

DRIFTING FORMOSA

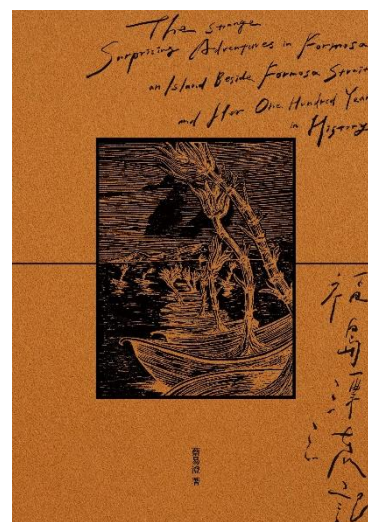
福島漂流記

What if Taiwan had joined the US as the fifty-first state after World War II? What if the 1999 Jiji earthquake had split Taiwan into four islands which each developed their own politics? These ten stories are alternate histories that each provide an imaginative mirror to Taiwan's current reality.

Cutting-edge novelist Tsai Yi-Chen re-envision the pivotal moments in Taiwan's modern history with daring imaginative twists, producing a speculative chronology that spans a wide range of literary forms and styles. Like a visionary time-machine, this short-story collection transports readers to alternate histories that nonetheless ring true to the world we know.

Brimming with the sights and sounds of a rapidly industrializing colony, "Travels in Taiwan" is a faux travelogue written from the perspective of an Englishman visiting Taiwan under Japanese rule. "Night Flow" takes the form of a ghost story, but the strange mutterings and exotic tongues heard in the night are the grievances of those dispossessed by the transition from Japanese to Republic of China rule. In "Please Close Your Eyes" Taiwan becomes the fifty-first US state at the end of WWII, and a parallel post-war history of the Asia-Pacific region unfolds. A love-letter to Formosa, "Last Case" is a detective story steeped in the paranoia and tension of a 1980's authoritarian police state.

The final story, "Drifting Apart", is the bold imagining of a Taiwan split into four landmasses by the 1999 Jiji earthquake. As the islands drift apart over the following years, so do the thoughts and worldviews of their inhabitants. In an attempt to promote national unity, short stories from across these islands are compiled into a collection: the nine preceding stories of *Drifting Formosa!* The fictional plot device of drifting islands is a powerful metaphor for contemporary Taiwan, whose citizens struggle to reach consensus on the critical issues faced by their country.



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In the classic vein of alternate history fiction, author Tsai Yi-Chen poses “what if” questions that reframe reality, constructing new perspectives on Taiwan’s past, present, and future. His meticulous handling of historical sources grounds the speculative plots and fictional characters, allowing for meaningful re-interpretations of the events that forged the real Taiwan.

Tsai Yi-Chen 蔡易澄

A PhD student in the Graduate Institute of Taiwan Literature at National Taiwan University, Tsai Yi-Chen has received numerous literary awards for his novels. After receiving support from the Ministry of Culture’s Youth Creative Fund, he began planning the ten history-based stories that became *Drifting Formosa*, his first short story collection.

DRIFTING FORMOSA

By Tsai Yi-Chen

Translated by Jim Weldon

The Journey Begins: First Impressions of Formosa

Should the opportunity present, I would heartily recommend any traveller harbouring a yen to experience the exotic customs of the Far East to come themselves and take a look around Formosa. Here, one can enjoy the assault of a panoply of varied cultures, be it Chinese, Japanese, or that of the local natives; for the traveller making their first visit to the Orient, there is no better way to step into its world of mystery and wonder. Of course, should one have already journeyed to lands such as China or Japan, here is still an excellent next destination, perhaps allowing one to savour with finer attention how the cultural mores of diverse nations have taken root in this place and begun to sprout and grow anew, to present a vista of an altogether different kind.

This is all very much connected to the historical experience of this isle. Formosa was once ruled by the Manchu Qing Empire, with that changing only very recently; it is now governed by the newly-risen power of Japan. Interesting to relate, China never seemed to set any great store in the worth of Formosa; their historical records of the isle are scanty in the extreme and they never included the place in their territorial charts. Neglect of this sort saw the island occupied for some time by rebel forces, a source of no small irritation to the then Manchu emperor, until he was able to dispatch troops sufficient to make a fist of wresting back control and at last formally establish a local administration. As we all know only too well, the Chinese bureaucracy is always marked by a great passivity, and it adopted a *laissez-faire* posture in all affairs, allowing the island to decline into a hellscape of savagery and tyranny, to such an extent that sailors were unwilling to so much as mention the island by name, fearful of running aground here to fall subject to the abuses of the Chinese soldiery or be simply murdered outright by the native head-hunters. In an abrogation of their responsibilities, Chinese officials even went so far as to profess, no doubt with a view to avoiding any associated duty of compensation, that the dwelling places of the natives lay beyond the Pale of imperial civilisation, thereby stating that close on half of the island fell outside their jurisdiction. Most other nations were left helpless in the face of such scoundrelly brigandage from the Chinese, with only a few, such as Japan, able to seek redress for their subjects by sending soldiers to attack the island natives. Although the Ching instituted a number of reforms, claiming to be about to begin regulating the natives and steadily bringing their mountain lands under administrative control, any effects were hardly apparent. Now it is Japan that exercises complete powers of government in Formosa, exploiting the very sort of rich colony they have long dreamed of owning in a manner now marked by its rigour and vigour.

The most encouraging facilitator of our happy sojourn, besides thanks being due Baron Janssen and Doctor Williams, has been the Office of the Governor-General of Taiwan, which has displayed assiduous care for us throughout. Some little while ago, I received a telegram from the Rohr Chamber of Commerce requesting I travel from Hong Kong to Formosa to assist Baron Janssen in the handling of certain matters of business. Here I must also express my gratitude to the British Consulate, whose staff provided a letter of recommendation expressing the hope that the Office of the Governor-General could look after me as appropriate during my trip, a request to which the Office of the Governor-General happily acquiesced. As I noted previously, the air of savagery prevailing in Formosa after long years bereft of any civilising endeavours has meant that few indeed have been such travellers rash enough to come to the island. On this trip, I have been treated with the greatest solicitude by the Office of the Governor-General, and it has been their hope that I might write an account of my sojourn, in the manner of a news reporter, doubtless with the aspiration that this might sweep away the dark shadows of the past and set forth how they have transformed a savage land into a fairy isle by the excellence of their governance. Here, I must state frankly that it will not be every visitor who receives such splendid treatment. If you do find your interest piqued by this place, my advice is that you repair here with all haste; once the stated aims of the Governor-General's administration are achieved, they will perhaps be less concerned with accommodating the foreign traveller.

On the second of November, the day somewhat chill, I arrived at the Port of Keelung. This was, it seems, in itself something of a rarity, Formosa being famed for the oppressive hotness of its climate, while the frequent rains of Keelung only add to a visitor's sense of stifling heat; when the trade goods of the various nations are dispatched here, they must also consider the costs incurred due to decay caused by the damp. To be able to commence my visit in such rare good weather was, naturally, the very best of beginnings. Even so, the constant gusts of cloying sea wind gave me a sense of how this port city feels after long years soaking in fine rains. Looking out, one saw how the Chinese houses rose up alongside the narrow streets, their grey walls marked with various water stains. Puddles and water-filled hollows were evident all about; clearly a heavy rain had fallen overnight and the sun only recently shown its face. The architectural style of this place was the product of its year-round damp and overcast, the sloping roofs built to let the water run off, grey-tiled eaves always extending well beyond the body of the house itself and joining together until they seemed like some mass of dark cloud lowering over the streets. The moment I set foot in the place, my fancy turned unbidden to envisioning the fresh and bracing air of Formosa's mountain districts. They were to be the ultimate objective of this trip, the magnificent primal landscapes of the uplands allowing the visitor to understand from direct experience the origins of the name The Beautiful Island.

Charged with receiving us was a fellow from the Foreign Affairs Department of the Office of the Governor-General by the name of Morita, a rather thin and weedy specimen. Just as we have come to know about the Japanese, they have a particular dedication to the most finicking details of politesse and protocol. The moment he set eyes on us, Morita proffered a polite bow, before asking us to wait a brief moment whilst he personally handled the various customs

documentation on our behalf. That done, he hurried us off to the newly-constructed railway station, where we were due to take a train that would reach Formosa's most developed city, Taihoku, in something over an hour; he showed not the slightest inclination of allowing us time to drink in the scenes of the little town of Keelung. When I expressed my dissatisfaction on the point, Morita stated, with a note of apology, that because Keelung was so frequently inundated, its streets were very rundown and there were issues with hygiene. His superiors had instructed him to bring his guests away from the place with all dispatch, though recently plans had been set in motion for a renewal of the urban area. Compared with the shame he clearly felt talking about the as-yet unfinished new street facades, Morita was much keener to tell us all about the newly-instituted north-south cross-country rail line, and he was interested in hearing our views on it too. I thought it a very fine thing, though of course still much inferior to the railways of Britain. We were, however, in Asia; so having a train one might take at all was already most impressive.

Morita did his very best to show us that side of Formosa where progress has been at work, efforts that did not go to waste. I must state in all truthfulness that, among all the cities of the Far East I have visited to date, Taihoku is the one that has made the deepest impression upon me. When one steps out of Taihoku Railway Station, it is hard to avoid having one's gaze captured by the three-storey edifice of the Railway Hotel, sporting a Mansard roof of the type so common in Paris and with a most imposing portico serving as its entrance. The red brick with white decorative striping is entirely after the fashion of Norman Shaw, putting me at once in mind of the Savoy Theatre in London. If one turns back at this point, one finds the railway station has adopted the same design: black tiles, red brick and white stone, seemingly modelled after Amsterdam Central Station, while leaving out the overly ostentatious Gothic ornament. It could be described as a plain copy in miniature.

Any mention of a city inhabited by the Chinese will most likely not evoke thoughts of cleanliness and good order, but the reforms instituted by the Japanese have achieved just such a thing. Morita took us on a tour of an ordinary leisure and entertainment district, its arrow-straight streets lined to either side with buildings in the traditional Japanese *washitsu* style. There are theatres dedicated to the performance of Japanese-style stage plays, and work is due to be completed next month on a public market, which will then go into operation. Everything appeared exceptionally neat and orderly. There were none of those dark and gloomy districts where chaos breeds here; an excellent drainage system keeps the streets free from puddles, and there is no call to spend all one's days fretting over problems of health and hygiene such as malaria. I imagine this is connected to the solemnity and nervous disposition of the Japanese. Their militarised governance means they find no impediments when it comes to the business of tearing things down, allowing them to carry out programmes of renovation on a grand scale. As well as demolishing the old houses in the Fukien style, at the same time they tore down the wall of the old city and its great west gate, not even sparing the tombs. They display not one iota of softness in either intent or methods when treating with the Chinese inhabitants of their colony, yet they have set this city on the road to development in the shortest order.

It is the colonial rulers who determine the overall demeanour of a conurbation. Compared to the Japanese, we British are somewhat more enlightened, having more of an eye for freedom of trade and commerce, and less exercised by any desire to assimilate our colonies. Although Hong Kong is neither so neat nor orderly as Taihoku, it has a vitality and is a city of much greater enthusiasm. Of course, if one's object is to experience the mysteriousness of the Orient, then I would suggest Taihoku as the better choice. In Hong Kong, after all, the Western faces all around and the familiar sounds of English can only serve to spoil the mood. By contrast, in Taihoku one is sure to experience that same sense of shock and wonderment that struck Lafcadio Hearn on first arrival in Japan – how exquisitely delicate everything seems, as if one has landed in a Lilliput. Now, as the denizens blink at you with their long narrow eyes, appraising the man from foreign parts with curious gaze and whispering in one another's ears in their ancient tongue, their speech unfamiliar and their writing like so many arcane sigils, you truly do experience the sensation of having set foot in a strange land.

Morita had arranged accommodation for us in a high-class Japanese-style hostelry that catered specially to foreign travellers. Although I was greatly interested by the newly-opened Railway Hotel, its palatial exterior was a faithful reflection of the cost of staying there, not something within the means of the average traveller. That said, our rooms in a Japanese-style hostelry did not come cheap either. The cost of a night's stay here would suffice to pay for four or five nights' accommodation in Shanghai. On first hearing, that might seem excessively expensive, but it is no easy matter to find a hotel room that meets Western standards of hygiene when in the Far East. I am sure no-one would be willing to stay in the rooms of the Chinese, who go such a long time between baths, the sort of places that even have chamber pots or bedpans, the thick stench making it absolutely impossible to get a good night's sleep. As anyone would agree, such times when travelling are not the best moments to be experiencing the local culture, especially the sort that will likely make you ill. And of course, looked at another way, to be able to experience a genuine traditional Japanese hostelry in the course of one's visit to Formosa can only be no bad thing. The hostelry was apparently translocated wholesale from Japan; its wooden beams and supports, the tatami floor mats and the sliding doors all exactly as one would find there. I suppose they spent most of their money on preservation; after all, in such a hot, damp island clime, preventing termites boring into the woodwork is no simple affair.

As soon as I had my luggage stowed as it should be, I headed downstairs to the bathhouse, to avail myself of the pleasures of a good long soak. The hostel maids were most attentive in their duties, showing me how to make use of the various bathing accoutrements, and cautioning me to be careful of the discomfort that might arise should the water be too hot. I wrapped myself in a bath towel and set to studying the lovely *ukiyo-e* woodcut on the wall, a mist-wreathed white crane standing perfectly still, yet seemingly come alive before my eyes. After a little while, I decided I would come out of the hot water and sit with my legs crossed in meditation, wishing to sample that Oriental notion they call Zen. It was something I had learned previously from temple monks during a trip to Japan. They say to do such can bring inner calm and relax the body, and moreover, bring a man to a state of realisation of the emptiness of all things. I copied the posture just as I

had been shown, and while I can hardly be said to have achieved so rarefied a sensation, it still went some way to aiding my relaxation, allowing me to shed the weariness attendant on a long time spent shipboard.

I mention here in passing, that a visitor from foreign parts might feel they lack for any privacy here. This has always been the case, something to do with the locals' Oriental cultural mores, which appear bereft entirely of any concept of personal space; the sliding doors of the rooms are for the most part left half open. Another part of it is how infrequently they have the opportunity to set eyes on foreigners here. While in the bathhouse, I encountered two Japanese guests. They first fled the room in panic, then proceeded to hide behind the door, peeping out from its cover to watch me. Any lady or gentleman who would find such behaviour especially objectionable would be best advised to give additional consideration before visiting, otherwise such vexations will make any enjoyment of their travels impossible.

A Trip to the South Gate Factory and the Chinese Quarter

The main reason for my visit was a commission from the Rohr Chamber of Commerce to assist Baron Janssen in his evaluation of the produce of the colony. Thirteen years previously, prior to the Japanese taking over governance of Formosa, the vastness of its natural resource endowment had attracted the commercial combines of many nations to invest, in tea, in fruit, in cypress wood, in animal pelts... one would be hard pressed to lose money trading here.

Yet once jurisdiction over Formosa transferred to Japan, that all changed. Traders were obliged to sign new commercial contracts; those signed previously with the Chinese government no longer counting for anything. For the lucky ones, the new prices reduced earnings somewhat but remained within the bounds of the acceptable. The unlucky not only failed to get new agreements, they also faced the possibility of any and all facilities built with earlier investment being taken over by the Japanese. Take the example of the Rohr Chamber of Commerce; they had previously been engaged in the camphor trade, investing in camphor stills in the mountainous parts of Formosa, yet as soon as the change in regime occurred, these were banned from operating with no recourse to any law. Although, after protests from the governments of many nations, the Japanese temporarily extended the deadline on camphor production, they did ultimately adopt a monopoly policy, taking all camphor into compulsory state ownership, leaving no room whatsoever for any involvement by the foreign commercial combines.

What can one say? Although Japan's progress towards civilisation has advanced far further than the Chinese, displaying more of the sense of responsibility of a civilised nation, they have also begun to show no little ambition. Over the past decades, they have been reforming their nation through the application of science and reason, aspiring to catch up with the West and to assuage a fragile national pride hurt by the forcible opening of her ports by the Black Ships. They felt the need to show their worth by going and taking something, by conquering somewhere – I imagine the connection between self-esteem and ambition manifests as something of this sort. As

their first colony, Formosa represents an ideal opportunity to prove that they can be as powerful as the Western nations, so the adoption of a monopoly policy as a means of displaying their sovereignty is perhaps only to be expected. Yet in their pressing anxiety to prove themselves, they committed the most basic of errors. Not long after the monopoly policy came into effect, because there had been no harmonisation of the price for camphor between Formosa and Japan, the two places began to cut prices in fierce competition, failing entirely to achieve the enormous profits from high prices originally envisaged with the introduction of the monopoly. One can only say this has been a terribly bungled colonial policy.

As newcomers to colonialism, the Japanese did experiment with a variety of methods to avoid the failure of their monopoly regime. Although the price for camphor was always set by the Office of the Governor-General, when it came to the most important business of selling the stuff, they turned still to the commercial concerns of the older colonial powers to take it into those foreign markets with which the Japanese remained unfamiliar. Such services had formerly been furnished by the Samuels Company of Great Britain, but late last year the Office of the Governor-General terminated their working agreement with the company, the business of selling their product now to be undertaken by their own Japanese people. They seemed very sure of themselves, believing they already knew how to work the European and American markets and hence no longer in need of the assistance of a foreign enterprise, able to now conduct a thoroughgoing monopoly of all aspects of the camphor trade. This self-satisfied approach combined with overweening ambition, to the surprise of absolutely no-one, once again ended in abject failure. In the first half of the present year, the price of camphor saw a precipitous fall, meaning the Office of the Governor-General made enormous losses. This was of course the result of a meticulously-planned act of commercial revenge by the Samuels Company, deliberately flooding the market with a glut of cheap manmade camphor and product from Ching China, supply far outstripping demand, so indirectly forcing the sale of Formosan camphor at a ruinously low price.

Because of these losses suffered in the first half of the year, word is going around that the Office of the Governor-General intends to correct its mistake at once and return again to working with a foreign commercial partner in the sale of its product, so that Formosan camphor can scale again the heights it once attained. Of course, the Office can hardly restore collaboration with the Samuels Company it treated so cavalierly, which has made a number of other commercial concerns eager to get involved, including the Rohr Chamber of Commerce, despite its earlier fall from grace. From what Baron Janssen has said, their hope is that a dazzling success in the field of sales will stand proof of their experience and wisdom as veterans at the game, and be sufficient to convince the Office of the Governor-General to correct another still earlier mistake, permitting foreigners to once again engage in the manufacture of camphor on the island. With this in mind, the first visit of my trip was made to the Monopoly Bureau in the company of Baron Janssen, where we also took a tour of the camphor factory built by the Japanese.

My companion Baron Janssen, as a result of his commercial endeavours, has had dealings with the Japanese over many years, yet he has none of the tourist's enthusiasm for an exotic nation,

viewing them rather with the exacting eye of the man of business. The Baron showed no courtesy at all to the man Morita assigned to accompany us, and was forever demanding he handle every sort of finicking paperwork on our behalf, to make the formalities required for us to visit the Monopoly Bureau as simple as possible. Baron Janssen is a critic of the etiquette of which the Japanese are so proud, claiming that it is nothing more than cover for a bureaucratism differing in no wise from that of the Chinese. Thanks to the Baron's forceful approach, we soon found ourselves meeting officials of the Monopoly Bureau face to face, discussing possible collaboration in a number of future commercial endeavours.

The Monopoly Bureau was much like any other place of official business, with little there that was novel or interesting, but this was far from the case when we came to the camphor factory; for most people, the process by which camphor is extracted remains something very unfamiliar. The full formal name of the factory is the South Gate Factory of the Monopoly Bureau of the Office of the Governor-General, having formerly been known as the Taiwan Camphor Monopoly Manufacturing Works. After the Office of the Governor-General instituted its monopoly system, the year before last an opium processing factory was constructed alongside the existing camphor works. Rumour has it that the opium factory employs a special secret recipe, handling all its own production and sales; so that they might rule the Chinese with their addiction to narcotics, the Japanese, with no drug-taking habits themselves, took only a short time to come up with their own method for making the stuff. I expressed an interest in visiting the opium factory but was of course refused, I imagine at the behest of the Governor-General's Office itself. They seem to see the manufacture and peddling of narcotics as something very shameful, and are unwilling to let any foreigner get up close. The South Gate Factory stands close to the headquarters of the First Infantry Brigade of the Taiwan Garrison; with such an important military site just next door, it is plain to see how great is the importance the Governor-General attaches to the economic value of this factory complex. (Although Baron Janssen did say to me it is also likely because this district was never built up by Chinese immigrants). The whole process by which camphor is made involves tipping crudely-finished camphor brought down from the mountains into distillation vessels, then in the great heat and steam of the factory, the camphor that arrived as granules much like sugar is processed in the distillation columns to produce respectively camphor cubes of fine crystals and oil products. The enormous metal distillation columns vibrate due to the great pressure within, filling the factory with bursts of roaring noise that instantly elicits a sense of the highest admiration for our modern industrial civilisation that one would struggle to put into adequate words.