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A FAR CORNER

A FAR CORNER

Life and Art
with the
Open Circle Tribe

SCOTT EZELL

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln & London

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Set in Sabon by Lindsey Auten.

To my father

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PREFACE

A Far Corner

Far is a relative term, based on a conception of a center. In 2002, after living and playing music in Taipei for some years, I received an advance from a local record label and moved to Dulan, a village on a remote stretch of Taiwan's Pacific coast. There, fifty miles south of the Tropic of Cancer, I joined a community of aboriginal artists, the Open Circle Tribe, and built a recording studio in an old farmhouse above the sea.

The Open Circle Tribe was acephalous and amorphous. It was anarchic in the original sense of the term, having no internal ruler or authority, no one to say what was right or wrong, no administration or hierarchy. It had no phone tree, no newsletter or list of members, or even a concrete definition of itself. It was a loose confederation of woodcarvers, painters, and musicians, splitting apart and reconverging to work on collective projects that came up periodically. These artists cultivated a living connection to their indigenous heritage, and to their ancestral landscape, while navigating the social and economic terms of the Republic of China. They were not primitive or “pure” in maintaining past tradition—they used chainsaws and drove four-wheel-drive trucks, and they never dreamed of boycotting the products of the government-run Taiwan Alcohol and Tobacco Monopoly. But within the terms of their creativity, their distance from centers of authority, and this landscape of mountains and the sea, my friends in Dulan

did not sacrifice their identities at the altar of progress, that laughing god with a stomach of oblivion.

I related instinctively to the Open Circle Tribe. I felt at home with the gift exchange nature of their social commerce, their spontaneous gestures of friendship and welcome, and their love of art as an infusion of creativity into a fluid present, rather than as some wingbone of the human social apparatus that had to be kept behind glass in a museum. Time here was an elastic continuum, distinct from the gridded fragmentation of the metropolis. We had no fealty to the hegemon. We existed within the hierarchy of the nation-state, but within this structure we lived out a desire for freedom of identity and occupation. For the Open Circle Tribe, autonomy was connected to indigeneness, an identification with place and culture, in the wake of decades or centuries of assimilation, relocation, and repression. In the previous fifty years of the Republic of China's occupation of Taiwan, aboriginals had been mostly confined to roles such as construction workers, coal miners, truck drivers, and often, in the case of women, prostitutes. I arrived in Dulan with only the desire for cheap rent, open space, and the sea, but over the period of my residence I experienced my friends' issues of identity, marginalization, and belonging, which reflected back upon my own sense of individual and cultural identity.

• • •

Dulan is a village of the Amis (Ah-MEECE) tribe, who originally settled much of Taiwan's Pacific coast. I was in my midthirties when I moved there and had first come to Taiwan to study Chinese ten years before. Because Mandarin was the lingua franca of the various ethnicities in the area, I communicated fluently with nearly everyone, with the exception of the aboriginal elders. Taiwan was colonized by Japan from 1895 to 1945, so in addition to their indigenous languages, the elders had learned Japanese when growing up. They were only exposed to Mandarin as adults, and for them it always remained a foreign language.

In and around Dulan, vestiges of indigenous culture remained, such as a belief in the sacredness of the land, an affinity for gift exchange rather than strict monetary accounting, and an oral transmission of stories, songs, and history. The Amis, Puyuma, Bunun, Paiwan, Rukai, and other indigenous peoples here did not feel they were far from anything. Rather, they were at the center of their traditional cultures and landscapes; they were home.

At the same time, these ethnic minority peoples were fully aware of their marginal social and political status. When I arrived, the population of Dulan was approximately half Amis and half ethnic Chinese. The flank of Dulanshan, Dulan Mountain, which rose behind the village, had been wild and unbroken a few decades before but was now quilted with fruit orchards and hog farms owned by Hakka farmers who had migrated from the north. A luxury resort was slated to be built by a distant conglomerate upon Dulan Point, a rocky promontory sacred to the Amis. When I went on a two-week “cultural re-establishment” trek organized by the Bunun tribe, high in Taiwan’s central mountains, we ventured into land where the Bunun were not allowed to live and hunt, though they had resided there until they were relocated to the lowlands by the Japanese in the 1930s. (Chapter 13, “Hunting with the Bunun,” is an account of this trek.)

Taiwan’s aboriginal languages belong to the Austronesian language family. Most scholars believe Taiwan was the origin of Austronesian languages, which today comprise about 1,200 of the roughly 8,000 living languages in the world. (See, for example, “Taiwan’s Gift to the World” by Jared Diamond, in the journal *Nature*.) It’s generally accepted that Taiwan was the source of the great Austronesian sea migrations from which Malay and Polynesian languages are descended, and which reached as far as New Zealand, Madagascar, Hawaii, and Easter Island. Arriving in this “far corner” of the world, I stepped into a further vector, the starting point of the larg-

est dispersion of a language group before the European conquest of the Americas.

• • •

In the introduction to his book about seventeenth-century Taiwan, *How Taiwan Became Chinese*, Tonio Andrade writes: “I decided to study Taiwan because it is a place where European and non-European colonialism met.”

I had no such perspective on Taiwan when I arrived for the first time in 1992. I loved ancient Chinese poems of nature, wine, contemplation, and letting go of social or material ambition, and I came to Taiwan to study Chinese on a friend’s recommendation, almost by chance. Tang Dynasty poets like Wang Wei and Li Bai, from the eighth or ninth century, or Tao Yuanming, from much earlier, wrote about stepping away from positions of power and returning to the essence of things (though this was usually only after they had been banished from the capital). These old exiles, writing from the margins, created bodies of work that now stand at the center of Chinese culture.

I arrived in Taiwan with visions of Taoist recluses drinking wine in bamboo groves and Zen monks cutting cats in half to prove that the world is an illusion, and I did not know the then-longest-running martial law regime in the world had existed in Taiwan until 1987. After its first, partial colonization by the Dutch from 1624 to 1661, Taiwan became a loosely administered province of China’s Qing Dynasty. It was ceded to Japan in 1895; then at the end of World War II it was handed over to Chiang Kai-shek, whose Nationalist government, the KMT or Guomindang, was fighting Mao and the Chinese Communists. When the Nationalists lost the civil war in 1949, they retreated to Taiwan and established their government-in-exile of the Republic of China, the ROC. This was a dictatorship ruled by Chiang and, after his death in 1975, by his son. Though the ROC proclaimed itself “Free China,” and received huge amounts of financial and military support from the United States, the KMT was a brutal regime that killed twenty thousand Taiwan-

ese in the course of its White Terror period, starting in 1947, in response to civilian protests to its rule. An ethnic, cultural, and political rift remains today between the different Chinese peoples of Taiwan—between the “Taiwanese” Minnan and Hakka from southern China, whose immigrations began during the Dutch period, and the “Mainlanders,” who originated from all over China and mostly came with Chiang Kai-shek in 1949.

In the mid-1990s, my fellow grad school dropout Doug and I used to go busking in Jilong, the major port of northern Taiwan. We sang and played guitars in the pedestrian underpasses of that swampy harbor city, and sailors urged us to gulp vodka as they dropped foreign currency in our guitar cases. There was no sign of Jilong’s history as a Spanish fort surrounded by aboriginal villages, or of the battle the Spanish lost to the Dutch there in 1642, forcing them back to their base in Manila. Years later when I read in Andrade’s book, “The loss of Jilong to the Dutch signaled a change in the balance of power in the Far East,” I was astounded to imagine Jilong as a pivot point of global power.

In the early 2000s a disproportionate number of the most interesting and successful musicians and singers in Taiwan were Amis and Puyuma from Taidong. This included everyone from A-mei, a pop diva whose albums sell in the tens of millions, to Chen Jian-nian and Panai, folk singer-songwriters who recorded with an independent label in Taipei. These musicians contributed to a shift of national identity, from a Chinese province at war with the mainland toward a pluralistic culture and de facto sovereign nation. From their cultural and geographic margins, aboriginal singers and artists helped transform the social center, just as ancient poets, writing from the edge of the empire, now occupy the heart of Chinese civilization.

• • •

I first went to Dulan a year before I moved there. Xiao Lu, a Puyuma bass player, invited me to drive the seven hours south from Taipei to Taidong to join a gig he was playing with his

cousin Chen Jian-nian. We wound our way up and out of the Taipei basin and back down the mountains to the northeast coast, then drove the two-lane coast highway south along the Pacific Ocean. The sea was gray and undulant beyond the fields that spread along the apron of the coast, with clouds moving over low and brooding. We drove past aquaculture farms, duck pens, and patchwork fields of corn and rice with power lines striding through. We also passed glass booths enclosing beautiful young women wearing almost nothing.

“Holy hell, did you see that?” I said.

“That’s nothing. Wait till you see what’s up ahead,” Xiao Lu said, driving onward unperturbed, cool as Danish butter.

They were selling betel nuts (*binlang* in Mandarin), a mild palm nut stimulant that turns saliva blood-red when chewed. In addition to *binlang*, these roadside stalls sold anything else you might need for a long-distance drive, including cigarettes, canned tea, and Wisbih, a bubblegum-tasting liqueur infused with caffeine. The betel nut merchants each tried to purvey a sexier girl wearing less clothing to reel in drivers as they sped down the highway.

“We need cigarettes,” Xiao Lu said.

“How can we decide where to stop?”

“It’s not easy,” he agreed. “I’ve got to concentrate on the road. When you see one you like, shout out.”

We were flying down the road and had just whipped past a blue farm truck stacked with cages of chickens when we passed a girl in a booth more seductive than any we’d seen so far.

“Stop!” I shouted. “She’s the best one!”

Xiao Lu had seen her too. He hesitated and almost jammed his foot on the brake, but grimaced and stomped the gas instead.

“They get better and better up ahead,” he said. “You can’t believe how polite some of these girls are.”

“How could they be any more polite than that? Did you see the tassels on her bikini?”

“Trust me, that’s just the beginning,” Xiao Lu said, though

he gripped the wheel hard, tendons straining in his wrists, perhaps still considering cranking us around and doubling back. As if to reassure himself, he said, “Some of them are so polite it’s almost illegal.”

However, we were out of cigarettes, so had no choice but to pull over a few minutes later. Xiao Lu swerved to the side of the road, where a girl tottered out of her booth in a miniskirt and high heels. She paused and took a half step back when she saw me, but Xiao Lu threw out a few strands of testosterone-laced banter and ordered two pouches of betel nuts, two packs of 555 cigarettes, and two Mr. Brown coffees (a saccharine brew with a caricature of a leering Panamanian on the can). He implied he might have to fight me if I even thought about making a move for my wallet. The girl wiggled back to her booth, brought us the goods, and bent far forward to hand it all in to me. Xiao Lu passed her some bills and flashed a smile, and he gunned us back onto the road.

“Man, you’re right,” I said, slamming down my Mr. Brown like it was liquid salvation. “She was extremely polite.”

“Damn it, that was nothing. You should see when they’re *really* polite. Don’t worry, we’ll try another place up ahead. Shit, did you see her face when she caught a glimpse of you? She didn’t expect to see a giraffe in the passenger seat.”

“No,” I said, “they never do.”

I’m six and a half feet tall, with gold-colored hair, and in Asia I stood chest, shoulders, and head above almost everybody. When I first arrived in Taiwan, I felt like a circus bear unicycling through a crowd. In no time I could lip-read “*hen gao!*” from twenty paces, “So tall!” But soon, as if a switch were clicked off, I simply stopped registering this physical gulf between myself and others. Only when someone called my attention to it did I recall that I was a giant in this land.

• • •

South of Hualian, the coastal mountains rose up beside the sea. The central range retreated inland, and a rift valley opened in

between. We stayed on the coast road. Xiao Lu clenched cigarettes between his teeth and spat betel nut juice out the window as he wrestled the car through the mountain curves, his arms bulging where they emerged from his embroidered vest. I reclined into his gregariousness as he told me stories of signing on to a deep-sea trawler at sixteen, ranging out as far as South Africa to strange ports he never knew by name. Below us an ocean of three blues stretched to the horizon—a milky cornflower blue gave way to periwinkle, and then to deep cobalt, all separated distinctly as if by drawn lines. We crossed the Tropic of Cancer as sunlight poured ripe and liquid from the sky and sparkled across the sea.

In Taidong the streets were caramelized with heat, glassy and dusty. We joined Chen Jian-nian on his cousin Tero's porch, playing guitars and talking about nothing. Jian-nian had won a Golden Melody Award in 2000, the Taiwanese equivalent of a Grammy, and was a genuine star, especially here in the Puyuma homeland. Tero presided over the scene with bohemian panache, pouring tea and homemade rice wine, explaining the origins and virtues of each. Men and women drove up in work clothes and rubber boots, parked their motorbikes by the chain-link fence, sat down for a cup of tea or wine or both, and joined in singing harmony on a song or two without bothering to take off their helmets, then stood up and stepped back out into the molten heat.

Jie-ren sat in the background with a Japan Railways (JR) baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, tapping along with the guitars on a hand drum. He was a music friend of mine from Taipei, the producer of Jian-nian's albums, as well as those of various other aboriginal and indie artists, and had caught a flight down for the gig.

“What are you working on these days?” I asked him.

“Nothing. I've had enough of Taipei, I'm ready to make a change.”

“Yeah, to what?”

“Chicken farming.”

“Layers?”

“No, fighting cocks. Tero offered to let me keep some cages here in the back yard.”

Hao-en, a Puyuma guitar player, had flown down from Taipei with Jie-ren.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” he said, and slapped me on the shoulder.

“I just drove down with Xiao Lu to have a look around,” I said. “What about you?”

“Here for the gig with Jian-nian, you know. And to practice dancing, my group has a performance next week. What, you don’t believe me?”

Hao-en was rotund, and had a slightly crippled foot, and seemed to think I doubted his ability to dance. He immediately folded his arms and dropped down into a squat, from where he executed vigorous dance moves, kicking out his legs as he chanted to accompany himself. Then he smiled and lifted a glass of *mijiu* to welcome me.

“That’s how we do it here,” he said. “That was a war dance. But don’t worry, it wasn’t aimed at you.”

We rumbled out into town in a phalanx of beat-up cars, cruising through the sun-strafted afternoon like ice sharks, cool and melting everywhere we went. Steam boiled up from roadside stalls, the streets were turgid with motorbikes and their blue two-stroke exhaust. We went to a music shop to buy a harmonica, did a soundcheck at the gig venue, then stopped at someone’s cousin’s restaurant, where we ate glutinous rice and roasted wild pig.

As I looked out the window of Xiao Lu’s car, Taidong appeared to me as just a far-flung provincial town, a bit bland, a bit miasmic, a bit gray and straight despite the hip wavelength of my friends. The city was a listing grid, half-heartedly

industrialized, seeming to have fallen off the map of its own consciousness.

However, I'd forgotten that *Taidong* is both a city and a county designation. Commerce, development, and population were concentrated in the city, which differed little in character from other Taiwanese urban centers, apparently slapped together with a bit of rebar and some low-grade cement. For decades the KMT defined itself by the imperative to defeat the Communists and retake to the mainland, and had therefore invested little in local infrastructure. But the broader designation of Taidong included the coast north and south of the city, and the vast high mountains inland, which were still raw and plangent with natural beauty and open space.

• • •

Our last day in Taidong, Xiao Lu and I were preparing to drive back up the coast when he got a phone call from Panai. She was a folksinger we knew from Taipei, but she came from this area, and was half Amis and half Puyuma.

"How'd you like to see the real Taidong?" Xiao Lu asked when he hung up.

"Sure," I said, "but where have we been the past few days?"

"Ah, that's just the city, man. I'm talking about the ocean, the mountains! That's the real Taidong. We're going out to lunch with Panai, then I'll show you what I'm talking about. We'll head back to Taipei after that."

We picked up Panai and drove twenty minutes north to the Feiyu Café, just south of Dulan. The café fronted the coast highway, and the back opened onto the sea. We sat in the back yard, where Feiyu, an artist from the Tao tribe on Orchid Island, had arranged driftwood logs like sentinels, standing them on end with their twists and contortions lifted against the sky. Feiyu was stocky and strong, with a round, solemn face and a long ponytail, and showed us pictures of himself in Utah wearing a cowboy hat.

“What are you doing down here?” I asked Panai while we waited for our food.

She shrugged and half-frowned, as if it were a gratuitous question. “My mother tongue is here,” she said.

Panai never said much, as if she believed most words weren’t worth speaking, and those that were didn’t need to be said. Xiao Lu and I were already weary at the thought of the seven-hour drive before us. But when we finished eating, Xiao Lu was his usual cheerful self, and said, “Okay, now I’m going to take you to a place you won’t believe.”

I said nothing and climbed in the car. We drove straight across the two-lane highway and onto a dirt road into the foothills. We wound up and up, along tongues of land, twisting higher and higher above the sea. The mountains spread green all around us as the coast receded below, till we arrived at the top of a broad bluff. We got out of the car and looked down onto the shore a thousand feet below. The ocean was a blue and purple swirl of currents, like a billion saltwater eyelids receding to the horizon. The coastal range rose behind us, lovely shapes and lines moving north in jungle-green ridges. To the south the Beinan River emerged from the throat of the rift valley and flowed out to the sea.

“That’s Dulanshan. It’s sacred to the Amis here,” Xiao Lu said, pointing to the peak behind us.

My weariness melted away. I felt lifted and liberated, at a midpoint of geologic perfection between the mountains and the sea. I felt at peace and at home, though I’d never been here before, had never even known this place existed.

“I’m going to move here,” I said, with a certainty unmitigated by logic.

“Sure you are,” Xiao Lu said. Panai just smiled and looked out to the sea.

Xiao Lu didn’t believe me, and who could blame him? This lip of earth at the edge of infinitude would make you prone to

irrational talk, and made rational talk sound crazy. Taidong was Xiao Lu's and Panai's home, and even they didn't live here—what chance, then, that I would be able to unzip from the convenient speed and opportunity of the metropolis and inhabit a slower wavelength, to choose the gentle ridges of the coastal mountains over a skyline of apartment buildings and office complexes and antennae towers? What chance did any of us have to step away from the industrial glossolalia of the modern nation-state that nobody understands but to which we all jump in time like we're skipping rope with live electric wire?

We headed down the mountain and took Panai home, then drove back to Taipei. But this landscape began to grow inside me like a seed of tranquility, spreading roots through my blood and bones, opening like a blue-green flower in my mind. A year later I relinquished my life in Taipei, moved to Dulan, and met the Open Circle Tribe on this stretch of coast I had only glimpsed once, from high atop a hill, between Dulan-shan and the sea.

• • •

The Open Circle Tribe salvaged driftwood that washed from the mountains to the sea, then back up onto land, and carved it into sculpture, partaking of this cycle of return. I learned from them and used driftwood to build the counters, shelves, and tables in my studio, as I wrote guitar music to express the color and texture of the ocean.

This narrative is an evocation of a place and community where I became at home across the ocean from my native land. Among other things, *A Far Corner* may be a long-gestated contribution to the oeuvre of the Open Circle Tribe. However, my friends might disagree that Dulan is peripheral or marginal, as the title suggests. They might say instead that there is no such thing as a far corner of the world, that every place is a center, every piece of earth is sacred, everywhere is home.