# 14 Mona Rudo's scar

## Two kinds of epic identity in *Seediq Bale*

*Darryl Sterk*

### Introduction

Ostensibly about a Seediq tribal uprising that began on 27 October 1930 against the Japanese colonial authorities in the central Taiwan town of Wushe, the historical epic film *Seediq Bale* (dir. Wei Te-sheng, 2011) has been interpreted in terms of Taiwan today.[1] *The Economist*'s review, for instance, states that the movie's 'message of a unique, empowering Taiwanese identity is unmistakable' (*The Economist* 2011). A 'Taiwanese identity' sounds like a national identity. If so, the apparent approval of the film's message is surprising, because *The Economist* has not been supportive of nationalism if it means one state per nation, one people per place; the magazine opposed the 'leave' vote both in advance of the Scottish referendum in 2014 and before British exit from the European Union, or 'Brexit', in 2016. If nationalism can encompass a modern multicultural country of which citizens feel proud, then the approval makes more sense. The problem is that a film about a ritual massacre of Japanese men, women and children and a brutal reprisal against the Seediq warriors and their families hardly seems a vote for multicultural modernity.

*The Economist* is not the only one to see contemporary meaning in this film. For many critics, both foreign and local, *Seediq Bale* is an allegory of Taiwan's contemporary political situation. According to American pundit Walter Russell Mead (2011), *Seediq Bale* is a work of 'romantic nationalism' that might upset the delicate cross-strait balance. To Mead, the film's inflammatory contemporary geopolitical message would be that the Taiwanese people would rather die than submit to the People's Republic of China (PRC)! There is support for a cross-strait reading of the film in the context of production. Wei Te-sheng has cited resistance to the return of Hong Kong to China as an inspiration (Kan 2011) and associated himself with cultural producers who support Taiwan independence, most notably the black metal band ChthoniC which used footage from Wei Te-sheng's 2003 fundraising short in the music video for 'Quasi Putrefaction', one of the songs on the album *Seediq Bale* (Berry 2011: 95–99). For ChthoniC, Seediq resistance to the Japanese represents Taiwanese resistance to the Chinese, whether the PRC or

the Kuomintang (KMT). In the context of the 2012 presidential election, political scientist and former Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) politician Chen Ming-tong described Mona Rudo's resistance against colonial rule as representing the resolution of the Taiwan people (Chen 2012: 77), presumably against the Chinese threat or against closer ties with China, advocated by the KMT.

Commentators have remarked less upon the film's relevance to domestic politics, than upon the contemporary significance of Chief Mona Rudo's failure to unite the Tgdaya villages under his heroic leadership. Only six of the 12 Tgdaya villages around the town of Wushe joined Mona Rudo's uprising, while the Toda villages in the area ended up working for the Japanese as mercenaries during the reprisal. The film represents a population fractured along sub-ethnic lines that can at best muster a partial resolution against a foreign threat, a resolution that is shadowed by collaboration.

If Wei Te-sheng has politicised the 'Wushe Incident', as it is typically termed, in terms of contemporary national concerns, he would not be the first. As Michael Berry (2011: 57–62) has demonstrated, many retellings of Wushe in film or fiction since 1945 have read the incident in terms of Chinese or Taiwanese nationalism, taking Mona Rudo as an anti-Japanese or more generally anti-colonial hero. Nor would Wei's national politicisation of history be at all surprising. Nationalists everywhere have politicised history by reading anachronistically pre-national historical events like the Wushe Incident. Since *The Birth of a Nation* (dir. D.W. Griffith, 1915), nationalists have taken advantage of the silver screen as a vehicle for their anachronistic readings of history by shooting historical epic films. They tend to make films about traumatic historical events. Therefore, in remaking the Wushe Incident over and over, Taiwan's filmmakers (and musicians and novelists and cartoonists) seem to have been in the grips of a 'repetition compulsion'. Perhaps Wei Te-sheng hoped that this time would be different, that *Seediq Bale* could resolve the trauma once and for all and contribute to a sense of national belonging.

A sense of national belonging is what several scholars have argued the historical epic film is actually about. To one its purpose is 'to present a national or religious identity in times of change' (Elley 1984: 12). To another it is a modern myth intended to 'bind a tribe or nation together', especially 'at a time of spiritual or social crisis' (Santas 2007: 2). The way historical epic films present an identity or bind a tribe is through conflict: there has to be a 'them' to define an 'us'. In domestic conflicts, 'them' might become part of 'us', but conflict is often resolved by getting rid of 'them'. If so, the epic in question is nativist.

Outbursts of nativism at times of crisis or change worry liberals. They also worry scholars of the historical epic film like Robert Burgoyne. In a recent collection on the historical epic film around the world, Burgoyne (2011a: 1) interrogates 'the link between the epic and the imagined community of nation', not just because productions have toned down nationalist sentiment

to internationalise appeal but also in order to find opposition to tyranny and tolerance for diversity in *Gladiator* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2000) and in the film's cultural impact after 9/11, which included tattooing and scarification (Burgoyne 2011b: 87).

I went to see *Seediq Bale* hoping to find the same values of opposition to tyranny and tolerance for diversity, which I would term liberal. I was initially disappointed. The film is undeniably anti-colonial, and I could agree there was a lot to be against: the Japanese employed abusive policemen, imposed an ethnic division of labour, practised corporal punishment in the schools, and failed to grant political or legal rights. In the reprisal Japan ignored international law, putting prices on Tgdaya heads (*The Rainbow Bridge* 0:56:07–0:57:12) and using mustard gas on the rebels (*The Rainbow Bridge* 1:02:41–1:03:30). However, in its opposition to a foreign tyranny *Seediq Bale* seemed to substitute the tyranny of an interpretation of tradition that rejected modernity, specifically: trade in a state-issued currency (at the Taiwanese store in Wushe), the formation of the citizenry through education (in the village schools), rule by a law that overrides communal custom (which in Seediq was called *gaya*), and the state monopoly on violence (according to which the guns in the villages around Wushe were confiscated). More than anything, Mona Rudo seems to reject multiculturalism at the personal and social levels, represented by the native policeman Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō and by the mixed community of Paran/Musha/Bū-siā, where Seediq, Japanese and Taiwanese live together more or less in peace until the incident. Mona Rudo was not fundamentally opposed to foreigners. Before colonisation, he visited a Taiwanese tradesman to buy salt (*The Sun Flag* 0:13:56), and during the massacre spared the lives of the Han Chinese residents of Wushe, including the proprietor of the sundry goods store, with whom he shares a drink before saying goodbye (*The Rainbow Bridge* 0:14:35). He did not want to have to live with them, however. The last thing his father says to him is: keep the foreign race out of the *alang*, the tribal village (*The Sun Flag* 0:35:52). Mona Rudo took his words to heart.

The contrast between Mona Rudo in the tribal village of Mhebu on the one hand and Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō in the colonial town of Wushe on the other has led me to read the film as a debate between two understandings of national identity – nativist versus liberal – and discuss it in terms of belonging, because we identify with groups (including nations) we (wish to) belong to. By nativist I mean a communal, ethnic, monocultural ideal of belonging of roots and passions and descent. By liberal I mean an individual, multicultural ideal of becoming of routes and principles and consent. Though I am by sensibility a liberal, I try not to take sides, because the best debates allow antagonists to find common ground.

I have been influenced in this work by two scholars in particular. For Chao-yang Liao (2013) and Yu-lin Lee (2014a, 2014b; also see Lee's chapter in this volume), *Seediq Bale* is a parable of community fragmentation and possibly

of the incident in all of its historical specificity, I, too, generalise, by reading the film as a debate between liberal and nativist nationalism, with an additional contribution: a corresponding continuum of historical epic film narrative, which I develop by engaging with, of all people, Erich Auerbach.

In 'Odysseus' scar', the first chapter of *Mimesis* (1953, reprint 2003: 3–23), Auerbach cites excerpts from *The Odyssey* and 'Genesis' as two ideal-types of epic narration, externalised and internalised respectively, a contrast that guides me through the three main body sections of this chapter. The first section is a discussion of the stories implicit in visual symbols, particularly Mona Rudo's scar and the rainbows that keep appearing in the sky. The second section covers aspects of epic narration that are not medium-specific: scene arrangement and characterisation in social context. The third section attempts to 're-mediate' Auerbach by focusing on editing and perspective. It may seem fundamentally misguided to take a scholar of oral and written epic as a guide through an epic film, but I think the results I obtain are suggestive enough to justify the experiment. My results delineate two types of historical epic film: externalised epic that serves as a vehicle for nativist belonging on the one hand, and internalised epic that serves as a vehicle for liberal becoming on the other.[2] After a conclusion in which I describe *Seediq Bale* as a challenge to liberals to engage with nativists, I end with a postscript on the possibility of another, more Biblical but equally epic, treatment of the Taiwanese indigenous accommodation to the evolving project of liberal modernity.

## The three arcs: on the interpretation of epic imagery

One day, Mona Rudo, Chief of Mhebu, one of the 12 Tgdaya Seediq villages in the mountains around Wushe, motions over (*The Sun Flag* 0:47:35) a village youth, Pawan Nawi, and asks him why he is not at school (Figure 14.1).

Pawan Nawi claims to be ill, but Mona Rudo sees through the lie when he spies the bruise on the youngster's cheek. Pawan Nawi is home from school

*Figure 14.1* Pawan Nawi explains to Chief Mona why he is home
(Source: Central Motion Picture)

because he got smacked in the face by his Japanese teacher for beating a Japanese classmate in a race. The injustice of colonial rule is most poignant from the perspective of a boy who bears the brunt of its abusive discipline. Just then they see a rainbow (Figures 14.2–14.5).

'My grandfather says you were a hero when you were young', Pawan Nawi blurts out. 'I'm still a hero now!', Chief Mona replies. 'Hero' translates as *yingxiong*, the term in the Chinese subtitles, but the word Pawan Nawi and Mona Rudo use onscreen is *rseno bale*, a real (*bale*) man (*rseno*). A *rseno bale* is a kind of *seediq bale*, a real person. A *rseno bale* is a man who practises the traditional law of *gaya*, particularly by headhunting (Simon 2012: 165). The oldest anthropological explanation of the practice was that by bringing back an enemy's head, which contains his spiritual energy, a warrior contributed to the energy that protected the *alang* (Simon 2012: 166). According to *Seediq Bale*, the headhunter thereby turned his enemies into friends, with whom he would hunt in the afterlife on the other side of the rainbow bridge (*The Sun Flag* 2:10:56–2:11:01; *The Rainbow Bridge* 1:12:12–1:12:21). A successful headhunter had the right to receive the two facial tattoos that mark manhood. As most of the males in the film of Mona Rudo's generation have the facial tattoos, 'hero' might be too grand a translation for *rseno bale*. A *rseno bale* is simply a male adult, not necessarily a hero like Mona Rudo. Mona Rudo is no ordinary man, no ordinary *rseno bale*, but a leader of men, as his arc scar testifies.

Pawan Nawi has heard, and the audience has seen, how Mona Rudo got his scar in the first scene in the film, in which the young Mona Rudo jumped into a raging river, both to dodge bullets and to avoid losing the boar he had just stolen from his tribal enemy, a Bunun warrior, whose head was the first Mona Rudo hunted. Under water, Mona Rudo stabbed his knife into a crevice in an underwater rock to resist the current. In doing so he somehow gave himself a cut on the cheek. Thus, while there is a similarity in shape between

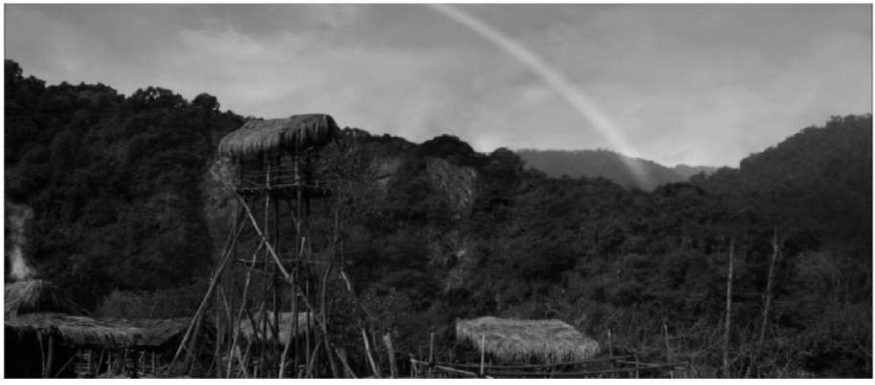

*Figure 14.2* A rainbow appears in the sky above Mhebu
(Source: Central Motion Picture)

*Figure 14.3* Pawan Nawi and Chief Mona gaze at the rainbow
(Source: Central Motion Picture)

*Figure 14.4* In the same shot Pawan Nawi looks over at Chief Mona
(Source: Central Motion Picture)

*Figure 14.5* In the reverse-shot, Pawan Nawi sees the scar on Chief Mona's cheek
(Source: Central Motion Picture)

knife and scar, it is due to the fact that the knife was once contiguous with the wound that healed into Mona's scar.

The three arcs – knife, scar and rainbow – are linked by contiguity or similarity, but what do they mean? From Mona Rudo's perspective, the meaning is clear: it is partly by virtue of his scar, the mark of a hero, that he will be able to muster support for a final 'headhunt', in which the hunting knife will be the weapon of choice. Though many of the victims at Wushe will be stabbed or shot, not beheaded, their ritual killing (*The Sun Flag* 2:00:15–2:11:05) will give youngsters like Pawan Nawi the right to receive the tattoos of manhood (*The Rainbow Bridge* 0:16:14–0:16:42). After death in the Japanese reprisal, the swelled ranks of the *rseno bale* will proceed to the edge of the rainbow bridge, the *hako* (bridge) *utux* (spirit). There they will be inspected by a guardian spirit who will confirm that they really do have blood on their hands and allow them passage across the bridge into the afterlife, a happy hunting ground where the spirits (*utux*) of the ancestors (*rudan*) await.

Like many images in the film, these three arcs appear over and over again, and seem to mean the same thing each time. Anthropologist Kai-shih Lin (2011) has criticised the imagery in the film as the work of a director so juvenile he has no idea how repetitious and obvious he is (Lin 2011: 38). Lin is right about the repetition, but wrong to condemn Wei for it, because repetition is a feature of the epic form. Lin is also wrong to condemn Wei for obviousness, because according to Erich Auerbach, obviousness is a feature of a certain kind of epic. In this regard, Auerbach notes the failure of all attempts to allegorise Homer, whose significance is always right there on the surface, in contrast to the Bible, which in its minimalism practically demanded allegorisation (Auerbach 2003: 11).

Just how obvious is *Seediq Bale*? To me, Wei Te-sheng's film is somewhere between Homer and the Bible in respect to the interpretation of imagery. Homer's world seems self-contained, its meanings fixed for all time, but the world of *Seediq Bale* is more fluid, as Mhebu is opening up to modernity. In an open world, images like rainbows and scars are open to different interpretations.

What a rainbow might mean today is therefore relevant to the interpretation of what the rainbow means in *Seediq Bale*. In Wei's sleeper hit *Cape No. 7* (2008), the rainbow (1:47:18–1:47:23) is a reification of romance that represents a connection between boy and girl, Taiwan and Japan, present and past. Similarly, in *Director Bale*, a director's diary about the making of *Seediq Bale*, the rainbow is a sign of connection on casting trips to central and north-eastern Taiwan, on which Wei meets with the actors who will play the young and mature Mona Rudo respectively (Wei 2011: 34–37). In his *A Little Director's Diary of Unemployment*, Wei had turned the rainbow into an ideal of Taiwan's cultural identity in which contiguity would not result in contamination:

> The concept of the national integration has compromised the integrity of the different cultural communities in Taiwan. Your hue has mixed with mine and someone else's, with the result that we have all ended up the

> colour of mud. Four hundred years of hard work and Taiwan has turned into the colour of mud! If we could but separate the colours out and work to restore each one to its original hue, and then place ourselves side by side in an attitude of mutual respect, what a beautiful rainbow that would be!
>
> (Wei 2002: 203, my translation)

Though Wei's colour metaphor seems essentialist, displaying a wariness of the mutual influence implicit in cultural connection, surely his ideal of cultural heterogeneity is preferable to homogeneity, whether Japanese or Chinese. Wei had not forgotten the rainbow of multiculturalism when he made *Seediq Bale*. He even turned it into an interpretation of his epic film. 'Why could the Seediq and Japanese not realise that there was space in the sky (symbolic perhaps of the context in which we interpret symbols) for both sun and rainbow, for both Japanese and Seediq belief?' asked the advertising blurb. With peaceful coexistence as an alternative, modern meaning of the rainbow in *Seediq Bale* in mind, let's probe further the significance of Mona Rudo's scar.

That Mona Rudo has a scar on his cheek is at first a puzzle and then an invitation to interpretation. The historical Mona Rudo did not have such a scar. Chiu Ruo-long, the cartoonist whose *Wushe Incident* (Chiu 1990) first gave Wei Te-sheng the idea for the film (Kan 2011), and who served as artistic adviser on *Seediq Bale*, did not draw Mona Rudo with a scar (Berry 2011: 83–85). There is no mention of a scar in Wei's (2000) prize-winning screenplay, nor in the novel Yan Yun-nong wrote based on the screenplay (Yan 2004). The Mona Rudo in the fundraising short Wei made in 2003 does not have a scar. Wei Te-sheng apparently added it at the last minute, right before the shoot began in 2009, on the advice of his movie make-up artists (Wei 2011: 73). How could Wei insert an ahistorical scar, especially considering that traditionally it was thought humiliating for a warrior to come home wounded (Wei 2011: 74)? Because Wei did not confine himself to history, nor is the meaning of the scar in the film limited to a traditional tribal understanding of it. On the face of it, Wei Te-sheng added the scar for continuity. Two actors play Mona Rudo, as a 20-year-old brave and as a 50-year-old chief. The two were two centimetres apart in height (Wei 2011: 37) but did not from most angles look much alike (Wei 2011: 73). It was to make the double casting compelling that Wei Te-sheng cut continuity into his protagonist's flesh. However, once he added it, it took on a life of its own. It became Mona Rudo's most recognisable feature, both in the film and in the promotional material. On the cover of the soundtrack, for instance, the only colour is Mona Rudo's scar, in blood red. Mona Rudo's striking scar connects him with other scarred or tattooed historical epic film heroes, not just the hero of *Gladiator* mentioned above, but also the scarred and war-painted William Wallace in *Braveheart* (dir. Mel Gibson, 1995). As in *Braveheart*, the scar in *Seediq Bale* signals the protagonist's heroism: that is surely what Mona

Rudo's scar means to the young Pawan Nawi when he looks over at the chief on his day home from school. However, that is not all it means. For more indication of what else Mona Rudo's scar might mean today in Taiwan, let us delve further into 'Odysseus' scar'.

## Mona Rudo's scar: two modes of epic narration

For Auerbach, Odysseus' scar becomes an emblem of various aspects of Homeric epic narration in which everything is 'externalized' (Auerbach 2003: 3). Auerbach begins with the recognition scene in *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus's housekeeper sees the scar on his leg and realises her master has finally come home. It seems a dramatic moment, but instead of drawing out the drama Homer interrupts the scene with an account of the hunt on which Odysseus received the wound that formed his scar. The purpose of the flashback, according to Auerbach, is not to create suspense but rather simply to 'externalise' the scar by explaining its origin. In this way, Homer explicates the relation between the recognition scene and the hunt scene. Instead of consigning the hunt to the background, Homer brings it into the same depthless foreground in which every part of his narrative takes place. The Bible is the opposite. Its narrative elements are fraught with background and taut with suspense. No explanation is given for the necessity of Abraham's journey to sacrifice his son Isaac, or of the relation between the temptation of Abraham in Genesis 22 and his burial of his wife Sarah in Genesis 23. The scenes of the Bible are simply presented and juxtaposed, leaving the reader wondering why 'this' is happening and what is going to happen next.

On my viewing, *Seediq Bale* is narratively externalised. One always knows exactly what is going on. The function of the 'recognition scene' in *Seediq Bale*, for instance, is to remind the spectator that Mona Rudo is still a hero and to reveal Pawan Nawi's impressionability. As in Homer, relations between scenes are too explicit for suspense. Although Wei Te-sheng does not, like Homer, cut from his hero's scar to a flashback, the relation between the hunting expedition on which Mona wounds himself and the recognition scene is clear, as is the relation between the recognition scene and the later hunting scene. When Pawan Nawi jumps into a raging river to recover a wounded muntjac (*The Sun Flag* 0:56:27), we see how big an impression Chief Mona has made on him: Chief Mona is the kind of man he wants to become.

We can form a clearer image of what manner of man Chief Mona is by relating him to Odysseus. Odysseus and Mona Rudo seem to have a lot in common. Like Mona Rudo, Odysseus got his scar as a youth on a hunting expedition. Both hunting expeditions were led by the fathers of the future heroes, Mona Rudo's father Rudo Luhe and Odysseus's father Autolycus. For Odysseus, as for Mona Rudo, the hunt is a rite of passage (Levaniouk 2011). In the passage from youth to manhood, the two future heroes are injured in

different ways: Odysseus is gored by a boar's tusk, while Mona Rudo cuts himself with his own knife. For both, though, the scar left behind is a proof of courage that distinguishes its bearer from other men. Both scars are therefore identificatory, but in different ways. Everyone knows who Mona Rudo is, while Odysseus, who has returned in disguise after 20 years away, is unrecognisable but for his scar. It is only when his housekeeper sees the scar that she recognises him. Even so, Odysseus's scar says something else about him besides the fact that he is the lord of Ithaca.

According to Auerbach, Odysseus's scar is a symbol of his superficial psychology, in which everything is externalised. As soon as he has a thought, Odysseus expresses it, and he never has any trouble expressing himself. We often talk about psychology today in terms of identity, and Odysseus's identity is skin-deep. Like a mark upon one's skin one carries for life, Odysseus's identity is also unchanging. 'Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier' (Auerbach 2003: 17). In other words, Odysseus's is a true 'identity', a word that is cognate with 'identical'. His relationship with himself never changes. His relationships with others in the small-scale feudal order in which he lived are the same, for, like all things in Homer, interpersonal relations are 'completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations' (Auerbach 2003: 6).

Similarly, Mona Rudo seems a superficial, static character in a small-scale tribal order who says what he thinks and never has any trouble expressing himself and whose relationships – whether with himself, his wife, the other villagers, his tribal enemies, the Japanese or the ancestors, including his father – remain forever the same. Once he becomes a *rseno bale* he is always a *rseno bale*. Once he becomes a hero, a hero he will always be.

Auerbach goes on to contrast the externalised, static Homeric heroes with the internalised, dynamic patriarchs of Genesis. Characters in the Bible are internalised in several senses. They are never described in any detail, physically or psychologically. They do not have striking, easily identifiable physical or psychic features the way Odysseus does. They almost seem physical and psychological blank slates. They do not say what they are thinking; Abraham does not seem to know what to think. For the reader, it is unclear what his relationship with God or his son Isaac should be. As a result, there is a sense of fluidity (Auerbach 2003: 21) in both self and what we now call society in 'Genesis' that is entirely lacking in *The Odyssey*. For Auerbach, the contrast is between the Greek and the Hebrew ideas of the human and the social; within *Seediq Bale* there is a similar contrast between the externalised, static Mona Rudo and the internalised, dynamic Hanaoka Ichirō, who was born Dakis Nobing, and the kinds of social orders they represent.[3]

Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō was educated along with his 'younger brother' Dakis Nawi/Hanaoka Jirō (who had the same given name but a different surname in Tgdaya) to serve as a native police officer and teacher. Unblemished with any identifying mark, whether tattoo or scar, Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō has the freedom to present himself in different ways

to different people at different times, to try on identities like sets of clothes. He has in fact at least four sets of clothes: a police officer's uniform, Japanese attire, judo *gi* and tribal garb. Each set represents one of the roles he plays. Mona Rudo, by contrast, has only one set of clothing and a unitary understanding of identity. In a scene in which Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō asks him whether he is really going to go through with it, Mona Rudo responds by asking him to 'change clothes' (*The Sun Flag* 1:40:17), to join all the other clean-faced Seediq males and become a *rseno bale*. Chief Mona demands that he choose between Hanaoka Ichirō and Dakis Nobing, refusing him the multiple identity that allows any contemporary Taiwanese citizen to become one thing and another and something else again. The key word here is 'become'. Anyone could have predicted that a male youth of Mona Rudo's generation would aspire to become a *rseno bale*. Mona Rudo was in some sense a *rseno bale* at birth. By contrast, no one could have predicted what Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō would become at birth, but becoming a teacher and police officer, Japanese in habit (in both senses of the word), was not Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō's choice, nor has it brought him happiness. He is caught between two worlds, accepted in neither. He obviously resembles educated natives in colonies like India, but in his inarticulate torment also recalls the Biblical Abraham. 'I ... I *am* ... Seediq' (*The Sun Flag* 1:40:14), he says, tongue-tied. One cannot imagine Mona Rudo tongue-tied.

## The scar of subjectivity: the presentation of perspective

Other aspects of epic narration discussed by Auerbach seem specific to written or oral epic, but can be adapted for film epic. Homer's 'syntactical culture', Auerbach (2003: 13) writes, explicated relations between clauses, relations which in Hebrew were left implicit. In film the 'syntactical' relationships would be visual, between shots. Relationships between shot and shot in *Seediq Bale* are almost always clear. The recognition scene, for instance, begins with a high-angle shot in which we see Mhebu as a whole. This shot is a master shot because it orients us in the space of the scene. A woman carrying a rattan backpack walks through the centre of the frame, covering, exposing (*The Sun Flag* 0:47:10) and therefore drawing attention to Chief Mona's slate house down below. Then, after a few connecting shots, comes the sequence I discussed above: a long shot of the rainbow, a profile shot of Pawan Nawi looking at the rainbow and turning to look at Chief Mona, and a close-up of Chief Mona's scar (Figures 14.1–14.5). The shots are spatially contiguous, so that the cinematography can be described as metonymic in Roman Jakobson's sense. An epic film grammar in which the relationships between shots (and scenes) are left somehow implicit might be a cinema of metaphor, where shots are matched not for spatial contiguity but for similarity (Jakobson 1995: 130–131). The shooting and editing of *Seediq Bale* is occasionally governed by the principle of similarity. After all, the rainbow reminds Pawan of Chief Mona's scar partly because of the similarity in shape,

but one has to look very hard for cinematographically metaphorical arrangements in *Seediq Bale*. In film studies terms, *Seediq Bale* is in the tradition of continuity editing, not montage.

Another way to approach the editing would be to ask from what perspective the shots are presented. For Auerbach (2003: 7), perspective is an issue of epic narration. He contrasts the 'subjectivistic-perspectivistic' narration of the Bible with Homer, who never adopts any particular character's perspective. Homer never enters his characters' heads, while the Bible somehow seems more 'modern' in its representation of the situatedness of human subjectivity. A Homeric film would presumably be composed entirely of objective shots, as opposed to subjective shots, also known as point-of-view shots. In this respect, *Seediq Bale* seems partly Biblical in its presentation of perspective. Yu-lin Lee (2014b: 101–104) suggests that in the slaughter scene at the end of *The Sun Flag*, the seemingly objective shots, including the final bird's eye view (2:14:59–2:15:26), represent the perspectives of the ancestors, perhaps specifically of the mother figure who constitutes a kind of film epic machinery. I will instead focus on how the subjective perspectives of the characters are presented. In film studies the presentation of subjectivity is usually discussed in terms of 'suture'.

As Stephen Heath (1978) explains, 'suture' was proposed in 1966 by the Lacanian Jacques-Alain Miller and applied to cinema by Jean-Pierre Oudart in 1969. In what follows I draw on Kaja Silverman's lucid account of suture in *The Subject of Semiotics* (Silverman 1983: 194–236). A suture, literally a 'stitch', closes a wound. In Lacanian psychology it would be a wound of castration, where the phallus symbolises the pre-subjective plenitude lost when, in the mirror stage, an infant first becomes a viewing subject. At that moment, the infant supposedly realises it is limited, only able to adopt a certain perspective at a time. The realisation of limitation is a psychic castration, which the subject soon forgets. In cinema, the subject's wounding limitation is sutured over and thereby concealed by continuity editing, particularly by '[t]he shot/reverse-shot formation' as in the example with which I opened this chapter: in the shot we see Pawan Nawi looking (Figure 14.4), while in the reverse-shot we see what he sees (Figure 14.5). The shot/reverse-shot formation 'conceal[s] from the viewing subject the passivity of that subject's position ... suturing over the wound of castration with narrative' (Silverman 1983: 204). Each reverse-shot offers the subject a viewing position that, depending on one's idea of how independent the subject is, either induces or invites identification. A Lacanian would probably use the word induce; I prefer invite. The reverse-shot in the recognition scene, for instance, invites identification with Pawan Nawi, who adulates Mona Rudo.

However, there are a lot of other possibilities in *Seediq Bale* for identification, many other perspectives we might choose to adopt, of characters who do not find Mona Rudo so compelling. Not all the chiefs who throw in their lot with Mona Rudo look up to him. Chief Tado Nokan, for instance, has to be arm-twisted into taking part in the rising. 'After you exchange lives (of the

Japanese people you are planning to decapitate) for the right to tattoo the faces of the young men of the village, how will you compensate for the annihilation of the tribe (in the Japanese reprisal)', he asks. 'With pride', Mona Rudo replies (*The Sun Flag* 1:53:20). Though he ends up giving in, Tado Nokan remains unpersuaded of the rightness of the rising. In this scene we switch from Mona's to Tado's perspective and back again. The viewing subject therefore has a choice. In other scenes, the shot/reverse-shot pair offers the spectator the choice of a woman's pacifist perspective, for example, when Tado Nokan's daughter Takayama Hatsuko/Obing Tado looks back at her father (*The Sun Flag* 2:13:54), or when Hakaoka Ichirō/Dakis Nobing and his wife Kawano Hanako/Obing Nawi look up to see Mona Rudo striding past right after he sees them (*The Sun Flag* 2:14:07). When a woman looks back, the cut can cut either way.

According to suture theorists, the viewing subject is particularly likely to transcend its putative passivity in moments of disconnect between the gaze and the voice. Right after Mona Rudo tells the warriors to leave him and prepare for the attack on Wushe, his wife Bakan Walis starts singing a song (*The Sun Flag* 1:43:28) in which she reminds her husband and the other warriors that they come from women and asserts that it is the women who have 'woven' together everything they have to be proud of. In this scene, Bakan Walis's implicit criticism of Chief Mona is given a voice but not a gaze. Bakan Walis appears with her daughter at 1:43:31 in a shot that is halfway between an over-the-shoulder and a profile; one cannot see what she is looking at. This shot cuts 180 degrees at 1:43:38, with the next cut at 1:43:44 to Ubus, one of Rudo Luhe's brothers in arms. This shot seems initially like it might be from Bakan's perspective, but at 1:43:49 we cut to Mona Rudo striding by, a shot that might still be from Bakan's perspective until Ubus enters the frame from the lower right. In other words, we never find out what Walis Bakan is looking at, nor does anyone acknowledge her by looking back at her. Her 'singing position' is not matched with a 'viewing position'. (In *The Rainbow Bridge* she will finally be given a viewing position, in a scene where she discovers her husband's store of gunpowder and tells her son that he and all the men are 'crazy' [0:26:26].) For a suture theorist, this moment in *The Sun Flag* is 'a moment of unpleasure in which the viewing subject perceives that it is lacking something' (Silverman 1983: 204). What we as spectators are lacking is the pacifist perspective of a woman with whom we might very much want to identify. As a result, we should pay particular attention to what she is singing.

What is Bakan Walis singing? That the men will cut asunder what the women have 'woven' together. Traditionally, a woman's qualification for passage over the rainbow bridge was calloused palms from weaving with a handloom, but Seediq women like Bakan Walis were also skilled at the use of the needle in sewing and tattooing. Mona Rudo's mother might have sewn – sutured – up the knife wound he gave himself at the same time as she gave him his tattoos (*The Sun Flag* 0:04:46–0:05:14). One might say that Seediq

women were the agents of suture in a larger sense. They sutured children into language and into the tribal community. Suture can therefore be reinterpreted as a metaphor for the cohesive ties that any community needs to be more than a set of individuals. This point brings me back to the possibility I raised in the introduction of finding common ground between liberal and nativist notions of nation.

## Conclusion: the role of scar nationalism in a rainbow nation

For all its explicitness, *Seediq Bale* has attracted allegorical interpretation in terms of Taiwan's contemporary domestic politics and international relations. In this chapter, I allegorised differently, interpreting the standoff between Mona and modernity in the film as a debate between a nativism that has roots in tribalism and a liberalism in which a leap of faith is made. In *Seediq Bale*, nativism is represented by Mona Rudo's metonymic understanding of belonging, metonymic because it is based on face-to-face personal connections and connections to the local landscape. The Seediq were literally 'chthonic', of the land: they believed the first humans emerged from a tree-rock or rock-tree (*The Rainbow Bridge* 2:03:37–2:04:16). It is to return to the *pusu qhuni*, the origin tree, that Hanaoka Jiro/Dakis Nawi and dozens of women and children hanged themselves from tree boughs (*The Rainbow Bridge* 0:34:16–0:37:41). To Mona Rudo, the people's connection to the origin of life was being severed under Japanese rule. Indeed, the only option for most of the young Seediq men in the film is working as loggers for slave wages, cutting down the trees that had seen their ancestors (*The Sun Flag* 0:41:46).

Liberalism in the film is represented by Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō, who aspires to a kind of belonging based on similarity. He attempted an intellectual leap to identify with a nation of individuals, who are compatriots not just because they belong to the same territory but also because they speak the same language, share the same culture, and enjoy the same legal or political rights. Though in respect to rights they are the same, in every other respect they have the freedom to be different. Wei Te-sheng's Mona Rudo was not exactly tolerant of difference. He went headhunting to force his enemies to become friends at the cost not just of their lives, but also of their identities. He dragged them across the border of the *alang*, the boundary separating self from other. For a liberal, by contrast, the boundaries around self or society let difference in and create complicated people like Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō, multicultural communities such as the town of Wushe, and what Wei Te-sheng himself has described as the rainbow nation of Taiwan.

As residents of a rainbow nation, we can still find Mona Rudo intensely appealing (however appalling). Mona Rudo's appeal is of someone who never doubts himself, because he has undergone a communally sanctioned rite of passage, written the successful result on his skin to display to one and all, once and for all, what he is: the potent but unquestioning upholder of an

inflexible tradition. How can liberals, for whom uncertainty in the passage 'through the indeterminate and the contingent' (Auerbach 2003: 10) is a source of endless angst, possibly out-appeal Mona Rudo? At least in contemporary Taiwan, they do not have to try. What they have to try to do is articulate the benefits of an open society in which the rights of all individuals are protected, including the right to speak one's mind, to point out the tyranny and intolerance that continue to trouble Taiwan while fulfilling one's responsibility to listen. In such a society, Tado Nokan would be less likely to capitulate to a demagogue, Takayama Hatsune/Obing Tado to get caught up in a pointless uprising. In such a society, Dakis Nobing/Hanaoka Ichirō would be more likely to feel at home, and Bakan Walis to articulate a modern *gaya* that complements individual possibility with a flexible form of national belonging.

## Postscript: the possibility of another kind of indigenous epic

In interpreting *Seediq Bale* as a narrative of contemporary political concerns, I seem to have left the Seediq behind. It has been argued that Wei's film leaves the Seediq behind. Lorenzo Veracini (2012: 244) describes *Seediq Bale* as 'a story of indigenous disappearance' à la *The Last of the Mohicans* (dir. Michael Mann, 1992), 'a (filmic) declaration of Taiwan's (settler) independence'. According to Veracini, the Tgdaya and Toda warriors in the film kill each other off to clear the land for the Taiwanese colonists, whose descendants would decades later identify with the aborigines in order to distinguish themselves from the Chinese and become postcolonial. The thing is that Taiwan's indigenous people have not disappeared. Actually *Seediq Bale* strongly implies the survival of the Seediq. At the end of *The Rainbow Bridge* a solitary hunter appears, on a solo expedition (*The Rainbow Bridge* 2:02:01). He hears the sound of singing and looks up to see a procession of warriors led by Mona Rudo across a rainbow (2:02:01–2:02:35), first in profile, then head on. The computer-generated imagery is atrocious, but Wei Te-sheng apparently wanted to make everything explicit, leaving nothing to the reader's imagination (also see Rawnsley 2016b). In this scene Wei implies that the Tgdaya survivors will continue to believe in the traditional rainbow bridge, but in the previous scene he shows a different procession (1:58:47–1:59:07), of Tgdaya women and children en route to the reservation of Kawanakajima, which the Tgdaya called Alang Gluban. Wei Te-sheng never gives us the reverse-shot. His purpose was not to tell the story of survivors like Dakis Nawi/Hanaoka Jirō's widow Takayama Hatsune/Obing Tado. After the war, just as Alang Gluban (a.k.a. Chuanzhong island) was renamed Qingliu, Takayama Hatsuko/Obing Tado added a third identity, Gao Cai-yun. She ended up moving back to Mhebu, or Lushan, where she ran a hot springs hotel with her second husband, apparently managing to reconcile her personal, cultural and linguistic identities.

In *Seediq Bale*, Mona Rudo launches his rising for fear that in 20 years the Seediq people will have become Japanese (*The Sun Flag* 1:19:51), so what

good is the store, the school, the post office and the police station in Wushe? Since 1930, Mona Rudo's people have crossed a different rainbow bridge, to what can idealistically be described as multicultural modernity. They no longer tattoo their faces, but their identities have not been effaced. As one indigenous critic of *Seediq Bale* put it, they each have 'the face of the inbetweener', in between Chinese and indigenous, modernity and tradition, individual and group (Pacidal 2012). That they are 'in between' attests to their survival. Eighty-five years later they are survivors of 15 years of attempts to turn them into Japanese imperial citizens, 45 years of Sinification under the KMT, and another 15 years of cultural and linguistic commodification and loss under neo-liberalism.

Viewers of Wei Te-sheng's *Cape No.7* may recall the Hakka travelling salesman of Malasang (0:18:36–54 and 1:37:06–34), a brand of millet wine, and the fired glass beads on sale at the airport store (1:31:27–38). In both cases, a ritual product of indigenous labour has become a commodity that serves as a symbol of interpersonal connection (as in the concert at the end of the film), a substitute for the social cohesion of *gaya*. Indigenous culture is obviously also commodified in *Seediq Bale* and related merchandise. Ironically, by commodifying the Seediq language – by using it to give *Seediq Bale* the aura of historical authenticity – Wei Te-sheng may have helped to slow linguistic loss, if only a little, by getting at least a few members of his audience interested. Seediq is now 'moribund', in that most native speakers are over 50 years of age. There are activists trying to revitalise the language like Guo Ming-zheng/Dakis Pawan, the translator of the Tgdaya dialogue in *Seediq Bale*, and Chiu Ruo-long's wife Iwan Nawi, a teacher and Toda native speaker, who went on to re-translate the entire screenplay into Toda (Nawi 2014). There are activists trying to reinvent the culture, often in the context of Christian belief. There are activists asserting political rights, including those who made an impression on Wei Te-sheng in 1996 by claiming that the government was occupying a traditional hunting ground in Hualian (Kan 2011). Another, more Biblical type of Taiwanese indigenous epic film should take up the suspense-filled story of the ongoing Seediq accommodation, and contribution, to the evolving project of Taiwanese modernity.[4]

## Notes

1 *Seediq Bale* was released in Taiwan in September 2011 in two parts, *The Sun Flag* (*Taiyang qi*) and *The Rainbow Bridge* (*Caihong qiao*), and as a single version internationally, *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale*. The term 'Seediq bale' means 'real person' in the Tgdaya dialect of Seediq. In the other two dialects of Seediq, Toda and Truku, the word is spelled *sediq* and *seejiq*, respectively.

2 There is a connection, however tenuous, between Homer and nativism, the Bible and liberalism, in their contrasting conceptualisations of the law: in Homer's world customary law secures the social order, while God in the Bible figures the sovereign

power that in a modern state legislates individuals, paradoxically in order to empower them.

3 Seediq bands were once nomadic, small and acephalous (Simon 2012: 171). With colonisation, they settled, grew in size and acquired chiefs (Simon 2012: 172). Clearly, Seediq society in 1930 was in flux. My claim that Mona Rudo represents a static concept of society and identity applies to *Seediq Bale*, not to history.

4 For an epistemologically humble, avant-garde narrative of the lingering trauma of Wushe in Alang Gluban, see Wu He's novel *Yusheng*, first published in 1999, due out in Michael Berry's English translation *Remains of Life* from Columbia University Press in early 2017.