Teaching *Othello* in Post-Colonial Taiwan

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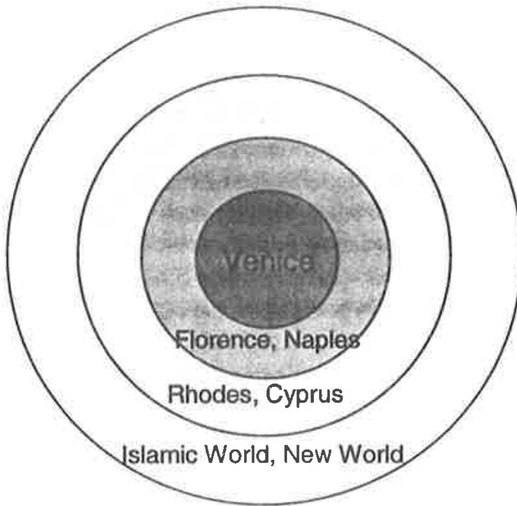
It was no accident that *Othello* has emerged to be one of the most taught Shakespearean plays in the United States. Though four hundred years old, the play addresses many prominent issues in contemporary American society—race, gender, and identity. There has been great enthusiasm for locating a "real life Othello" in contemporary American society, and O. J. Simpson seems to be the most extraordinary find. American students might not care about the fate of a Moorish general in Renaissance Venice, but they could very well identify and sympathize with an African-American football star in Beverly Hills. They could also understand, as in the recent Hollywood movie "O" directed by Tim Blake Nelson, what it would be like being a minority basketball MVP in an all-white private high school. Numerous modernizations and adaptations of the play in the last few decades demonstrate that in introducing Shakespeare to contemporary audiences, relevance matters.

After spending over ten years of graduate study in the United States, I returned to teach in my native Taiwan. In selecting which Shakespearean play I should teach in an undergraduate survey course, not surprisingly my first thought was *Othello*. The editor of the *Longman Anthology of British Literature* remarks that the play is "a tragedy both of its time and ahead of its time." Shakespeare makes his audience "question preconceptions about sex, race, and identity in ways that are still urgent today."[1] True enough, but I still had my doubts. Would my Taiwanese students be interested in the play the way American students are? Would they find the issues addressed in the play relevant? My doubts were not groundless. While Shakespeare is not unpopular in Taiwan—his profound human concerns transcend historical and cultural barriers and, despite the difficulty of his language, both professional and student groups love to adopt and update his plays—*Othello* is. The Contemporary Legend Theatre (CLT) re-created three of Shakespeare's great tragedies—*Macbeth* (*Kingdom of Desire*, 1986),

Hamlet (*War and Eternity*, 1990), and *King Lear* (*Lear: Wu Hsing-kuo Meets Shakespeare*, 2001). The settings are changed to ancient China, and the rich tradition of Chinese theatre is incorporated. Directed by Wu Hsing-kuo, a master of Peking opera, modern dance and avant-garde theater, the dazzling productions of the CLT won standing ovations both in Taiwan and abroad. In the past two years, less prestigious groups made similar choices: the popular Ping-Fong Acting Troupe made their third run of *Shamlet*, a farce parody of *Hamlet*, in 2001; Stan Lai, along with directors from China and Hong Kong, produced three renovated versions of *King Lear* in 2001; and the Department of Drama and Theatre of National Taiwan University chose *Macbeth* as their 2002 show.

Among the four great tragedies, *Othello* alone is left out—the most taught and staged Shakespearean tragedy in the United States is the least explored in Taiwan. The reason seems obvious: while the Chinese audience can understand and sympathize with the political ambition of a powerful general, the woe of an old father deprived of his regal prestige and human dignity, and the melancholy of a young man, the racial tension between Africans and Caucasians has never been part of our cultural legacy or lives. How could I pique my students' interest in *Othello*? To discuss the play exclusively in terms of race is certainly unjust; to ignore race, however, would be impossible. How should I address the issue? How would I translate and modernize Shakespeare's themes into something that could be related to a different historical and cultural context while keeping the text intact? How could I give my students a new perspective on themselves and their own world while looking at Othello and his Venice? These were the difficulties I faced.

My first challenge was to help my students locate Shakespeare's Venice. A port city with enormous economic, cultural, and military strength and a significant site for Christian resistance against the Muslims, Venice played a central role in Renaissance Europe. Although it is not located in the geographic center of Europe, it is the assumed focal point of the universe in Shakespeare's play. Gathering all the places named in *Othello* yields a world map consisting of concentric circles. Venetians, who inhabit the center, take pride in their city and in themselves, as made explicit in Brabantio's statement in the first act: "This is Venice; my house is not a grange" (1.1. 106-7).[2] Florence and Naples are slightly off the center and deserve some contempt. Cassio, a Florentine, is called an "arithmetician" (1.1.20), "debitor and creditor," and "countercaster" (1.1.32). The clown also mocks Naples as a city contaminated by syphilis (3.1.3-4). Encircling Italy are Cyprus and



the Isle of Rhodes; they are states of limbo and hence the sites of real struggle between us and non-us. Turkey, Africa, and the New World fall into the same category as the far ends of the world even though their physical distances to Venice greatly vary. People from these alien spheres are hardly human—they are seen as barbaric, bestial, and demonic. Seen from a world view like this, Othello the Moor is compared to a ram, a horse, the devil, an enchanter, a heathen, and a savage. How close this map conforms to actual geography is not important—the idea is to centralize oneself and to decentralize others. The distorted lens is so powerful that even the Moorish Othello, a victim of this Venetian perspective, cannot escape from seeing the world through it.

It is arguably valid to centralize Venice as Shakespeare's characters do—any randomly selected spot on this spherical earth could equally make a center. Indeed, there is no "right" map. All maps "distort distance, shape, area, or direction."[3] All maps "inevitably, unavoidably, necessarily embody their authors' prejudices, biases, and partialities."[4] What we take to be an "objective" view of the world, a "factual" statement, is actually a social construct no less arbitrary and contingent than the Venetians' self-aggrandizing lens. This is a point well made by the provocative Hobo-Dyer "upside-down world map," which puts the south hemisphere on top with Australia in the center. And, in fact, the Venetians' narcissistic cartography has its Chinese counterpart—Sinocentricism. Literally "the Central Kingdom," the word "China," or "Zhongguo," first appeared during the Western Zhou Dynasty.

Since the Zhou culture flourished along the Yellow River some three thousand years ago, the Chinese have always deemed themselves distinct from and superior to neighboring peoples and cultures. The peoples surrounding China are classified into four groups—East, West, South, and North Barbarians—regardless of their ethnicity. The world is like a Cartesian plane with China at the center; anyone more or less than Chinese, on the X axis or the Y axis (0, 0), must be barbarous. As eleventh-century scholar Shi Jie puts it, "Heaven above and earth below, between heaven and earth is the place named China; on the margins of heaven and earth are the four barbarians."[5] Shi Jie pictures the universe as a sandwich, and the non-Chinese are merely the mustard and onion bits that get pressed out; they barely hang on the rim and are ready to fall into the infinite chaos any moment.

Ideology, however, does not reflect reality—the borderline between us and non-us was constantly contested in Chinese history. In addition to natural borders separating the Chinese and the barbarians, the Great Walls were built to reinforce the distance. Ironically, the Walls made of rocks and bricks did not quite succeed as a defensive device—nomadic enemies from the north repeatedly invaded and even occupied and ruled China. The walls invisible, on the other hand, are far more difficult to surmount. Sinocentricism survived the ancient empires—any world map made by Chinese, ancient or contemporary, puts China in the middle, never in the far east. In Chinese, "foreignness" always carries some negative connotations, as can be detected from the slang terms for foreigners: they are not only odd-looking (Big Nose, Red Hair) but also seem to be some mysterious and even demonic species (Ghost Fellow, Foreign Devil). By analogy to Sinocentricism, the Venetians' pride in themselves and unconcealed contempt toward anyone outside their circle became understandable to my students. Shakespeare's Venice is, above all, a mental space—each of us builds our own Venice and carries it with us.

Next, I tried to locate Othello in our society. Dark-skinned Africans are not the main target of racial discrimination in Taiwan, but prejudice based on skin color is not unknown to my students. People from all over the world have come to Taiwan for tourism, business, and education, but the majority of these foreigners are not deeply involved in Taiwan's society. Since the government liberalized its foreign labor policy to remedy a labor shortage in 1990, however, the scenery dramatically changed. Inexpensive imported laborers contributed enormously to Taiwan's economic growth in the past decade. Currently, over 310,000 foreign laborers

are employed in Taiwan. They come from different countries—Thailand (39.34%), Indonesia (31.86%), the Philippines (22.26%), Vietnam (6.53%), and Malaysia (0.01%).[6]

Despite their diverse origins, what is common among them is a skin tone darker than native Taiwanese people. The majority (52.16%) of foreign laborers are employed in the manufacturing industry. Both men and women work on the assembly lines, putting together electronics and computers. Some jobs are more gender specific: 38.23% of the total, all women, work as domestic helpers. For families with special needs, these workers are also trained to take care of the elderly, the infirm, and the young. While women work at homes, men are mostly seen at construction sites.

Due to the global economic decline, the number of foreign construction workers shrank drastically in the past year and only accounts for about 10 percent now, with most of them engaged in laying subway and railroad tracks. Compared to other types of work, construction work is both heavy and dangerous. Although their minimum wages are the same, the construction workers' living environment is much worse than in factory dorms or private homes. On the worksite of Taiwan High Speed Rail in Hsinchu, the workers stay in shabby temporary dormitory buildings. Dark and humid inside, the dorm is crammed with bunk beds, with wet laundry hung on wires tied to the bed frames overhead. Privacy is not a concern here as there is no door separating bed from bed, the bedroom from the dining hall, or the bedroom from the bathroom. Also, no shower curtains are used.

Foreign workers are most visible on weekends, when they are off work. Not wanting to stay in the crowded dorms or in their employers' homes, they pack the city streets. Even though some of them are fluent in Mandarin or Taiwanese, and many of them, especially women, take up Taiwanese fashion, their skin tone notably distinguishes them from native Taiwanese. Unable to afford costly entertainment, many of them choose to loiter in parks or in shopping centers, resting or socializing with their co-workers. Some just sit on the floor and enjoy free air-conditioning in train or subway stations and are considered a public eyesore.

Foreign laborers, especially males, are often seen as dangerous and associated with criminals. Although most of them are Catholic (Philippine), Buddhist (Thai), and Muslim (Indonesian and Malaysian), the strict regulations of their religions fail to shield them from moral criticism. The stereotypical image is that they indulge in drinking, gambling, and fighting. Commonly thought to be lazy, sneaky, and violent, they are also believed to be

committee consisting of representatives from seventeen towns and cities and made forty-two demands, asking for an autonomous provincial constitution, popular election of magistrates, and abolition of the garrison headquarters. Governor Chen temporized and deceived with false promises while requesting that troops be sent from China. Eventually, the government's force prevailed and order was restored, but the death tolls on both sides were massive. Many students, intellectuals, and civil leaders were arrested and jailed afterwards. The KMT regime defined the incident, known as "228," as "rebellion," and suppressed any discussion of it, and it was only in the 1990s that the truth gradually surfaced. Lacking reliable statistics, the casualty toll remains a controversy, from hundreds to over one hundred thousand. Today, many scholars choose to reject the official perspective and call the incident "massacre" instead of "revolt." In 1995, the government made an official apology to the families of the victims and granted compensation, memorial monuments were erected around the island, and many oral accounts by survivors have been recorded and published since then.

Two and one-half years after the 228 Incident, Chiang Kai-shek and some two million Mainlanders were driven by the Communists to Taiwan. Although a small number held high offices and enjoyed power and wealth, the majority of the new immigrants were poor soldiers and young students. It was not easy for these newcomers, who had no access to land, to survive in a fundamentally agricultural society, and many lived on minimum wages as soldiers, teachers, and government employees. As the plains on the west coast were already densely populated, many veterans were sent to the mountainous areas of central Taiwan to cultivate virgin lands and to build highways. Poverty and hardship were the common condition for all but a few in the postwar era, regardless of ethnicity. Although local clashes among different ethnic groups continued to exist, cooperation and cultural exchange increasingly prevailed. Eventually, intermarriages became a social reality.

Taiwan's society has changed enormously since the 1940s. Under the KMT's "liberal dictatorship," exports, industry, and technology started to develop and gradually changed the scenery of an originally agricultural, poverty-stricken Third-World island. Rapid economic growth since the 1960s fostered pleas for political reform. Starting in the late 1970s, waves of political reform movements washed in and created serious tension in society. Protests against foul play in elections, advocacy of freedom of

speech, or struggles for political rights, the issues were often oversimplified or disguised. While the official media tended to demonize the activists as a violent, lawless mob, a terrible threat to the order and foundation of our society, the protestors in turn presented themselves as victims of racial discrimination. As consciousness-raising was not an easy tactic with people long used to dictatorship, ethnic differences were often invoked, despite the fact that many supporters of the oppositional camp were ethnically Mainlanders. Political activists' causes are promulgated as ethnic opposition between an alien military oppressor and native oppressed lovers-of-peace. Neither side's version is any closer to the truth. Nonetheless, the image of native tragic heroes against alien authority made a strong emotional impact and won general sympathy. As a result, this tragic sentiment has been the most powerful and the most popular strategy used by the oppositional camp. Sappy Taiwanese folk songs were heard everywhere during election times, lots of tears were shed, and a family history of being oppressed by the Mainlander regime almost guaranteed a candidate's success.

Chiang died in 1975 and was succeeded by his son. Confronted by pleas for political liberation, the younger Chiang made groundbreaking changes during the last years of his administration: he lifted martial law, legalized political parties, and emphatically promoted Taiwanese to high government positions.[9] His death in 1988 ended the Chiang Dynasty, and the presidents since then—Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian—are both native Taiwanese. What caused the ethnic division to exist in the first place is long over now. More than fifty years have elapsed since the Mainlanders first came; over the years, education, intermarriages, and urbanization have gradually obscured the sharp boundaries among different groups. It is no longer easy or even possible to tell someone's origin, except for the elderly, whose accents reveal their identities. The ethnic category "Taiwanese" has evolved—anyone under the age of fifty is Taiwanese in the sense that they were born and brought up on the island and that they all speak Mandarin with an audibly Taiwanese accent, despite the diverse origins of their ancestors, and it no longer makes sense to call them "indigenous people," "Hokien fellows," "guests," or "aliens."

Regrettably, these terms have not ceased to be used. More often than not, the ethnic banner is employed for non-ethnic purposes today. The survivors of first-generation Mainlander immigrants have long lost their control over political and military power, economy, and culture, but the memory of their once-enjoyed

committee consisting of representatives from seventeen towns and cities and made forty-two demands, asking for an autonomous provincial constitution, popular election of magistrates, and abolition of the garrison headquarters. Governor Chen temporized and deceived with false promises while requesting that troops be sent from China. Eventually, the government's force prevailed and order was restored, but the death tolls on both sides were massive. Many students, intellectuals, and civil leaders were arrested and jailed afterwards. The KMT regime defined the incident, known as "228," as "rebellion," and suppressed any discussion of it, and it was only in the 1990s that the truth gradually surfaced. Lacking reliable statistics, the casualty toll remains a controversy, from hundreds to over one hundred thousand. Today, many scholars choose to reject the official perspective and call the incident "massacre" instead of "revolt." In 1995, the government made an official apology to the families of the victims and granted compensation, memorial monuments were erected around the island, and many oral accounts by survivors have been recorded and published since then.

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privileges is not dead. Quite the opposite, the memory has been intentionally awakened, forged, and reinforced. Aided by the former president Lee, the "pan-green" camp[10] repeatedly rubs salt in the old wounds and manufactures new antagonism against Mainlanders to strengthen their regime and to legitimize their autocracy. Even the years of Japanese colonization—a period of strict police control, economic exploitation, and cultural mortification—is nostalgically sugared to demonize the subsequent KMT regime. Being the target of general hatred, the anxious Mainlander minorities are forced to unite as the "pan-blue" team and vigorously defend themselves.[11] In many ways, Taiwan politics is essentially ethnic politics,[12] despite the lack of real ethnic diversity. At election time, historical ethnic issues are unearthed, intensified, and propagated; each ethnic group identifies themselves as victims of another group's discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. Ethnicity, as it turns out, became a marketing strategy. Depending on the audience addressed, a candidate will speak the appropriate dialect and advertise him- or herself as member of any ethnic group. One group would emphasize Taiwan's links to mainland China in history and look forward to reunification with China; another group would abuse science and history to claim that Taiwanese are ethnically not Chinese at all and honor the Japanese colonizers as benefactors. Mutual enmity is intensified each time an election takes place—with supporters of opposing groups ending up in street fights. Worse, a general and reasonable fear of China's military threat is transfigured into hatred and contempt toward the Mainlanders, who are called by their enemies "Chinks" or "China Pigs." Their ancestors' immigrant status became their original sin—even though they were born and brought up in Taiwan, they could never escape their fate as "aliens" and "outsiders." On March 9, 2001, a sign was erected in a park in Kaohsiung, which says "No Chinamen or dogs allowed in park. Pack and roll back, China Pigs!" This hardly makes sense, because the Taiwan-born Mainlanders would not know where they could go "back" to.

It is not easy to label Taiwan's problem—the cause cannot simply be termed racial, social, national, or conceptual. Scholarly falsification, however, does not affect the dynamic. The tension between Renaissance Venetians and their Other may be too distant for my students, but Taiwan's "Provincial Complex" is their daily reality. As non-existing racial differences could be constructed and magnified, Othello could, indeed, be white or black, or he could even be "green" or "blue," as in contemporary Taiwan. Every

society, we come to realize, has its Othello. In teaching *Othello*, I made my students look around themselves as well as looking into Shakespeare's text, hoping they would learn not just about Shakespeare, but also about themselves, about the world they live in and about their own fear, anxiety, and prejudice. To their surprise, race is not *the* issue in *Othello* or in contemporary Taiwan, though it seems to be that way in many societies. As must be clear, identity is an issue because we want to make it an issue. The same applies to gender and class—the struggle between us and non-us could take on any guise. Too often, we take on a label without questioning its validity or implications and without investigating the motivations behind the act of labeling. In *Othello*, the treacherous Iago brags about his false loyalty and proclaims that "I am not what I am" (1.1.66). Iago's true colors are revealed by the end of the play, but what we are is a question which can be even more treacherous, regardless of our nationality, race, language, or culture.

Notes

1. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, ed. David Damrosch et al (New York: Longman, 1999), 1B: 1179.

2. References to *Othello* are from the *Longman Anthology*.

3. Matt T. Rosenberg, "Peters Projection vs. Mercator Projection" (New York: About, Inc., 2001), http://geography.about.com/library/weekly/aa030201a.htm.

4. Denis Wood, *The Power of Maps* (London: Routledge, 1992), 24.

5. Shi Jie, "On China," my translation.

6. Republic of China Council of Labor Affairs, *Department of Statistics Monthly Bulletin*, 115 (Sugust 2002).

7. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 9.

8. As ethnic origin is no longer recorded in Taiwan's household registry, there are no official numbers for the four ethnic groups. The data is taken from Huang Shuanfan, *Language, Society, and Ethnic Identity* (Taipei: Crane, 1993), 21.

9. See Bevin Chu, "Defending Taiwan's 'Democracy,'" *The Strait Scoop* (Burlingame: The Center for Libertarian Studies, 2002), http://www.antiwar.com/chu/chu-col.html.

10. Green is the color of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the ruling party since 2000. The former president Lee, originally from KMT, formed the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) to support DPP's pro-independence cause. Hence the two parties are called "pan green."

11. The "pan blue" team includes KMT, People First Party (PFP), and New Party (NP).

12. Ft. Leslie J. McNair, "Taiwan Politics and Leadership," paper presented at the conference "The People's Liberation Army and Chinese Society in Transition" (Washington, D. C.: National Defense University Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2001), http://www.ndu.edu/inss/China_Center/Tkacik.htm.