

Koxinga

Wu Ming-yi

Translated by Darryl Sterk

I once came to Guoxing Township, Nantou County, in the summer of 1994.

The night before I'd caught a game at the Taichung ballfield between the Wei Chuan Dragons and the Jungo Bears. I spent the evening resting on a chair in the waiting room at the train station, unable to sleep. Sometime after six a.m., I stumbled to a nearby fast-food restaurant and dozed off, slumped over a table. When I was a bit more awake, I rented a motorcycle and set off, without a destination.

That's the scruffy style of travel I was enamoured with in those days, though in retrospect I wonder if I was just aspiring to the pride of a maverick. Regardless, "Guoxing Village" sounded like a pretty plain place to me, but somehow the name itself attracted my motorcycle, which just happened to head down the road to Tienleng, taking me past a temple under restoration: the Huguogong, the Guarding the Country Shrine.

The idol of the shrine was none other than Koxinga [the sake of Guoxing Village, who is also known to posterity as

Zheng Chenggong].¹

At the beginning of summer in the 13th year (1659) of Yongli [1646–1662, the last and longest of the Southern Ming reigns], Zheng Chenggong led an iron-clad force “wearing iron masks and coats of mail, and armed with horse-chopping sabres and bow-and-arrow” (Xia Lin, *Compilation of the Essentials in the Naval Records*), overcoming Guazhou, whence he immediately attacked Zhenjiang, scattering defenders like leaves in the wind.² According to Yang Ying’s *The True Story of the Campaign*, “the enemy [Manchu] riders fled in disarray, trampling one another under hoof. They tried to flee across the canals and the river, but died there instead.” Thus, Zheng’s force, the thread of martial force upon which the Ming dynasty’s survival hung, took back four prefectures and twenty-four counties. But a stalemate would soon form, with Zheng’s force and the Manchus each holding one side of the Yangtze River. Alas, in his onslaught on Nanjing, Zheng encountered the delaying tactics of the Manchus, and the situation suddenly took a turn for the worse. Zheng decided to abandon the Yangtze, retreating back to Siming (Xiamen or Amoy). In the same year, He Bin [a Fujianese in the employ of the Dutch] presented him with a map of Taiwan and explained the tensions between the Dutch and the indigenous peoples, as well as the vagaries of the waterways from the mouth of the Luermen River to the walls

¹ Zheng Chenggong was bestowed the Ming imperial surname Zhu, the name Chenggong meaning “success,” and the title “lord of the imperial surname” (Guoxingye, romanized as Koksèngià in Taiwanese, and as Koxinga in English) by the Longwu Emperor, the second Southern Ming emperor, in recognition of his loyalty to the dynasty, which had been driven out of northern China by the Manchus, founders of the Qing Dynasty in 1644. Known as Zhu Chenggong in the seventeenth century, his surname was changed back to Zheng by the Manchus.

² Guazhou is an island in a canal accessing the Yangtze River in Jiangsu Province, while Zhenjiang is the town just across the Yangtze to the south. Nanjing is upriver.

of Fort Provintia. It’s uncertain whether He Bin’s presentation predated Zheng’s decision to build a base for himself in Taiwan, for according to a piece of diplomatic correspondence collected in the *Taiwan Provincial Gazetteer*, written to the then governor of Taiwan, Frederick Coyett, Zheng breezily declared:

Taiwan is rife with miasmas, and the bush has not been cleared. What use would it be to me even if I conquered it?

It was in a military conference in the sixth month of the following year that Zheng first revealed his strategy for the conquest of Taiwan. In another military conference held in the first month of the fifteenth year of Yongli, Zheng’s decision created conflict with his southern admirals, Wu Hao and Huang Ting, who came from Zhangzhou and Quanzhou respectively, but found favour with his northern generals, Yang Chaodong and Ma Xin. Zheng ultimately closed his ears to the counsel of the southern admirals, who knew the geography of the area, not to mention naval warfare, and heeded the advice of the northern generals, who were needless to say unfamiliar with Taiwan. Did Zheng Chenggong, as Zhang Tan says, refuse to take the advice of the southern admirals because he knew it was self-interested, in that Wu and Huang hoped to stay home and manage their commercial affairs? Or was his fatal over-confidence acting up again, as in the battle of Nanjing? No matter what, this military conference was almost certainly a formality: Zheng’s decision was final, and could not be gainsaid, certainly not by Zhang Cangshui, the leader of the central Zhejiang volunteers, who, as Zheng’s entire force was preparing to attack Taiwan, argued strenuously for staying in Siming, even questioning Zheng’s motives:

*While in pursuit of deer in the Central Plains, how can you have time to ask about rainbow beams?*³

³ With allusions to Sima Qian’s *Shiji* and to the *Commentary of Zuo*, Zhang insinuates that Zheng Chenggong is no longer interested in winning back control

This dispute over the invasion of Taiwan has now been laden with subjective opinion and endowed with the haze of the beauty of history observed through the lens of time.

On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of the fifteenth year of Yongli (1661), Zheng accepted the Dutch surrender at what is now the East Gate roundabout in Tainan, and made ritual notification to the gods of the mountains and rivers. Zheng had taken Taiwan despite the misgivings of his commanders and substantial desertions prior to the campaign; without the approval of Zhu Shugui, the Prince of Ningjing [the last of the pretenders to the Ming throne]; and without assurances of support from the Japanese.

The Huguogong is situated beside the road to the Huisun logging grounds. I sat on a broken concrete column, gazing at several distant rows of tall, thin betel nut trees—boundary markers—as I let my imagination carry me back to the days when this was but a subtropical valley. Back then, Northport [Peikang] Creek would have been draped in a green raiment; the new growth of trees and ferns stretching up towards the sky like an inkfish [cuttlefish] extending its tentacles. Layers of herbaceous plants, shrubs, and light-hungry evergreens layered the surface of the earth so thickly that the raindrops could only fall to the ground by sliding gleefully down. Hill sickle-grass⁴ and edible *zhuyu*⁵

of China, symbolized by the deer, for the Ming, because he now has imperial ambitions of his own, to build a palace with beams arched like rainbows on Taiwan. Zheng Chenggong “asks after” the rainbow beams because in the locus classicus, an ambitious hegemon asked after the weight of the nine tripods, which represented the nine territories of ancient China.

⁴ *Melicope semecarpifolia* (Merr.) T. Hartley, 1993. Melicope is a genus of plant on which butterflies feed. There is no common name for this species, so I have just translated the Chinese.

⁵ *Zanthoxylum ailanthoides* Sieb. & Zucc., the leaves of which are food for swallowtails. The “common name” ailanthus-like prickly ash is not only not common but also misleading; prickly ashes are not ashes. So it would seem the

thrived in the forest, while stone-crawling ferns [*Lemmaphyllum microphyllum* Presl.] crawled over stones and strangler figs⁶ strangled hosts in an inseparable lover’s embrace. All plants were trying to find a patch of soil they were adapted to grow in, spreading their arms to embrace or block the sun, and then quietly biding their time, storing up the life they would need to ensure their offspring would go far.

The view of endless “green” of former times is an apt symbol of plurality, of freedom.

Imagine: a riverside wetland dotted with Bluebelts [common bluebottles], Bluespots [common jays], Phoenixcrows [peacock black swallowtails], Doubletails [great nawab butterflies], and other flocks that share the water source, like attendees of a grand luncheon. Now and then, an uninvited guest arrives, a Whistling Thrush like a purple exclamation mark or a thirsty Muntjac splashing in with short steps, sweeping all the butterflies into the sky; a colorful sight to make you swear fall has come early. Then, enfolded in the clamour of the Grass Cicadas [*Mogannia hebes*, an endemic species], the butterflies once again lovingly cover the land.

Not a single tree is pruned; nor is there a solitary un-bug-nibbled leaf. There are no open spaces where the gaze meets no limits, nor road to cleave the heart of love.

Alas, such a scene belongs to an afternoon of centuries ago. It belongs to the past.

Riding along, that whole afternoon I saw only Taiwanese linewhites (a cabbage butterfly) dancing in fields of mustard, whiteleaf, and bighead [mustard, bok choy, and kohlrabi, where

Chinese name is to be preferred. But a translation of the Chinese name, “edible cornelian cherry” (*Cornus mas*) is not helpful because cornelian cherry is an evolutionarily unrelated species. Hence, *zhuyu*.

⁶ Specifically the Indian laurel fig (*Ficus microcarpa*), one of the so-called “strangler” figs.

mustard and bok choy belong to the same species, *Brassica rapa*, kohlrabi to the same genus]. “Green” seemed to have been tamed over the past several centuries. The roadside was lined with utterly neat vegetable plots, the mountainside occupied by a verdant monotone...likely an orchard planted with a single kind of fruit-bearing tree. Oftentimes in such orchards, plastic covers the ground to prevent non-cash crops from sprouting. As far as the eye could see, all plants were growing for money, and grew unevenly stout. Only with difficulty did their branches support fruit that hung like sleeping babies gorged on breast milk. The longer I stared, the starker the glare became, leaving me tired and sore.

In the course of my ride, I had at least seen a little purplespot (a Puli purplespot) [a dwarf purple butterfly] around noon, and this gave me a little rise. Like a toy car tethered to him, I followed him. Sometimes when he hovered or wound around in the sky, I stopped by the road to wait, like I was his lover, gazing at him, waiting for him to swim back to my side in undulating flight. In terms of the ability to control speed, humans are way behind butterflies, which have, after all, studied flying for over a hundred million years. If I rode the motorcycle like that butterfly flew, at such incredibly variable speed, I might have fainted from the acceleration and turned right off the road. I followed him until we'd almost reached Stonegate [Shih-men] Village, where, catching a breeze, he left for the other side of the valley. Perhaps there he would chance upon the wild Malay vine [*Caturus scandens* Lour.] that would nourish the next generation.

I flipped through the field guide I had brought along and found this particular butterfly with purple wingspots, which is easily distinguished from other purplespot [Genus *Euploea*] species by its diminutive size. They are found not only around Puli, but are also commonly seen at mid-altitude around the island. Like other purplespots and greenspots [Genus *Tirumala*, the tiger butterflies], the little butterfly with purple wingspots migrates south to winter in butterfly valleys in Taitung, where it feeds on a

few species of plants in the mulberry family. Its scientific name is:

Euploea tulliolus [ssp.] *koxinga* Fruhstorfer.

I stopped in front of the Huguogong. There, in that windless afternoon, I could almost hear Zheng's approaching troops three hundred years before, grave and harsh.

There is no credible evidence that Koxinga was ever here. But, tracing the Bigbelly [Tatu] and the Northport rivers, [his son] Zheng Jing and a commander, Liu Guoxuan, did indeed lead a force to Puli and “evicted” the aborigines who lived in scattered villages on the plain, driving them into the mountains like wild plum blossom [sika] deer. Is this the land where the Pingpu tribe “Bigbelly savages” danced and sang? Later on, the Han Chinese, who had won control of the land, named the place after Koxinga to memorialize his sweeping victory.

Koxinga succeeded in his conquest of an island stronghold that his officers and Ming loyalists saw as a retreat overseas and from which no reconquest of the mainland to reinstate the Ming was ever launched. This was no more than a base like Siming but with a larger hinterland. So I wondered: when Koxinga entered Taiwan and was elevated to divine status, what *guo*, what country, was the Huguogong protecting? The Ming Dynasty? The Qing Dynasty, which defeated the Ming [in 1644] and then in the year of *yimo* [of the Guangxu reign, 1895] gave Taiwan up to the Japanese, subjecting the Han Chinese living in Taiwan to the pain of losing their country? Or the *guo* of the Guomindang, which practically fled here [after losing the Chinese Civil War] in 1949?

The enchanting purple light reflecting off the forewings of the little purplespot I had followed surfaced in my mind. The little purplespots have never understood the history of the human race, nor do they need to.

Here, defeated generals of the Ming found a “land” (*guotu*) to replace the one they had lost, but in the same stroke, indigenous peoples lost their “land.” Since the Dutch occupation [1624–1661], when a lie on a piece of parchment tricked away a huge swath

of land, the history of the indigenous peoples who once lived on Taiwan's western plains has been a slow march, either to higher altitudes, or towards the moving line of "ethnic integration." To appease the Han Chinese people, Koxinga forced the indigenous peoples even further up the river valleys, higher and higher, and closer and closer to the "snowline," above which they could scarcely survive. That is why the township was named to honor his memory. The Japanese also ventured up the Bigbelly, along which they built army roads to transport cutting-edge instruments of murder for the "pacification" or annihilation of the savages, who had never seen such things before. Perhaps the Huguogong bore witness.

The little purplespots must have witnessed it.

More than one-hundred million years of existence on this planet has given butterflies more chances than humans to converse with and understand the land and to regard with indifference major earthquakes, dust storms, sudden gales, and downpours. Besides striving to adjust their constitutions better to surviving on the land, they have never found it necessary to claim a "national territory" (guotu) for themselves. To the little purplespots, the milk of the Bigbelly belongs to every life. They need not build a memorial to whoever drove away whom, to whoever protected whom.

Then came the Dutch, who ran the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie [the Dutch East-India Company]. From 1638 on, they slaughtered plum blossom deer at a rate of more than 120,000 each year, for a total headcount of more than a million. Those deer, which always gazed upon people with affectionate eyes, even as they slumped to the ground, were never able to understand why they had been forbidden from bounding in the hills. This slaughter shattered the myth that "year-round hunting will never exhaust the deer," recorded in Chen Di's *Record of the Eastern Savages*. Then came Zheng Chenggong, who helped the immigrants from the central plains [of China] gradually gain mastery over the island. Protected by the state and the military, the immigrants wiped out

ancient plants on the western plains and in the foothills in order to grow grains exclusively for human consumption. Then came the Japanese, who systematically anatomized and extracted arboreal resources, leaving as testimony the railways and roads leading to execution grounds for trees. Then came the Guomindang, which poisoned and carved up the mountains and rivers, sold the oxygen we breathe and the sky overhead to business conglomerates, which reserved from their profits slight charitable contributions towards the "protection" of the land they had plotted to harm.

Not a few little purplespots born in the days when Taiwan was a Butterfly Kingdom [in the 1960s and 1970s] were executed for their iridescent purplish-blue forewings and stuck on butterfly mosaics. The butterflies sacrificed to form the starry night sky might have been great phoenixes (great Mormons), black phoenixes (spangles), or Taiwan phoenixes (broad-tailed swallowtails).

Perhaps, for them, the indigenous peoples who were chased deep in the mountains for centuries were soulmates. Had this little purplespot who led me across Guoxing Township ever felt nostalgic for the old Taiwan, when the only inhabitants were face-writing people [people who tattooed their faces], or for an even earlier island home?

In 1908, Hans Fruhstorfer documented 15 new subspecies of Taiwanese butterfly. Two of the subspecies were named after Koxinga: the Taiwanese purplespot butterfly (*Euploea tulliolus* [ssb.] *koxinga*) and the Taiwanese citrus phoenix (*Papilio xuthus* [ssb.] *koxinga*), now renamed *Papilio xuthus* (L.). Were these subspecies so named because they were discovered in the eponymous township? Or for any other reason? Regardless, "Fruhstorfer" was added to the scientific name only later. Fruhstorfer was a German merchant who named fifteen Taiwanese phoenixes without ever setting foot on the island. The Taiwanese purplespot butterfly was probably delivered by his collector, Hans Sauter. Neither the Taiwanese purplespot nor the Taiwanese citrus phoenix know who

Fruhstorfer is, let alone Koxinga. The former still bears the title of this very important historical figure hundreds of years after he brought his troops, and a group of learned people with thousands of years of cultural wisdom, to Taiwan. So, as I looked at the beautiful iridescent purple spots on the little purplespot's wings, I felt like I was gazing at a warped image of a contradictory history in a crystal ball.

Actually, a little purplespot's main life purpose is just to find a plant its progeny can climb and eat. But obviously, the way things are going, it is going to take it longer and longer to find a suitable plant.

But I also know that the homeland whose name now burdens the little purplespot is also the homeland of the many people of Taiwan, no matter whether they are the descendants of those who were evicted, or of the ones who did the evicting.

Perhaps one day, these people will know that the true meaning of *guo* is "land," which is in turn the true meaning of the plurality of life. Because if there ever comes a day when the little purplespots lose their homeland, people might then also be deprived of any homeland to remember.

Selected from *Midiezhì* [Records of Bewildering Butterflies]. Taipei: Xiari Chubanshe, 2010, pp. 128–138.