

Modern Monsters / Death and Life of Fiction

MODERN MONSTERS



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In ancient China, there was said to be a monster called *Taowu*, a creature that looked like a tiger but had “a human’s face, a tiger’s feet, a pig’s teeth, and a tail as long as eighteen feet.” Aside from its vicious nature, *Taowu* was known for its power to see the past and the future, so as to make the best of its own life. From such origins, *Taowu* went through various incarnations over the centuries, to the point where it became identifiable with humans of evil inclination and, more intriguingly, with history itself. Since the seventeenth century, the meaning of *Taowu* has taken on yet another dimension: as a fictional account of history.

The metamorphosis of *Taowu* from monster to historical *and* fictional account, while indicative of the amorphous power of the Chinese imaginary, points to *one* way in which history came to take its form. In view of the incessant outbursts of violence and brutality from one generation to another, one has to ponder: Could history be regarded as both an embodiment and an indictment of monstrosity? If so, to what extent has the contemplation of history entailed insight as well as indifference? This paradox becomes all the more poignant in modern times, when monstrosity has assumed an unprecedented multitude of forms. Particularly in view of the massive scale of violence and pain that Taiwan and the rest of the world have undergone over the past few centuries, one senses that the line between understanding and complicity has never been so difficult to discern.

The mutual implication of history and artistic representation, to be sure, has always motivated human creativity. But never have we seen such a moment as we have in modern times, when official history has been so dictated by the ideological and institutional machines as to verge on make-believe, and representational art so arrested by a desire to reflect the past *and* future as to appropriate the functions of traditional history with respect to facts.

The monster *Taowu* is invoked because it is a mythopoetic figure deeply ingrained in the Chinese imaginary. The monster is known both for its ferocious nature, multiple incarnations, and divinatory power. In classics such as the *Shenyi jing* (The Classic of the Fantastic and the Strange), *Taowu* is described as a creature which “looks like a tiger, with hair two feet long.” *Taowu*, however, became identified

with human evils as evinced by accounts in the *Zuozhuan*, *Shangshu*, and *Shiji*. It is said that Prince Zhuangxi's son, Guen, was of such wayward nature that he earned himself the monstrous name of *Taowu*. Together with three other evils of the time, this human *Taowu* was tamed and exiled to the frontiers, where it would scare away ghostly mountain spirits of the *Qimei*—only evils being able to withstand other evils.

Even more pertinent to our concern is the fact that *Taowu* was known for its power to see the past and the future, so as to make the best of its own life. As scholars have noted, in the Xia, Shang, and particularly Chu mythological traditions, *Taowu* appears to have been a creature with divinatory power, and it was therefore worshiped as a tribal totem. Because of its ferocious nature and mysterious visionary ability, *Taowu* was made one of the guardian creatures of the imperial tombs in the Chu region. Most significantly, somewhere along the way *Taowu* acquired cognitive identity with history itself. One finds in *Mencius* the following statement:

The *Sheng* of the Chin [Jin], the *T'ao U* [Taowu] of Ch'u [Chu], and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* of Lu are the same kind of work ... and the style is that of official historian.

As the *Zuozhuan* indicates, thanks to its fiendish nature *Taowu* compels the ancients to “remember and recount [their] wickedness so as to take precaution.” In other words, the monster was invoked as an “objective correlative,” so to speak, to the human account of bygone experience, registering that which is immemorial and yet unforgettable in Chinese collective memory, and cautioning against any similar mishaps in the future.

My genealogical foray into the ancestry of *Taowu* culminates in a modern Taiwan connection. In Taiwan in the fall of 1957, the émigré mainland Chinese writer Jiang Gui (1908–1980) published a novel titled *Jin taowu zhuan* (A Tale of Modern Monsters). This novel chronicles Communist activities in a small town in Shandong Province from the twenties through the forties, and it culminates in a macabre riot costing hundreds of lives. For Jiang Gui, the function of *Taowu*, or history, is to “record evil so as to admonish.” He sees in the image of *Taowu* a

liminal zone where the inhuman and the human mingle, a region that is politically and morally anomalous. Jiang Gui is not the first writer to equate fiction with *Taowu*; he derived the idea from a late Ming novel, *Taowu xianping* (An Idle Commentary on Monsters, 1629) by Li Qing (1602–1683). Moreover, an early Republican writer Qian Xibao incorporated the term into the title of his novel *Taowu cuibian* (A Compendium of Monsters, 1916). Still, as Jiang Gui would have it, at a time when history is dominated by ideological camps, it is fiction, not history, that serves the function of recording evil so as to admonish.

Jiang Gui's fictional invocation of *Taowu*, though based on his diasporic experience in Taiwan, can be brought to bear on far more complex experiences and representations that the world has undergone. Two hundred miles southeast of mainland China and sparsely populated before the sixteenth century, Taiwan had traditionally been regarded as on the margins of the margins of Chinese politics and culture. It would nevertheless serve as an unlikely pathway through which China entered a succession of global modernities. Between the sixteenth and the late nineteenth century, when China was undergoing a final dynastic cycle and settling into an increasingly confused stagnation, the island had already diverged onto a fateful path of its own. It was alternately inhabited or dominated by ruthless pirates, scheming exiles, venturesome settlers, Ming loyalists followed by Qing pacifiers, to say nothing of Dutch and Spanish colonizers. In 1895, Taiwan was ceded to Japan, as a result of a Chinese defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War. Over the next five decades, Taiwan became Japan's most treasured colony and a testing ground for Japanese cultural and political assimilation. In 1945, at the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan was returned to China; but then, reverting to its traditional role, Taiwan became the refuge of the Nationalist government after the Chinese Communists took over the mainland in 1949.

Thanks to these experiences, Taiwan constitutes a contact zone where conflicting legacies, impulses, and ideological forces are brought into play. Taiwan was first forced into its "modern" existence at the turn of the twentieth century, when Japan initiated its colonial regime. The next five decades were to see, in both cultural and political spheres,

strenuous conflict and compromise between colonial discourse and indigenous consciousness; between modern viewpoints achieved via Japanese mediation and revolutionary thoughts brought back from China; between fascination with the novelty of a colonizer's culture and loyalty to Chinese tradition. Taiwan was both the "Island of Beauty," or *Formosa* as early foreign explorers saw it, and the "Orphan of Asia," as viewed by Wu Zhuoliu (1900–1976), the pioneer of post-1945 Taiwanese literature. So Taiwan came to illuminate an entire array of modern issues, ranging from postcolonial critique to oppositional cultural politics, from hybrid modernity to the circulation of cross-cultural capital—issues that concern us even today.

Through the prism of Taiwan, we come to appreciate the anomalous and polymorphous nature of *Taowu* anew. We recognize that though the professed goal of history lies in leading virtue to the exclusion of evil, the act of historical writing is made possible ironically by the continued accumulation—inclusion—of that which is immoral and therefore excludable. This historical vision generates its own antithesis: insofar as its moral *telos* holds true and valid in the long run, history, as a narrated account of bygone events, performs its function negatively, as an agency revealing vice, waste, and anomaly.

*Taowu* has been associated with monsters, outlaws, the historical account of evil, and the fictional representation of that historical account; it now takes on the form of various artistic projects. Through the multitude of representations of the monster, we find ourselves imagining past inhumanity in the hope of a future in which such inhumanity can scarcely be imagined. And yet at any fold in time we may come to realize that without the imagination of past violence, we are unprepared to recognize it in its future incarnations, and for this reason all modernities bear the imprint of primitive savagery. Walter Benjamin's statement resounds: "There is no documentation of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

A monster haunts the human struggle for self-betterment. How to come to terms with this monstrosity by way of teasing out its hidden divinatory force remains a task as urgent in our millennium as it was in ancient times.