelt Road Section 5  
/yield/green light/Min  
quan East Road/cars in left lanes  
have right of way/red light/Bei  
ping Road/one-way traffic/

[*City Terminus* (Dushi Zhongduanji) (Taipei: Shulin, 1988), 114-115].



While some have argued that the poem can be read as a serendipitous work based on street and construction signs, I believe the poet has offered us something more. The poem was written one year before the lifting of martial law when the government had just begun the liberalization process in earnest. That Lin has chosen so many streets with obvious political significance (Aiguo—patriotism; Minzu—democracy, one of Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People; Zhongshan—Sun Yatsen himself; Jianguo—national reconstruction; Roosevelt—Franklin D. Roosevelt, U.S. president and wartime ally of Chiang Kai-shek); Minquan—civil liberties or rights, another of the Three Principles called for by Sun Yat-sen; and Beiping—Beijing, the capital of the PRC) suggests that we consider a political reading. The form that Lin has used to write his poem mocks the solemnity these terms should convey. Structurally he has used line-end breaks to divide many of the terms: Minzu West—Road, Zhong—shan North Road, Jianguo—South Road, Min—quan East Road, and Bei—ping Road. This causes the reader to question the names, to read them as meaningless components rather than “meaningful” wholes, and thus desanctifies them.

Lin uses slashes to sandwich the street names between traffic light colors and cautionary signs, which reduces even further their significance by juxtaposing the politically significant with the quotidian and the mundane. The color of the traffic light suggests the permissible (green), things to be wary or cautious of (yellow) and the dangerous (red). Thus, patriotism must be kept in proper bounds, suggested by the speed limit, while democracy and democratization must not turn too far to the left. Sun Yat-sen, the father of the country, is politically safe, provided he is properly respected and revered, hence the avoidance of horn honking.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> This sign is often found near sacred political sites, including Chiang Kai-shek’s temporary burial site at Zihu and near the Martyr’s Shrine in northern Taipei.

process of national construction, and with it reunification, both sensitive subjects, continue but have been detoured, so one must be very careful in discussing them. One should use caution in dealing with the ROC's most powerful ally, the US, and inevitably yield to them. With liberalizations in progress, the government has given a green light to the development of civil liberties. However, Beijing or Beijing—the PRC—should be treated with caution given their One China Policy and their inflexibility (one-sidedness, all suggested by the one-way street). The poem contains a wealth of political significance and shows that talking about street names is itself a political act.

Two decades earlier, another creative writer, the poet Ya Hsien (1932- ), turned to a street name in his last poem, “Easter” (Fuhuojie). The poem opens with the line “She walked south along Dehui Street” (Ya 1981: 217), which also appears again in slightly modified form in the last stanza. While the line may seem innocuous, a look at a Taipei city map will reveal that walking south on Dehui Street would be impossible because the street runs west to east. Ya's “mistake” can thus be attributed to a flight of fancy or, as fellow poet, essayist and critic Yang Mu observes, an exercise of poetic license in which Ya Xian's vision of reality does not extend to geographic reality and accuracy but a holistic portrait of what a real Taipei is like (see Ya 1981: 319). Yang makes specific reference to Ya's 1958 poem “Chicago” (Zhijiage), in which the poet states “head south on Seventh Avenue,” a geographic impossibility since, as “Easter,” the street actually runs west to east (Ya 1981: 121). Since Ya did not visit the United States until 1966, the geographic error was likely due to ignorance, the exercise of poetic imagination or a combination of both factors.

In “Easter,” however, the oversight seems more problematic—Ya Xian had spent time in Taipei and had at least some familiarity with Zhongshan Road, one of Taipei's main

thoroughfares.<sup>8</sup> Why then would he mistake the direction that Dehui Street travels in? Perhaps Ya was trying to play with or transgress the well-ordered plait of politically-named streets by switching the directions a street traveled, or by trying to draw attention to the restrictions of the streets themselves. By switching directions and suspending geographic or cartographic reality, Ya transcends the political orthodoxy and concomitant constraints that Nationalist street naming practices imposed upon Taipei and its citizens. Dehui Street lies adjacent to two major streets with significant ties to Sun Zhongshan and the Nationalist regime —Zhongshan Road and Minzu Road. Dehui also evokes virtue (*de*) and kindness or benefit (*hui*), the sort of Confucian values that the GMD promoted as part of their plan to create a new civil society in Taiwan. While the poem does not expand on the significance of the street name, it does raise the issue of determinacy in its references to what the female poetic subject attaches to her pre-war lover, a haze of memories conveyed by the repeated use of *huo* “perhaps” or “maybe” (Ya 1981: 217). In an age of political absolutes, such vagueness and playfulness opens up a new creative space in an otherwise planned and politically overdetermined city.

### Rereading Taipei from Above

The idea of opening up an alternative creative space posited by Ya Xian comes to full fruition films directed by Wan Ren, Zeng Wenzhen and Stan Lai. Zhang Yingjin has noted:

The 1990s saw the emergence of a new sense of space associated with the aerial view. In *The Red Lotus Society* (Feixia A Da, 1994) and *Super Citizen K[o]* (Chaoji da guomin, 1995), the aerial view surveys the Taipei landscape from above, at once rendering a breathtaking feeling of superiority, a titillating *jouissance* of voyeurism, and the effect of complete distanciation and defamiliarization between the viewer and the city (Zhang 2002: 308).

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<sup>8</sup> In his essay, Yang Mu (writing under his earlier penname, Yeh Shan) noted that he first met Ya Xian at the home of Huang Yong, who lived on Zhongshan North Road.

I would argue that perhaps the key reason for the feelings of superiority and distancing Zhang observes stems from the freedom from the political ideologies of Taipei road names when one moves from the street-level to an aerial position. By centering action above ground level, the characters, the camera and the viewer all move away from the political and ideological constraints imposed not only by the government-imposed street-naming policy of the 1950s, but also beyond the world of government buildings, monuments and planned space. Urban planner Li Qingzhi has noted that “in the heart of every urban person remains the impetus of ‘wanting to fly,’ a desire to take off the heavy shackles of the city...” (original sources, quoted in Braester 2003: 44). In Li’s view, flight “give[s] freedom and “relieve[s] urban stress” (44). While the “heavy shackles” Li refers to may come from the pressures of life in a fast-paced metropolis, they may also stem from the stress of negotiating Taipei’s street system; when you transcend this, you can then enjoy the freedom and stress relief that flight, or moving above ground level, provides.

As I will show, characters in these films view the world from above ground level. Both Mr. Ko, the protagonist of Wan’s *Super Citizen Ko* (Chaoji da guomin, 1995) and Xu Jinyu, the subject of Zeng Wenzhen’s documentary *Spring: The Story of Xu Jinyu* (Chuntian: Xu Jinyu de gushi, 2003), use elevated positions to offer revisionist readings of Taipei places and spaces. As a result, they recover the lost history of the GMD’s White Terror in an era in which parks, department stores and five-star hotels have replaced execution grounds, detention centers and sites for military tribunals in the martial law-era ROC. The Shinkong Life Tower, what became the tallest building in Taipei when it opened in 1994, plays a significant role in both *Ko* and *Spring*, as it also does in *Red Lotus Society*. For A Da, the aspiring martial arts hero, rooftop spaces, top floors of high-rise buildings and ultimately the air above the city become places

where he can be liberated from the mundane realities of urban life and the realm of authoritarian politics that threatens the members of the Red Lotus Society.

Wan Ren's films all reveal a fascination with aerial spaces. In the first of his trilogy of "Super" films, *Super Citizen* (Chaoji shimin, 1985), the movie opens with a series of static shots of Taipei landmarks taken from elevated positions.<sup>9</sup> The camera then moves down into the veterans' village (*juancun*) where the primary action of the film takes place at ground level.<sup>10</sup> In *Super Citizen Ko*, however, aerial positioning offers vantage points for viewing Taipei. Throughout the film the Shinkong Life Tower is not only foregrounded, but also featured in the background of shots of the city. Ko eventually ventures up to the observation deck of the building, opened in 1994, the year before the film was released. This perspective affords both Ko and many filmgoers their first bird's eye view of the city, laid out like a model or map below with the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial, Presidential Mansion and other landmarks clearly in view. The film then features Ko's voiceover narration as it identifies key Taipei landmarks from the White Terror Period—sites of incarceration, interrogation, trial and execution—and then reveals their present status. In this scene the protagonist focuses on Youth Park (Qingnian gongyuan) in Wanhua district and reveals that many political prisoners had been executed on this site many years before the park had been built. Ko's aerial perspective of Taipei introduces a series of voiceover commentaries that occur later in the film. These reveal that a Westside department store and the former Lai Lai Sheraton Hotel, symbols of commerce and consumption, occupy

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<sup>9</sup> To date, Wan Jen has produced three films whose Chinese titles all begin with the words Super (Chaoji): *Super Citizen* (Chaoji shimin, 1985), *Super Citizen Ko* (Chaoji da guomin, 1995), and *Connection by Fate* (Literally "Super Worker" or Chaoji gongmin, 1999). A fourth film, tentatively titled *Super Voter* (Chaoji xuanmin), had been largely completed but awaits some final shooting (Wan interview, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> I use the terminology adopted by Yomi Braester in his study of Taipei urban cinema and what he terms the "poetics of demolition" (Braester 2003: 31).

places that once housed prisons and military tribunals. As the film progresses, Ko recovers a once-lost record of Taiwan's past that enables him to remap sites from the 1950s onto the contemporary (1995) city. Viewing the city from above enables him to do this. Wan also uses of shots of downtown Taipei from the surrounding hills as transitions between scenes showing Ko at his daughter's home and his journeys into Taipei to search out, identify, recover and then remap fragments of his lost past.

Zeng Wenzhen's 2003 documentary *Spring: The Story of Xu Jinyu (Chuntian: Xu Jinyu de gushi)*, like Wan Jen's *Super Citizen Ko*, focuses on recovering the White Terror as told from the perspective of Xu Jinyu, who was imprisoned for fifteen years for her participation in a labor action to seek equal pay for Taiwanese and mainlander postal workers in 1950s Taipei. The film employs cinematic gestures appropriated directly from Wan's film. The Shinkong Life Tower is shown an establishing shot early in the film to introduce a scene in which Xu and several of her former political prisoner friends visit the Tower's observation deck. As they view Taipei laid out below them, they, like Ko, compare past and present by pointing out the places where White Terror atrocities occurred. The documentary then moves on to Xu and her friends boarding a bus and taking a tour of White Terror landmarks, something Ko does on his own. Xu visits the former Sheraton Hotel and the department store, as well as a monument to White Terror victims not yet built when Wan Jen shot *Super Citizen Ko*. As in the first film, aerial positioning takes Xu out of the realm of modern day Taipei and turns the clock back to earlier times and to an alternative mapping of the city that recovers a suppressed past and suppressed Nationalist-constructed Taipei.

If *Ko* and *Spring* hinge on the tension between aerial and ground level perspectives, *Connection By Fate* shifts almost entirely to above-ground perspectives. Political activist-turned-

taxi driver Ah De lives in a *dinglou* or rooftop flat. It was from the rooftop that his young son fell and died, precipitating his divorce and leaving Ah De a broken man numb to emotion and detached from the world. He meets Ma'le, a member of the Paiwan tribes of indigenous people, who spends his time working on highrise construction projects. Plagued by abuse on the job from an abusive boss, the young man in a moment of anger stabs and kills his supervisor. Tried, convicted and finally executed, Ma'le soul wanders the city and climbs into Ah De's cab. The film depicts the friendship that develops between the two characters and leads, ultimately, to Ah De jumping from his apartment to his death and joining Ma'le as they flee the city for the peaceful, green mountains of the young man's homeland far away from the Taipei. Much of the action takes place in above-ground settings ranging from Ah De's apartment, to the Muzha elevated MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) line that runs by it, to high-rise construction sites, to the elevated expressways that Ah De drives along, to *tianqiao* or over crossings, to stairways and to elevated bridges and viaducts. *Connection by Fate* seemingly echoes Li Zhiqing's comments quoted earlier, when the film suggests that the stress and shackles imposed by the city can be relieved by flight, whether by taking refuge in a rooftop apartment, traveling by elevated light rail train or, metaphorically, by fleeing the city and heading for rural isolation in Taiwan's mountains.

Like *Connection by Fate* (Chaoji gongmin, 1999), Stan Lai's *Red Lotus Society* (Feixia Ahda, 1994) frequently takes action above ground. Protagonist Ah Da dreams of being a flying knight by practicing the art of *qinggong*, a form of martial arts that purports to teach practitioners to jump and fly (see Braester 2003: 40). Ah Da studies and practices *qinggong* on the roof of an apartment building. As the film progresses, Ah Da works for a time at a trading company with high-rise offices, and as the film reaches a climax, finally discovers the ability to fly when he is

pushed out the window of a burning nightclub located on the upper story of a tall building. In his analysis of *The Red Lotus Society*, Yomi Braester has noted that flying over Taipei becomes a “local strain of the modern fantasy to reappropriate the city” (43). But what was the city being reappropriated from? The group of male and female knights errant Ah Da befriends, members of the Red Lotus Society, flee underground from Nationalist government police and secret agents who systematically hunt down and imprison them, paralleling the White Terror discussed earlier.

Braester also notes the importance of elevated views as crucial tools used in the nineteenth century to remap Paris (42). Postwar GMD mapping in Taipei was exclusively a ground level phenomenon; construction code restrictions kept buildings below the height of the Presidential Mansion for many years. The first building to allow a civilian remapping of Taipei was the 51 story Shin Kong Life Tower, the first skyscraper with an observation deck open to the public. Ko’s and Xus’ aerial remappings become post-martial law revisionist phenomena that look back rather than forward to reappropriate an earlier cartography of the city covered up by construction and urban development carried out under the aegis of the Nationalist government. Ah Da’s escape from the burning high-rise and his resulting discovery of his ability to fly promise what Braester terms “an alternative politics of space, one that opens new room for individual agency” (Braester 2003: 45). Art then allows Wan, Zeng and Lai to transcend political constraints and create alternative visions of Taipei’s past and future.

In her 1996 novella “The Old Capital,” fiction writer Zhu Tianxin engages in a remapping exercise that builds upon what Wan, Zeng and Lai have depicted, but relies instead upon geographic references to an earlier era, the Japanese colonial period. Zhu’s work, a more than one hundred-page long stream of consciousness story, makes intertextual references to Japanese Nobel Prize-winning author Kawabata Yasunari’s novel of the same name (*Koto*) and



to the Jin dynasty (265-420 AD) essay “The Peach Blossom Spring” by the Daoist writer and poet Tao Yuanming (365-427 AD). While the unnamed female protagonist travels between Taipei, Taiwan and Kyoto, Japan, she reflects on her childhood and her friendship with her high school and college classmate A, as well as on her own childhood, adolescence and adulthood. For the protagonist, Kyoto, with its centuries-old traditions and timeless beauty, becomes a symbol of constancy and stability that provides much needed comfort, since Taipei is seen in contrast as a constantly changing world in which the past disappears due to changes in government policies and a lack of respect for the city’s past history. Zhu indicts the GMD government for not valuing Taipei’s own history and for their acting like an occupying power that only plans to stay for a short period of time, a critique of the Nationalist’s reunification plans. Kyoto symbolizes enduring culture with its timeless and unchanging beauty, while Taipei is marked by constant shifting in which the past disappears and Taiwan’s culture is replaced by a highly Westernized and commodified consumer culture. In Kyoto she enjoys the routine of age-old traditions and customs each centered in a specific geographic location in the old capital, whereas in Taipei one place simply duplicates another, causing her to remark, “Are these signs of early onset dementia? Where is this place anyway?” (168).

Traveling around Taipei becomes an exercise in frustration and disorientation for the protagonist. In her high school and college years, she regularly walked the Nationalist-named streets that created a simulacra of mainland China or were named for Nationalist officials or their policies (153-156 and 177). Like Ah De in *Connection by Fate*, she rides the elevated MRT line, which affords her a refreshingly new perspective of the city. She notes that riding in a “three-story-high train that lopped off the sight of most of the disgustingly ugly, old, five-story apartment buildings, and seemed to have returned to an age when there were only single-story

houses” (151-152). She also notes that with more of the sky exposed and not concealed by buildings, she gained “a new sense of vastness” that she has not seen for years (152). That height affords a new or restored sense of perspective is also seen when she, like Ko and Xu Jinyu, ascends the Shin Kong Life Tower and views Taipei from above. However, in this case, the protagonist rereads the city not from the perspective of the White Terror era, but from the Japanese colonial era. Noting that she “had never seen the place where [she]’d lived for more than three decades from this height or angle” she begins to remap the city along colonial era rather than Nationalist lines, restoring the Japanese place and street names that the Nationalist officials had removed (187). Armed with a Japanese travel guide to Taipei complete with “maps and scenic sites from the colonial period,” she begins walking around the city recovering its colonial history (187). Zhu Tianxin thus remaps Taipei along pre-Nationalist lines, which thwarts the didactic experience of walking along the interim capital’s byways and alleys.

The Nationalist government’s renaming of streets established a system whereby important government leaders, policies, programs and values could be both commemorated and inculcated in the citizens of Taipei and Taiwan. Poets Lin Yaode and Ya Xian bring this fact to our attention and begin to explore its significance and consequences. Filmmakers Wan Ren, Zeng Wenzhen and Stan Lai cause us to question the naming and attempt to either remap the city in light of suppressed Nationalist atrocities or to move the action above ground level to a space beyond Nationalist hegemonic control. Finally, writer Zhu Tianwen not only tries moving the action above ground level, but also adopts a remapping strategy that looks back to the Japanese colonial era to derive an alternative conception that undoes what had been done five decades earlier.

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