

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Amanda Ming-Yu: “in the beautiful country”

Amanda Ming-Yu · Friday, March 19th, 2021

### **a note on the poem.**

*A couple of years ago, I watched this movie for the first time, Taipei Story (1985).*

*The movie is gorgeous and sad. We follow two former schoolmates who consider leaving for America as they run out of options in a rapidly Westernizing and modernizing Taipei.*

*In one particular scene, a character describes a level of upward mobility afforded to East Asians in the US, and recounts an incidence of violent anti-blackness. This observation struck me as being incredibly ahead of its time for a film nearly 4 decades old.*

*But what’s more is that I was certain the LA-adjacent neighborhoods that our characters wanted to live in, back in 1980’s Taipei, were my very own.*

*And so it felt as if I was observing a time capsule, watching the events that would compel the wave of mass migration that would make the San Gabriel Valley what it is today.*

*And the time capsule, in turn, had also foretold how much progress there was yet to make.*

*Now, from a Los Angeles bracing for change yet again, I write from the future to these characters, in agreement with a line that can be translated as: “America is not the answer.”*

*This poem, together with the film and Gene Luen Yang’s 2006 graphic novel, American Born Chinese, form an informal syllabus.*

*The title of this poem comes from the literal translation of the name we give the US in Mandarin—“the Beautiful Country.”*

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### **in the beautiful country**

2019, Highland Park.

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the line is practically out the door. in the brief walk from the yoga studio to the pizza spot, you watch all the brightly-clothed bodies against the beige wood.

in a neat, inoffensive, and unremarkable sans serif font, a menu offers noodles and dumplings.

you would never eat here. imagine living in the San Gabriel Valley and leaving to get your fix of dumplings and noodles.

you watch all the people in the restaurant. there was something startling about this after growing up to comments about MSG and cats and dogs, and nobody knowing where Taiwan is on a map.

oh, y'all like Taiwanese food now? you take a bite out of your pesto pizza slice. name 5 Taiwanese people.

—

2002, the San Gabriel Valley.

it used to be that everyone would gather around a television the way you might a fire.

*there are ways to talk about things without really talking about them.*

Taiwan has Indigenous peoples, but you never hear about them unless a Mandarin-speaking variety show invites them on to sing and dance.

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1999, the San Gabriel Valley.

on Saturday mornings, you wake up to the gentle ticking of the wall clock inching towards the afternoon, and your grandmother back from the donut shop.

back in the old country, your grandmother would walk to and from home to her two jobs as a nurse, stopping all the while to chat with villagers.

in the US, your grandma would never walk further than the donut shop or grocery store, for fear she would get lost and there wouldn't be a soul to help her.

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2019, Highland Park.

a man rests in his work truck in the evening. a car pulls abruptly to the side of the road and parks. a stranger walks to the middle of the street and stands there. the man locks his doors for his peace of mind.

after I get a satisfactory picture of the bright, hand-painted mural of naranjas on a truck, I get back in my car and leave.

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2019, Echo Park.

*here, I could say that Asian people do not necessarily feel kinship upon the sight of each other. not Mainlanders at the sight of Taiwanese people, not Taiwanese people at the sight of me.*

*instead, I will gladly report that one Christmas Eve, I saw a group of 4 men speaking to 2 young Korean ladies from overseas. and, to the displeasure of the men, who wanted to take girls who barely speak English out drinking, I convinced the girls to stick together and go get some rest instead.*

—

2020, Downtown.

your phone lights up: be careful.

you always wonder if anyone would miss you if something happened.

you and a friend visit her brother while you're in downtown.

you don't remember much about him. just that, one summer, as your friend was nursing your broken heart, he came into the room to talk to his sister. and, as his eyes followed the tips of your toes to the end of your shorts, he got real quiet. I didn't know we had company, he said.

you don't like anything everyone's drinking, so you sit on a couch and address someone sitting on another couch.

how's your night going? you ask.

it's not done yet, said the stranger. by the time I'm done, my eyes are gonna look like yours.

you smile because you'll never see him again. maybe you'd be upset if you didn't know people said things like that. but you knew.

for him to say that to you, you think. I must be like a white girl to him. maybe worse.

at one point, your friend's brother catches you alone and tells you to flash him for the hospitality. you make a face. he insists. you roll your eyes and lift up your sweater. he is no longer interesting to you.

before you both leave, your friend orders delivery. Happy New Year! you say to the driver.

Happy New Year! where are you from? he asks.

my parents are from Taipei, you say. how about you?

Hong Kong, he responds.

you've always wanted to visit, but it's been a long day, and you've suddenly run out of Mandarin. Happy New Year, you say again, brightly.

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later, you and your friend link arms and rush down the steps to the getaway car.

as you pass some drunks coming home, you scream at them: Happy Lunar New Year!—and you make them scream it back at you.

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