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BEST OF BOTH WORLDS: WISTERIA TEA HOUSE AND STARBUCKS

在紫藤廬與Starbucks之間*

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Taiwan's Insularity

In 1968, an electronics industry leader and his U.S. corporate president visited Taipei to see whether this was the right location for their company's first Asian factory. In the end, however, they opted for Singapore. Why not Taipei? The entrepreneur explained to me that Taipei seemed somehow closed off, that people just did not know what was happening around the world, and that the general level of English proficiency was quite low. In other words, Taipei was not international enough.

In 2002, Lonely Planet brought out an updated edition of its

* From Yen Kun-yang 顏崑陽 et al eds. *Chiu-shih-er nien san-wen hsuan*《九十二年散文選》 (*The Best Taiwanese Essays, 2004*). Taipei: Elite Publishing Co., 2004.

Taiwan guidebook. The author had clearly put little effort into the revision, as there was almost nothing about new developments in Taipei in it. But the author did provide an overall impression of Taiwan's capital, which he described as one of the most unapproachable cities in Asia. In other words, Taipei seems isolated, barely connected with the outside world, and with a lower than average English fluency: not the kind of city where international travelers are going to feel at ease, let alone at home.

Can it be? Thirty-five years have passed since 1968 and Taiwan is still closed off, still out of touch with the rest of the world?

Yes, it's true. Anyone who has traveled much can see immediately that Taiwan is comparatively insular. There are few foreign travelers at Chiang Kai-shek International Airport. The English on the street signs in the capital is an utter mess. Pick up a newspaper and you are finished with the international section in five minutes flat. The content of cable television news is a collective indictment of our self-centeredness: ten times as much coverage for a child who swallowed nails while playing than for Ethiopia's starving millions; footage of a dog chewing betel nuts in Nantou dwarfs the Argentinean presidential election in importance; nude demonstrators at a G-8 summit fill up the television screen, without as much as a single commentary on their cause. 24 hours a day, the people of Taiwan are force-fed detailed images of loud-mouthed politicians, whose antics often escalate into scuffles and even brawls. Issues of international concern—war, the environment, poverty, famine, intellectual advances, sudden changes in the old order, latent crises—seem not to exist in Taiwan.

"That's absurd," you may argue, "Taiwan *is* international:

just look at the concentration of Starbucks in Taipei, the highest in the world. And what about the all-night convenience stores, on almost every street corner." There are indeed ways in which our capital city seems cosmopolitan. Want to hear the hippest hip hop music and see the latest fashions? Taipei's the place to be. Release dates for Hollywood movies are among the earliest in the world. Moreover, the yearly rhythm we beat out is international: we celebrate Valentine's Day on February 14, hold a costume parade for Halloween in late October, and cook Thanksgiving turkey dinner in November. Come Christmas in December and the whole town turns out to sing and dance in City Hall Square. Even the Presidential Office gets in on the act on New Year's Eve, setting off fireworks, popping champagne corks, and counting down the seconds to midnight, when you grab the nearest person for a celebratory kiss.

Finally, the newly elected national government is now asking for English versions of all official documents. Civil servants must now undergo English testing. The entire population is studying the language! The final goal of all these efforts is to make English an official language. So who says Taiwan is closed off?

Who to Emulate?

But what on earth is "internationalization"?

If "modernization" means the introduction of new farming techniques used on the existing soil of traditional culture—such as democratic institutions, the scientific spirit, and industrial technology—for the benefit of a new philosophy of accommodation and a new lifestyle, and if "globalization" signals an unprecedented perforation of traditional ethnic and national borders as deep-rooted cultural institutions are now self-adjusting to

the rhythm of modern technology and economy, then a nation's cultural and social heritages—its laws, beliefs, morals, values—will all have to be redefined.

Modernization is the holy grail of a great many developing nations, and globalization is rapidly becoming a reality. In the new order, developed nations are trying to capitalize on established advantages, while developing countries are faced with the danger of "becoming invisible" even as they ride the tide of opportunity.

Where does the concept of "internationalization" fit in? It would seem to indicate becoming international, but what does that mean? Who is international and what are they like? In making English one of our official languages, are we trying to emulate England and the United States? Or India and the Philippines? Or Hong Kong and Singapore? When the government announces the adoption of a foreign language as a lingua franca, have they thought seriously about the country's destiny and its place in the world? Are they willing and able to ensure its survival?

Like a Shepherd through the Pasture

It was 1978, my first trip to Europe, the continent of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, where many of the world's advanced nations were to be found. My head was stuffed with bright-eyed imaginings about what "modernized" countries were like. But fresh out of the airport, motoring along the Franco-German frontier, I was surprised at the absence of the surreal high-tech cityscapes I had been expecting. Framed by my window was a medieval landscape illuminated by the slanting rays of the setting sun. Villages were nestled at the verge of forest groves and fields of wheat. The orderly pattern of red-

roofed, white-walled houses set off the serene balance of church steeples amid a symphony of dogs and chickens.

The car had to stop when nearly a hundred fluffy sheep trundled across the road like children going home from school, shoving and jostling and shouting. Looking off into the pasture, I saw a shepherd walking slowly over, his flock milling around him. He wore a beard and a raincoat and held a staff in his hand. The dusk dyed the sheep a pastel shade, and the sharp extraneous smell of grass wafted through the air.

I was shocked! Where were the proud monuments of "modernization"? All there was to see was "tradition," tradition that was serene and peaceful, and close to the soil. As the man and his sheep drew nigh from the rich green pasture, I felt like a thirsty traveler in the presence of an Old Testament shepherd.

A subsequent period of lengthy residence in Europe confirmed my first impressions time and time again: tradition is still a vital part of the European way of life. People carry on the traditional ceremonies for the different stages of life, knowing on every occasion what songs to sing, what colors to wear, what flowers to send, and what words to speak. As with birth, age, sickness and death, so with spring, summer, autumn and winter: the seasons are cadenced, with the Carnival parade at winter's end to ward off evil, egg painting at Easter to celebrate life, street dancing at midsummer to break from work, and solemn reflection at Christmas to pray for blessings. Age-old practices have not warped or disappeared because of modernization. In Rome, Paris, and Berlin, the works of the past—a fallen city wall, a ruined church, or a cobblestone street—are protected and restored, no matter what the expense. Thus, modern technology is used to preserve the feeling and essence of tradition.

This is no shallow poetic nostalgia. As we soar up into the

vast unknown like a helium balloon, tradition is a tether tying us safely to the ground. Tradition helps us maintain our composure through the trials of life and live in harmony with the seasons—spring flowers, autumn moon, winter snow. It is like the firm ground beneath our feet, or like a solid tree that we can lean on. Tradition is the old poem that makes us weep, and the writer—long dead and gone—with whom our spirits communicate.

Tradition is not a nostalgic mood. It is a necessity, essential for our survival. I discovered in Europe that my original understanding of "modernization" was incomplete. For advanced countries, modernization is the means; protecting tradition is the end. The massive sums that are invested in the environment, the efforts that go into related research and development, are only to recover the perfect simplicity of tradition: "narrow bridge, flowing brook, human abode." The final goal of modernization is not to propel ourselves aimlessly into the unknown, but rather to return to our own language and culture, to our own history and belief, and to our own soil.

A Crisis of Culture

Thereupon I saw that the more advanced a country, the greater its capacity to protect culture, and the more culture is protected, the more self-assurance the people have. By contrast, the more backward a nation, the worse the loss or even disintegration of culture becomes. A country in such dire straits can neither keep its bearings nor plot a course into the future.

Taiwanese people celebrate the day of lovers but know nothing of Saint Valentine; they hold costume parades but are unclear about the meaning of the Carnival; they eat turkey dinner but cannot say to whom they are thankful; they join in the

Christmas revelry but do not settle down for any religious reflection. Every seasonal celebration must be linked back to its religious or cultural roots. Adopting other people's celebrations is analogous to picking up somebody's ancestral tablets without having any idea about how or who to worship!

It is easy to import the hustle and bustle of festive celebrations, but not the cultural meaning. Uprooted, celebrations are reduced to empty consumerism. Neglected are one's own cultural observances, which have since time immemorial punctuated the seasons with occasions for gratitude, cleansing, soul searching, and prayer. If our cultural roots wither and die, how can we invest our communal life with meaning? A few speak words of wisdom in times of trouble, but most have no clue what to do.

Taiwan's leaders want to make English an official language, but they know not what they do. They treat language as a tool that people can "pick up" just as easily as you can grab some dead piece of wood to use as a club.

Language is not a club. It is a great and sturdy tree, whose roots are inextricable from the ground of culture and history. Transplanting language is transplanting culture and history, values and beliefs, for these things are intertwined. Consider colonialism. Consolidating colonial rule involves changing the identity and outlook of the colonized people. The first step in the process is to get the colonized people to take the language of the colonizer as their own language. This is how English came to be widely used in Hong Kong and Singapore, where people not only speak English but also understand how the Anglophone world operates. History has made it easier for Singapore and Hong Kong to engage directly with the international community, but perhaps there has been a price, paid not in currency but in

culture. The ascendancy of English has weakened Chinese and Malay, but has also failed to seed an Anglophone culture rich enough to rival that of New York or London. If culture is a soil, then in Singapore and Hong Kong there is no soil deep or rich enough to support the growth of a towering tree.

Knowledge is the Key

Taiwan is not an English speaking country, never having been colonized by an English speaking power. So why list English as an official language? What might the consequences of this decision be? Clearly, the politicians in Taipei do not have reasonable answers to these questions. They have only this foolhardy plan that will surely oust us from our niche.

If internationalization is not adopting other people's festivals or languages, then what exactly is it?

It is knowledge of self and other. In knowing ourselves, we gain a sense of our place in the world and of our foundational values. In knowing others, we are able to explain our language, institutions and customs—our unique perspective—in terms that others will understand. Internationalization does not mean being the same as others but rather being able to tell others how we are different. As such, "internationalization" means finding a reasonable way to make ourselves understood. It is not an end but a means.

Finding "a way to make oneself understood" requires knowledge. Not knowing the colonial history of Africa, you will think that the sorrows of the Taiwanese people are the greatest that the world has ever known. Not knowing how the world reacts to the Chinese market, you will only view "the China problem" through the lens of politics. Not knowing internation-

al commerce, you will continue seeing Taiwanese entrepreneurs in China as traitors and not as an economic vanguard. To be international, we must understand the rivalry between the United States and Europe in the wake of the Persian Gulf War, the compromise politics of the United Nations, the post-glasnost transformation of Russia, the position of the new China in the international order, and the enormous challenges that globalization presents to sovereignty and culture. If we lack such understanding, how can we possibly find the right words to let the international community understand Taiwan? Without international knowledge, our explanations are wasted breath.

The more advanced the nation, the more its people know about the world. A mastery of such knowledge makes a nation powerful, for knowledge *is* power, after all, and competence increases with knowledge. If television is an index of culture, consider television in Taiwan and the nature of the knowledge it imparts: local news is broadcast unremittingly, blowing our own importance out of all proportion. This navel gazing is a sign not only of the backwardness of our nation but also of a sickness in our culture. We complacently allow television stations to deprive us of our right to know. We remain apathetic and ignorant about the rest of the world, and yet we still complain that nobody understands our plight, we still lament that we are the orphans of the whole world. Are we not being just a little contradictory?

Starbucks or Wisteria Tea House?

I like drinking coffee at Starbucks, not necessarily because they sell the best coffee, but because no matter where I am I know what it will be like before I go in. Cold rain starts falling

in Jerusalem, London, Beijing, or Hong Kong; and then you see that familiar sign glowing at the next street corner. You are a stranger to the city, but you know that a tasty bagel and a nice warm Grande Latte are waiting for you just a few steps away.

"Globalization" is what makes you feel at home away from home, and vice versa.

I also like drinking tea and meeting friends at Wisteria Tea House. Amid the aroma of tea, someone reminisces about the great personages who once gathered within these walls and about the history they helped to make. Others, impassioned souls, plan out the next program of social reform. The wisteria blooms leisurely all the while, for there is no sense of hurry here. It knows the history of Taipei City too well.

There are fifty-eight Starbucks in Taipei and only one Wisteria Tea House. There are six thousand six hundred Starbucks worldwide and still only one Wisteria Tea House.

Internationalization does not mean renovating Wisteria Tea House into one more Starbucks. It means instead opening our gate and showing Starbucks in, while at the same time ensuring that Wisteria Tea House's soft and lovely light continues to shine. It also means knowing how to show this light to others, knowing how to familiarize people with how Wisteria Tea House is—how "I" am—different.

The more Starbucks there are, the more important Wisteria Tea House is.