

The Invention of the Global MFA: Taiwanese Writers at Iowa, 1964–1980

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In 1961, C. P. Snow wrote: “Of all the small towns in the western world, I suppose Iowa City is by now the best known among writers” (“State Department Notes”). Paul Engle, the director of the Iowa Writers Workshop (IWW), took pride in that recognition. By now, the rise of creative writing in the US, the IWW’s vital role in that process, and the broader transformation of US writing through such programs have become well known to both scholars and writers. In his influential analysis *The Program Era* (2009), Mark McGurl argues that “these programs are the most original production of the postwar period, its most interesting and emblematic—and yes, increasingly hegemonic—literary historical transformation” (31). The MFA has arrived, and the story of its emergence commands attention. But this story has another important yet overlooked aspect that concerns the MFA’s historical relationship to world literature.

Engle’s ambition for Iowa City went beyond being merely the most famous small town in “the western world.” If, by the 1960s, Engle had achieved great success with the IWW, he had also grown eager to test the limits of the MFA concept. Could the MFA shape the development of not only US literature and the literatures of the English-speaking “Western world,” but also the entire globe? As he proudly declared to a friend: “My ambition is to run the future of American literature, and a great deal of European and Asian, through Iowa City” (“Letter to Virgil,” 31 Oct. 1963). That same year, after a nine-month trip to Asia, Engle envisaged building a

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new program that annually invited dozens of authors from around the world to study creative writing in Iowa City. The International Writing Program (IWP) was born.

Engle asserted a wholly salutary vision for the new program: to build what he calls, in a documentary on the IWP, a “community of the imagination” enabling foreign writers to live in the US and learn about its culture (*Community*). But the invention of the IWP quickly assumed a specific ideological cast. Like many academics of the day, Engle strongly endorsed anticommunism and a view of international diplomacy now known as “modernization theory.” He believed that developed nations, such as the US, could help postcolonial countries, particularly in East Asia, still emerging from the wreckage of World War II, attain higher levels of economic and social prosperity through the reception of technology and Western values. For Engle, the IWP could directly contribute to this transformation. Exporting ideas about how to write well, alongside new factories and TV stations, would help elevate standards of living in places like Taiwan, bringing such nations closer to the US fold of modernity. Or so the theory went. Here Engle’s twofold aspirations for the Iowa MFA seamlessly blend together. In first imagining the impact of creative writing to extend internationally, he lent a distinctly cultural impetus to the broader political project (one embraced by numerous US academic institutions, and the University of Iowa especially) of spreading democracy around the globe. By articulating the purpose of the IWP in these ideological terms, the more belletristic goal of turning Iowa City into a center for world literature took on greater prestige and significance. The US State Department certainly saw Engle’s project in these terms and gave a tremendous amount of funding to the IWP. As Eric Bennett has recently argued, the story of the IWP is thus also a story about Cold War US empire.

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In practice, the IWP operated through a specific pedagogical mechanism. It differed from the IWW’s curriculum in targeting foreign students who came from developing nations often at threat of falling to communism. On the one hand, these students were typically already established authors, often eminent, and thus did not require so much explicit teaching. On the other, the IWP believed that these students needed to be *socialized* into an American way of being, one that embraced core US values of modernity, so that, once they returned to their home countries, they would spread the gospel of democracy and individual freedom. Specifically, foreign students at Iowa had to be taught *empathy*—a social scientific buzzword that Engle took from his friend and colleague Wilbur Schramm, a proponent of modernization theory and a founder of communication studies in the US. Learning activities at the IWP, informal as they

were, focused on inculcating students with an empathetic disposition. The hope was that such students would embrace this disposition in their writing and that the literature they produced at Iowa and beyond would manifest this quality. For Engle, this pedagogy constituted the backbone of the broader plan of modernizing Asia. Many of the students in the 1960s and 1970s came from Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan—all postwar Asian developing nations. Thus, the invention of the IWP is also a story about socialization and pedagogy, and how this pedagogy came to take on global implications.

This essay reconstructs the early history of the IWP to tell the story of how a group of US and Taiwanese writers implemented the vision of creative writing at the global scale. That story brings together three distinct strands of scholarship: the history of postwar US fiction and literary institutions; studies of Cold War culture, also known as “the Cultural Cold War”; and the field of world literature. Each strand is refracted here through the other to produce new insights about each field. The history of the IWP, for example, complicates Pascale Casanova’s claim in *The World Republic of Letters* (2004) that Paris historically has embodied the world’s literary “Greenwich Meridian,” its center of cultural capital. Engle’s project was to leverage geopolitics to wrest cultural authority away from France and toward the US. At the same time, this history illuminates the international stakes of the rise of postwar US fiction and creative writing. If this rise was, in part, a story about the training of young American writers at colleges, that story also came to involve writers from around the world.

1. Creative Writing as Global Network

In 1963, Engle traveled first to Hong Kong, and then Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, to find writers who might also be potential students. Previously, he had communicated with the Rockefeller Foundation to create a program to lure foreign writers away from communist nations. Engle and the Rockefeller Foundation deemed countries such as Taiwan important to this goal: as newly decolonized nations, they were potentially open to the “American way of life” yet were susceptible to communism given their proximity to China. In 1962, he corresponded with a US Foreign Service agent, Richard McCarthy, who had recently recruited the distinguished Chinese modernist author Eileen Chang to work for the US Information Agency in Hong Kong, one of a number of contacts that McCarthy brokered in East Asia.¹ Despite the Rockefeller Foundation’s strong preference that Engle remain free of State Department involvement, archival evidence indicates

that Engle received significant government funding during and after the program's early efforts. In the words of John Richardson, "The Department of State has enjoyed a special relationship with the University of Iowa through collaboration in the International Writing Program established and directed by Paul Engle" ("Letter to Paul Engle," 7 Jan. 1977). Engle's trip to East Asia initiated this "special relationship."

While in Taiwan, Engle met a female Chinese novelist, Nieh Hua-ling, who had moved to Taiwan during the Communist rise to power on the mainland. Since her arrival, she had helped to launch a nascent modernist literary movement as both the author of distinguished short stories and a college instructor of writing. The two fell in love, and Nieh moved to Iowa City in 1966 to live with him. She and Engle shared a passionate vision of creating a "community of the imagination" in which writers from across the world could meet and share ideas, thus transcending the rigid political borders that characterized the Cold War era.² Such a vision was highly romantic: it mirrored back the story of their own meeting and partnership as friends, lovers, and collaborators. An idealist rhetoric suffuses their earliest attempts at creating a mission statement to pitch the idea of an International Writing Program to potential donors. In a letter to Michael Novak, Engle writes: "This Program represents in my mind such a congenial environment as the Renaissance humanists found when they went from one country to another, always finding a friendly group, always communicating through the common Latin language, translating each other's work, finding a person's mind more important than his nationality" (19 Aug. 1966). In follow-up statements over the decade, Engle grows even more emphatic: The program is "an imaginative community." It is "people, not idea or word only." It makes a "group with common understanding" ("Why International?" 1).

In assessing such statements, we might explore two strong ideological dispositions shaping Engle's vision of a global writing program. The first is Engle's vigorous anticommunism; and in the context of the University, he was comfortable rooting out former and current partisans and sympathizers. In a letter to Virgil Hancher, the Iowa president in 1953, he writes:

I note that that the House Committee is preparing to investigate college faculties. I wouldn't want any members of the Communist Party teaching my children, but you can be sure the probe will extend far beyond party members to catch all those who were unwary enough to have been involved in any group which the communists, in their sinister way, had infiltrated. (6 Jan. 1953)

To be fair, it's possible that Engle merely uses this rhetoric to play to the administration to gain support for his programs. Engle was well known as a savvy administrator who was not above deploying popular forms of rhetoric to solicit financial backing from the University. However, here Engle *volunteers* to extend the university's plan to identify communist faculty at Iowa. When we read his personal letters (where he does not necessarily need to make an administrative appeal) over the next decade, we find that he repeatedly pledges himself to anticommunist endeavors.³

Engle's commitment to anticommunism helps to explain his specific interest in postcolonial East Asia—again, Taiwan in particular—as a primary site to build a global version of the MFA. As he opines in a travel report to Asia: “It seems to me especially important that we should do what we can to convince the young writers of the world, now so heavily favorable to left wing attitudes, that we honor the mind in its freedom, and that certain conceptions of this country as uncultured and as hostile to the artist are quaint and unreal” (“Proposal for Travel” 1). It is precisely in such developing countries as Taiwan, located at the border of socialist regimes, that there exist legions of young people inclined to leftism. Engle views his work as convincing them that the US “honors the mind in its freedom” in a way that China does not. The IWP will teach them to have “good will for [the US] and our ways” (“Proposal for Travel” 2). In doing so, the IWP would help the greater political cause of erecting a bulwark against the spread of communism, once these writers returned home after graduation. By the 1960s, Engle’s concern with containing communism at the campus level had assumed global dimensions, and he became preoccupied with containing communism in Asia especially.

Engle’s anticommunism coordinated with a second ideological disposition that strongly influenced his imagining of the IWP: modernization theory. A keyword that consistently appears in his writings from this period is “communications.” For example, Engle writes: “What concerns the IWP? The power, the importance, the imaginativeness, the reality of global communication in the late twentieth century, necessary not only for its human relevance but perhaps for our simple survival” (“Proposal—A Program”). The use of this term, particularly as affixed to “global,” is far from incidental, for Engle is tapping into the zeitgeist. After World War II, communications analysis arose as a significant new area of academic and government research. The explosion of new forms of media, such as the radio for propaganda purposes, like Voice of America, and television, along with increasing availability of data regarding social behavior, prompted a wave of studies focused on the effects of such media on personal interactions. Previous academic research

into propaganda and mass psychology folded into a new “Communications Studies,” which government and higher education were eager to fund. Understanding how large aggregates of people could be better persuaded and organized via the broadcast of signals would, in the eyes of many, improve state efficiency and, ultimately, better government.

The ideas of one particular scholar—the widely touted “Father of Communication Studies,” Wilbur Schramm—obviously shape Engle’s invoking of communications. A former professor of English at Iowa, Schramm was the original founder of the Iowa Writers Workshop and became friends with Engle through that work. In 1948, he handed over control of the Workshop to Engle to focus on his research in the new field of communications. One standard narrative is that after Engle took over, the IWW shed whatever first design Schramm had imparted onto the program, including any incipient social scientific ideas about communications. This is likely true of the IWW, yet the IWP appears to dovetail quite strongly with Schramm’s emerging ideas about the political power of communications, especially in the international context, in the 1950s and 1960s. Engle and Schramm remained friends, and Schramm continued to work at Iowa through the 1950s, building the nation’s first Department of Communications. Engle’s ideas of broader understanding through communication often resonate with his predecessor and colleague. Specifically, Engle believed that literature allowed people from very different parts of the world to share their experiences, and thus become mutually known to each other, even if geographical distance made it physically impossible for them to have direct contact.

Consider Schramm’s most important theory, which came to constitute an important column in the broader edifice of modernization theory. Many communications scholars, such as sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, argued that, against the postwar deluge of data facing ordinary people, the purpose of this field was to develop methods to organize this wave of information and transmit it coherently to the public. Schramm put a somewhat controversial spin on this idea by implementing it in the “developing” world. Like Engle, Schramm sought to test the utility of his theories in regions deemed important to the state and its geopolitical strategy.

In 1950, he traveled to South Korea to examine the effects of different forms of propaganda on ordinary subjects, from which research he developed a formal theory of communications in the decolonizing world. While countries like South Korea required capitalism and industry to “modernize,” they also needed new modes of communication to socialize properly into modernity. Specifically, Schramm held, they had to develop the capacity for “empathy”—the

ability to comprehend ways of living and thinking highly different from their own:

The mass media can widen horizons. . . . [The media] is a liberating force because they can break the bonds of distance and isolation and transport people from a traditional society to the “Great Society”. . . . One reason why this is important for any developing country is that it helps to develop the quality of empathy . . . by bringing what is distant to near and making what is strange understandable, [the media] can help to bridge the transition between traditional and modern society. (127–29)

Here Schramm iterates core precepts of modernization theory—the importance of “transitioning” out of “tradition” and so forth—but puts a novel humanist twist on these otherwise economically oriented theses. Before people in East Asia can benefit from factories, they must learn to think in a new way, with a new transformative power.

Engle builds upon this framework to valorize literature as the ideal mechanism for this process. His rhetoric of “the power, the importance, the imaginativeness, the reality of global communication in the late twentieth century” is a clear nod to Schramm (“Proposal—A Program”). Yet Engle finds in literature an unusually rich capacity to do the work of teaching East Asian people to understand other cultures and to communicate with them better. He wrote in a letter to Novak: “What we deal with is the human vision; not printed texts only, but the visionary minds which produced those books. This is especially important for reaching the majority of our people who come from underdeveloped or primitive parts of the world, the bulk of . . . Asians” (19 Aug. 1974). Schramm had identified radio and movies as essential to modern communications. For Engle, books offer a “vision” or innate power that exceeds its nominal media form, a power unique to creative expression. This ability, he suggests, is best suited for the hard task of “reaching” non-Western individuals.

Ultimately, Engle sought to build a “global network” of writers joined by their experiences at the IWP. This “network” would help to instantiate Schramm’s idea of a “Great Society,” which brought developing and developed parts of the world into a domain of shared communication. Engle writes:

Gradually we are building up a global network of information about cultural life in all parts of the world, if not in all countries. They [IWP alumni] advise us on writers to come, on new publications, on political events—we even have ways of receiving

information which might jeopardize the writers in authoritarian countries. . . . To our knowledge, this “network” around the world at the level of literature and communications is the only example. (“Proposal—A Program”)

Engle took most pride in this network’s capacity to effect a form of world diplomacy, and a form of cross-cultural understanding, never seen before. This massive literary network would broker communication among ordinary people in different nations: “[This network] is unprecedented in the history of international relations, which are almost always governments talking to governments” (“Letter to David Rammesnv,” 1 Mar. 1976).

Engle’s frequent use of terms such as “communications” and “networks” indicates his embrace of a social-scientific and applied-practical disposition. Over time, he grew quite comfortable working with corporations, often leasing out services such as translation. Engle writes: “The whole range of human communication should be taken as the objective of translation. . . . American companies with branches in foreign countries can be encouraged to support such translation projects” (“Rapporteurs’ Notes” 1). Yet this commitment strengthens rather than attenuates the idealist aspirations of the IWP. Engle’s likening of the program to “Renaissance humanists” is not random, insofar as he imagines the IWP as not only serving to create a global network of literature, but also as representing its center, the place where the values and goals of that work are first articulated and developed. It is at Iowa City, he believed, that writers have created a new common language, the basis for a new republic of letters: “we have found how to communicate among the globe’s babble of languages” (“Proposal—A Program”). If, in an earlier age, the world communicated via Italy through the work of Renaissance humanists and, more recently, through Paris, then in a new age defined by technology and modernization, the world will communicate—and literature will assume its core form—in Iowa. Indeed, Engle proudly kept in his personal records the following newspaper quote: “[Writers] compare it to Paris for Hemingway in the 1920s” (*Congressional Record*).

Engle’s plan to construct a “literary network,” of course, resonates with the US state’s broader project of waging (what Frances Saunders has dubbed) a “Cultural Cold War,” which took as its mission “nudg[ing] the intelligentsia of Western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism towards a more accommodating view of ‘the American way’” (Saunders 1). Saunders notes that the “centerpiece” of this project was the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), a cohort of anticommunist US writers and intellectuals who carried out this “broad campaign of

persuasion.” According to Bennett, the Fairfield Foundation, an organization with ties to both the CCF and CIA, was listed as an IWP donor in 1967 (112). In an important sense, we might think of Engle’s literary network as extending the work of the CCF into the Pacific world.

2. Lessons in Empathy

McGurl describes the intensely demanding Workshop environment in the 1960s. Writers were subjected to a scrutinizing “communal gaze” that compelled them to develop mastery over their craft: “Discipline meant obedience to rules, and rules were established and maintained by institutions” (135). One expected outcome of this process was that the student, through such rigor, would develop a literary voice that, even if it were marked by regional tics, operated within a more “educated” mode that spoke broadly to national and international audiences, and ultimately facilitated upward social mobility for the student. In this way, institution and subject were joined by a quest for cultural capital and prestige. One may think of the IWP as simply modulating this pedagogical template for students who happen to be foreign, yet the IWP required a different apparatus: students from East Asia, such as Bai Xianyong, were in many cases already established authors and teachers of creative writing themselves. More than simply to teach its students how to write better, the IWP had to teach them how to imagine the world differently. The program specifically sought to convey to its students the importance of cross-cultural “understanding.” What its students lacked was the capacity to comprehend the life experiences of people very different from themselves. This, Engle argued, was the key to becoming a modern subject. Here his view of “understanding” directly lines up with Schramm’s theory of “empathy.” The IWP had to develop a pedagogical apparatus to teach this key concept.

Engle’s relationship with and recruitment of Nieh Hua-ling to Iowa laid the foundation for this apparatus. Nieh met Engle in Taiwan in 1964 and moved to the US that same year to complete her MFA degree in fiction, though it may have been specific political pressures that drew her to Iowa City. Nieh, who grew up in China and held personal ties to the Guomindang (GMD), immigrated to Taiwan in 1949 to avoid the communists. In Taipei, she joined the burgeoning modernist scene, which was in part organized through National Taiwan University’s department of foreign languages. She published several volumes of short stories and became an editor at *Free China*, a magazine focused on writing and liberal politics. She also taught creative writing and literature courses at the university.

Although the GMD was initially sympathetic to modernist-liberal intellectuals, they had started to crack down on open political discourse by the early 1960s, and several friends of Nieh's went to jail. Divorced and a mother, she grew terrified and needed a way out. Iowa was her escape.

Engle and Nieh founded the IWP in 1967 and worked together to formulate its first curriculum for non-American students. The meeting of Iowa and writers from developing, “at-risk to communism” nations seemed to be an intuitive match. From Engle’s view, the IWP promised foreign writers a chance to “catch up” with modernity and a freedom of expression not available in communist nations. From Nieh’s perspective, Taiwanese writers would be drawn to Iowa because it represented a chance to study modernist techniques. She argued that Maoism on the Chinese mainland and, now, GMD authoritarianism in Taiwan chilled the creativity of young Chinese-language writers: “The individuality of the writer is in conflict with his society. The writer is dying as an artist” (“Problems”). Taiwanese writers were hungry for new forms of expression, particularly ones that represented an alternative to socialist realism. Engle’s contact in East Asia, Richard McCarthy, echoed this sentiment: “What they [East Asian writers] want and need the most is help in learning and practicing the techniques of modern fiction. They can’t get it here [Asia] . . . they want access to foreign [modernist] models” (“To Engle,” 2 July 1962). The IWP curriculum would precisely focus on teaching “foreign models” of literary writing to non-Western students.

In a comprehensive account of Taiwanese literature after World War II, Yvonne Chang offers a more panoptic view of the rise of modernism amongst young Taiwanese writers in the postwar years. Nieh and colleagues such as Bai Xianyong and Wang Wenxing launched a literary modernist movement in the 1950s and early 1960s. The movement clearly drew from Western models, valorizing concepts such as the autonomy of the artist, the innate self-referentiality of language, and the rejection of traditional modes and hierarchies of writing. Broadly speaking, the Taiwanese embrace of modernism reflected a general interest in US liberal democracy and a desire to emulate it in order to catch up with the rest of the world. Other, more specific factors, however, complicate this otherwise straightforward narrative of dissemination and assimilation. For example, the island’s long historical experience of colonialism, and the felt experience of exile for ex-mainland writers, deeply conditioned their reception and articulation of modernism. Nieh discerned in modernism’s tropes of alienation a style commensurable with her own condition of geographical and psychological displacement. Dual vectors of US influence and colonialism/exile in East Asia

equally determined the emergence of “Taiwanese modernism” in the 1960s. I return to this point later.

Engle and Nieh developed a distinct pedagogy to satisfy this interest. The IWW invented the writing workshop; the IWP developed “co-translation workshops.” The primary work taking place at the IWP was not necessarily creative writing or the training of writing but “co-translation.” This process, for Engle and Nieh, entailed two writers, one familiar with the original language of the text, the other familiar with the target language, who translated the language of a piece of writing through a back-and-forth process of discussion and revision. This work is intimate: “[the co-translation] team discuss[es] every word and every line” (“Rapporteurs’ Notes” 18). What results is a “co-imagination” between the two writers, simultaneously engendering an act of communication through the text itself (“Co-Translation” 7).

To illustrate this process, Engle and Nieh wrote a document that transcribes the minute-by-minute labor of co-translating a Chinese poem into English. This text is populated by a meta-dialogue between them to indicate the challenges and gains of doing this work. It is both a lesson in and an example of communication. Consider the following exchange between Engle and Nieh over a text:

ENGLE: But in English, *rouge* is not a very pleasant word. We are dealing here with a classical Chinese convention. Do we keep the translation faithful to that, or do we try to make it faithful to the late twentieth century, as [Ezra] Pound would have done. Why not make a new interpretation?

NIEH: We aren’t dealing with the twentieth century, but with the imagination of a tenth century poet writing within the images of his time. Now, let’s compromise by trying to be clear to this century, but remain loyal to the poet in his century. (“Co-Translation” 8)

The text is the mediating object between two writers. Each comes to it with a clearly defined cultural disposition: Engle’s modernism, Nieh’s classical Chinese. They reach a compromise through the animating force of the text itself: it possesses an immanent imagination that (it is claimed) transcends the parochial preferences of both, and thus compels cultural synthesis (Nieh: “let’s compromise”). What starts out as an example of US cultural hegemony (Engle’s heavy-handed attempt to assert Pound as a model of translation) transforms into a moment of reciprocal contact. Engle accedes to the poem’s imagination; in doing so, the text brings him closer to Nieh.

Co-translation models a form of socialization in which writers from “primitive” parts of the world, through their interaction with

US writers, learn to exchange ideas and “communicate.” According to Engle, the work of co-translation means balancing “three voices”: Nieh’s voice (the Chinese translator), his own voice (English translator), and the voice of the original tenth-century Chinese poet (“Co-Translation” 1). The co-translators must learn not only to respect the other, but also to inhabit the worldview of each. Anything short of this represents a form of imposition and a lack of “compromise,” as Nieh says. The finished translated poem (which concludes the essay) embodies the outcome of this labor, the material residue of two minds, separated by time as well as culture, melding. Engle and Nieh advance co-translation as a model of cross-cultural understanding. Literature brokers the process. In simultaneously engaging the text, the two writers meet each other. Both become, in the end, better socialized to understand different kinds of people and thus are able to communicate across cultural divides. Engle proudly declares: “co-translation may become co-living, on which our survival depends” (“Co-Translation” 10). Also: “contrary to many who say that translation is distortion, we believe that the problems of getting through to others can be solved” (“Language to Language”). Co-translation exemplifies a new form of communication.

The anticipated outcome of co-translation is a specifically socialized type of person, someone capable of profound “understanding.” In this way, Engle and Nieh’s pedagogy resonates with Schramm’s theory of “empathy” as the basis for modernization. Co-translation as pedagogy—its use of literature as a platform to meet the thoughts of a person different from oneself—performs this work of empathetic induction, perhaps better than any other cultural medium. For Engle:

The remarkable thing [about co-translation] is that communication takes place not only at the level of direct statement but also at the intuitive level. This means that it’s really possible for writers, who regularly use their own language symbols, images, intense summaries of ideas and emotion, to understand each other, even if their English may not be perfect. Out of many different social and political systems, they reach understanding. (“Proposal for a Three Year Grant”)

Engle uses “understanding,” Schramm “empathy,” but their meaning is the same. If Schramm theorizes the use of media as inducing empathy, Engle argues that it is literature that most effectively does this work. As a measure of the enduring influence of this notion, consider that, for the current director of the IWP, Christopher Merrill, the “IWP depends upon empathy. Think of the IWP as an essay in empathy” (“Only Connect”).

The IWP's vision of empathy resembles the Cold War period's broader rhetoric, what Christina Klein has dubbed the "sentimental discourse of integration that imagined the forging of bonds between Asians and Americans both at home and abroad" (16). Popular writers, such as James Michener, echoed the efforts of Washington policymakers to imagine a world in which Americans become friends with Asian people and integrate themselves into local Asian communities. In his novels, Michener becomes a "conduit for the flow of empathy from his readers to his characters; he becomes an intermediary, or medium, who can make available to the reader the thoughts, emotions and life experiences of a young Japanese woman" (Klein 131). With the IWP, we find the reverse process: if the goal of Michener's writing is to teach Americans how to empathize with people in Asia, the purpose of the IWP is to teach non-Western people simply how to be empathetic. They converge in their shared commitment to stir the flow of "empathy" between the US and East Asia.

3. Free Indirect Discourse Will Set You Free

Between 1966 and 1979, more than 80 writers from East Asia came to the IWP. Of this group, more than a dozen were Taiwanese, including several distinguished authors like Bai Xianyong and Wai-lim Yip. Engle and Nieh intended to train these students to be "modern" by teaching them how to adopt a specific literary voice. Acquiring this voice would continue the work of the co-translation workshops by enacting "empathy." Specifically, they believed that the literary style known as "free indirect discourse" represented an ideal—perhaps *the ideal*—mode of discourse within narration, and that the use of this mode demonstrated that the writer was fully modern. Free indirect discourse (FID) is narration in which the voice of the narrator blends with the characters' voices, a technique made famous by Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, and Henry James. It is often marked by the absence of quotation marks when reporting the thought of a character, thus making unclear the distinction between narrator and character. McGurl has described the importance of FID to the IWW curriculum as a model of expression that encouraged the mobility between different points of view, some conflicting. This model allegorized the bigger project of postwar cultural pluralism, which brought different identity groups into dialogue. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the IWP sought to adapt this pedagogy. As a first step, co-translation taught its students how to pivot between different cultural positions and understand the worldviews of those very different from themselves. As a next step, writers would enact this acquired capacity for empathetic understanding in their writing.

Tracking the direct transmission of FID is difficult. Unlike the IWW, the IWP did not have formal reading lists that outline the exact literary techniques that students were supposed to learn. Also, when one reads the personal accounts of the IWP from writers who studied there, they rarely talk about such technical matters; typically, these accounts are merely personal and celebratory.⁴ We do know, however, that IWP writers were strongly encouraged to read and study the masterworks of writers, such as James and Virginia Woolf, who also regularly employed FID. Furthermore, we know that the IWP invited living masters of the form, like John Updike and Margaret Walker (whose *Jubilee* [1966] particularly evinced the use of the technique), to live with IWP students for weeks at a time, and show them various tricks of the fiction trade. So perhaps the best way we can track the impact of learning FID is by reading some of their writings. It may even be that students did not necessarily consciously embrace FID in class but perhaps *unknowingly* assimilated it just by spending a good deal of time within the IWP environment.

To that end, I focus on a cohort of Taiwanese writers who were among the first to travel to Iowa City in the mid-to-late 1960s, a group that includes Nieh Hua-ling, along with colleagues from her time in Taipei, such as Bai Xianyong. As part of the expanding modernist scene in Taiwan in the early 1960s, these writers, even before arriving, were already drawn to such modernist techniques as FID. But in analyzing several of their texts produced during and after Iowa, we can see how their work particularly exhibits this signature technique, and for reasons associated with the experience of displacement, temporal and/or geographical.

These Taiwanese writers were deeply influenced by the May Fourth “enlightenment” movement. One could argue that their interest in FID represents a postwar continuation of the forms of literary innovation that flourished in China through this movement in the 1920s and 1930s, an era that scholars typically view as defined by the Chinese assimilation of Western texts and ideas. The importation and translation of major Western novels—such as *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Ulysses* (1922)—inspired Chinese writers to experiment with and adopt new aesthetic forms. Elly Hagenaar argues that new writing techniques already existed in nascent form in Chinese letters before the May Fourth movement (34–49), yet the surge of interest in Western culture in the 1920s helped to accelerate the embrace of FID and other related styles. A number of prominent writers, such as Mao Dun, turned to FID in their writing, but the interest in modernism in China was short-lived. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Chinese writers assumed more politically engaged forms of writing. Thus, for Chinese writers who fled the Communists in 1949 and moved to Taiwan, FID represented the

continuation of an eclipsed May Fourth tradition outside of the nation. It also signaled an ongoing interest in the West as a site of aesthetic inspiration and innovation. The charm of FID was that it was both anti-Maoist and pro-American.

In what follows, I read a series of stories written by Taiwanese writers who studied at the IWP in the 1960s and 1970s to track the use of this form. We can start with Nieh's book of short stories from the early 1960s. Although she wrote them before she came to Iowa, they were translated into English by the State Department as *The Purse* (1959), and came to represent the ideal type of story to be written by IWP students. Fifteen years later, Nieh proudly held the stories up as an ideal form of IWP authorship.⁵ Perhaps the most prominent of these tales is "Old Lady Gao's Weekend," which takes place after the war in Taipei and describes a generational conflict between Old Lady Gao, a member of the older prewar generation, and her children, Wen-ting and Wen-chi, who belong to the Cold War era and embrace Taiwan's increasing Westernization. Lady Gao is grumpy, complaining that her children are inadequately filial. The children humor their mother, spending their time reading Western novels such as *Anna Karenina* (1873–77). At first, Lady Gao appears as a laughable figure, but as the story develops, the text reveals hidden qualities of thought and complexities of feeling otherwise obscured by the story's plot. Gao has endured a deep melancholy for years. The death of her husband 15 years ago, more than the context of generational difference, renders her unable to speak to her children—or any other person. The story penetrates into Gao's mind to expose this trauma and, as it does, Gao begins to understand herself and the reasons for her own inability to communicate and feel connected to others.

In the story, FID marks this transformation. While the first three-fourths of the story are written in a fairly straight realist style, heavy with dialogue, the final quarter shifts into a more modernist mode, deploying FID to move deeper into Lady Gao's mind and report what she thinks. The trigger for this sequence is Gao's increasingly intense and forlorn memories of her deceased husband. Once her children leave the house, she is alone with her thoughts and a rich stream of FID starts to course through the text: "She thought of her dead husband. If he were still here, would they still be husband and wife?" (*Wang Danian* 16, my translation). This sentence represents a standard example of FID. It begins with a clear omniscient narrative perspective of the protagonist thinking ("She thought . . .") but then rapidly moves into the subject's mind, presenting a report of reality emanating from the character's own consciousness ("would they still be husband and wife?"). The first sentence belongs to the narrator; the second sentence, to the character. The

text uses a common tactic of FID—the use of interrogative or exclamatory markers (“?”, “!”)—to indicate that the reader is in the character’s mind. The rapid shift between narrator and subject creates a basic confusion for the reader as to who is speaking in the story. Discourse exists somewhere between narrator and character. This is FID in action.

The obvious purpose of this method is to render Lady Gao sympathetic to Nieh’s intended reader: young Taiwanese readers of the postwar generation. The gap separating Gao from her children also separates her from the reader. The more that she scolds her children, the more she appears alien and unfamiliar to the reader. The use of FID, however, reverses this movement. The reader can travel into her mind and find her remembrances of her husband and how she feels about him: human and relatable. Her exclamations such as “Would they still be happy together?” may well become the sympathetic musings of the reader too. Thus does Gao’s personal tragedy take on a deep affective resonance. Scholars of FID, from Dorrit Cohn to Mieke Bal, describe its use as deeply linked to the production of readerly sympathy for the character who exists within that narrative mode. As Bal contends, “the two speakers [narrator and character] . . . are technically equal, [and] are assigned different opportunities to gain the reader’s sympathy” (71). The reader draws closer to Gao. If she previously seemed cranky and a caricature, she now comes alive as human, with real thoughts and feelings. Not only is the gap between narrator and character closed by making them equal; the abyss between character and reader is also overcome by this process.

This story valorizes empathy as the desired outcome of fiction, whether for reader or for protagonist. While at the story level, the text posits a clear social problem—war has traumatized a generation of Taiwanese people, creating a communicative barrier between that older generation and the younger one—and proposes a solution at the level of form. FID allows the anticipated reader, who belongs to the younger generation, to understand Gao’s trauma, making that trauma now legible and coherent.

“Old Lady Gao’s Weekend” articulates a general model of writing for IWP students. Bai Xianyong largely adopts this model, even as he modified it in several key ways. Specifically, although their stories also articulate a general state of trauma or alienation for their protagonists, the source of that trouble is imagined in geographical rather than temporal terms, and thus the text’s use of FID as its “solution” is altered as well. Like Nieh, Bai Xianyong grew up in China, fled to Taiwan after the rise of the Communists, and helped to launch the modernist scene in Taiwan in the 1950s. Like Nieh, he traveled to Iowa City at Engle’s behest, where he

flourished. Best known for his collection of short stories, *Taipei People*, which he published after his time in the US, he also wrote several short stories at Iowa (1963–64), which index the force of the IWP's pedagogy upon his writing.

Take for example “A Day in Pleasantville.” This story describes a Taiwanese couple who immigrated to the US and now live in a plush New York City suburb, populated largely by polite, outgoing white people. Weicheng, the husband, has come to love the US and has deeply assimilated into its culture, although Yiping, his wife, cannot adjust to her new life, and is alienated from her home and neighbors. Worse, she is alienated from her own daughter, who has taken more after Weicheng and adores US culture. In this story, geography embodies the trauma that afflicts its main character. To Yiping, Pleasantville appears affluent and clean, but ultimately is deeply impersonal and cold: “Pleasantville’s like any big-city suburb, designed by an architect who must have learned his style from hospital operating rooms” (184). Compared to her well-adjusted husband and daughter, Yiping is portrayed as old-fashioned and intractable, a bored housewife who cannot appreciate US modernity. Thick descriptions of her neighborhood—“Their street connects the small hill of the neighborhood with the highway that runs into New York City, and of course, their street is quiet, wide, and clean” (185)—overwhelm the narrative, eliding any report of interiority or thought that might emanate from Yiping’s mind.

Yet much like “Old Lady Gao’s Weekend,” by the story’s end, the narrative suddenly embraces the use of FID to peer into Yiping’s thoughts in order to rearticulate what initially appears as social banality as a deeper form of psychological affliction. While much of the story is told in thickly descriptive language that attends to the anti-septic surfaces of suburban life, there now arise key moments in which the author deploys FID to reveal, rather than obscure, Yiping’s alienation:

So between five and six every day, Yiping’s train is crawling. The housework’s all been done, the electrical gadgets are all switched off, dinner’s ready. What’s there to do? She’ll sit for a minute and smoke a menthol, stand up and take a taste of her ox-tail soup . . . move them there—no, move them there—well . . . move them back.⁶ (*Bai Xianyong Xiao shuo Xuan* 198)

The passage begins in traditional third-person narration (“Yiping’s train is crawling”), but then rapidly transitions into an account of her mind. The interrogative statement “What’s there to do?” clearly marks the movement into FID, while the next several clauses, after a brief move back into third-person narration that describes Yiping’s

physical posture, travel even deeper into Yiping's mental state. The back-and-forth of "move . . . move," combined with ellipses and dashes, indicates a strenuous staring into interiority. Yiping, previously rendered as unimportant or boring, reappears here as sympathetic. Modern life, while so convenient, is nonetheless full of strange objects to perplex her. She is alienated by this environment and is not quite sure what to do in her own home. Her suffering afflicts all migrants who are suddenly uprooted to a new world that valorizes odd, unfamiliar things.

As with Nieh's short story, FID provides the "solution" to the problem posed in the story's content: the problem of trauma and alienation induced by the postwar effects of migration and displacement. What initially appears as comically awkward to the reader—the trivial problems of daily life—is rendered, through FID, full of significance. Again, empathy emerges twofold: First, it is the empathy between the anticipated modern reader and the character who appears as cranky and old-fashioned; second, the empathy that the author of the story himself develops for his own character. By seeing how strange the US appears through Yiping's eyes, Pleasantville begins to feel strange to us, the modern reader, as well.

Yet the manner in which FID solves this situation does not remain stable for this cohort of writers, as the work of Lin Huaimin, another Taiwanese writer who came to Iowa City to study creative writing, exemplifies. Unlike Nieh and Bai, Lin was born in Taiwan and came to Iowa in the early 1970s, later than the first wave of East Asian writers, though his writing, in many ways, even more forcefully embraces FID. Consider "Homecoming" (1975), a short story he wrote while at the IWP that mirrors the narrative setup of "A Day in Pleasantville." Highly autobiographical, it details the last days in Taiwan for a young writer, Chen Chihou, as he prepares to leave for the US. Chen spends his days seeing his friends and family for a final time, but his heart is already in the US, and he finds himself alienated in these meetings. He finds it hard to communicate with those who were once close to him, as they do not understand what it means to leave home and embrace the idea of claiming a new one. Chen's position is opposite of Yiping, but their afflicted states are similarly animated by the challenge of geographical relocation.

The story's narrative shape, as it builds to a climactic use of FID, fits the pattern laid out by Nieh's and Bai's short fiction. The cause of Chen's aloofness from his family and friends is a mystery until the final pages, which reveal the precise reason for his unpleasant behavior. The author mobilizes FID to do this work:

Chen Chihou raised his head. The moon was a plain roundness, pale, with light shadows on it. Thinking that a few days later he

would see the same moon in America, a smile came to his face.
 And he would meet Weiwei in Chicago . . . New York!
 Chicago! San Francisco! O, America, I'm coming! Dear
 Weiwei, my little darling. . . .⁷ (*Chan* 227)

At last, the reader peers into Chen's mind and begins to sympathize with his otherwise patronizing behavior to those he cares about. Chen conflates his desire for Weiwei, his lover, with his desire for America. He does not disregard his family; he simply wants to see his girlfriend. He does not despise Taiwan; the US merely represents both an erotic locus and an opportunity for personal fulfillment. He is misunderstood by family and friends in Taiwan, and until the story's end, by the reader too. Once again, FID arises to make visible that which otherwise cannot be clearly expressed.

But there is an important twist here. As this passage develops, it becomes clear that the narrative uses FID partly to satirize Chen as well as to make him seem more sympathetic. His thoughts on Weiwei, and thus the US, grow obsessive and ridiculous ("O, I simply can't wait to see you, to touch your hair, you. . . .") until the space of his thoughts transforms into a space of fantasy. To underscore the lack of substance in this fantasy, FID quickly becomes comical. Grand thoughts of romance and love turn into the trivial realization that he has run out of ink: "Goddamn it! Out of ink!" (454). Here the text finds recourse to another common function of FID—as Cohn describes, "to throw into ironic relief" the "false notes" struck by a character who has exaggerated or misread the reality of his or her life situation (117). The use of FID as a mechanism to induce empathy in the reader for Chen's situation is still present, but it exists in tension with moments of "ironic relief" elicited by that same method. The "problem" posed by the story is the same one we find in "A Day in Pleasantville," even if the FID solutions have changed.

Nieh, Bai, and Lin are joined by a shared aesthetic interest in FID, particularly as it relates to a common thematic interest in social alienation. But even within this fairly small cohort of writers, we can discern an evolution of style: Bai shifts Nieh's thematic interest in temporal trauma along a geographical axis, while Lin shifts Bai's interest in FID as inducing pure empathy to one also capable of eliciting irony. These writers may have all experienced the trauma of exile that afflicted so many East Asians after the war, and they may have all come to Iowa to study creative writing, but they adapted what they learned there, especially FID, to the particularities of their lived situations, even if those situations might be summarized as "postcolonial." If we were to read the stories of other East Asian writers who studied at Iowa and embraced FID, such as Wang Meng, Wang Wenxing, and Richard Kim, we can detect further mutations.

Yet even as we see the evolution of this method among IWP writers, its basic presence is constant. And while we should keep in mind that the IWP of course was more than just Engle, and its students came from all over the world—including Latin America and Africa (not just East Asia)—the IWP’s early years were dominated by Engle and Nieh’s influence; they invented a distinct model of writing, which a group of Taiwanese writers helped to materialize, that has proven enduring. To this day “empathy” remains the IWP’s watchword. As scholars continue to write the history of the MFA and its effects on both US and world literatures, this is an important, perhaps burdensome, origin story to keep in mind.

Notes

1. See Richard Jean So, “Literary Information Warfare: Eileen Chang, the State Department, and Cold War Media Aesthetics,” *American Literature*, vol. 85, no. 4, 2013, pp. 719–44. for a detailed account of this story.
2. This was an expression frequently used in materials of the IWP and took on a formal “branding” with the making of the film *Community of the Imagination*, a documentary made about the IWP, funded by the CIA.
3. See for example “To Charles F. Schwep,” 30 May 1960, Box 4, Folder “From Paul Engle, 1958–1964,” MsC 514, where Engle, unprovoked, launches into an anti-communist tirade to his good friend Schwep.
4. See for example Yip (1999).
5. See “Introduction” in Nieh (1980).
6. I relied heavily on Fitzgerald and Hsu’s translation in Bai (1981), which I find excellent, though I have tweaked several words.
7. I have relied heavily on Lin’s own self-translation in *Chan* (1973), though I have made a few small changes.

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