

## Shawna Yang Ryan discusses her novel Green Island

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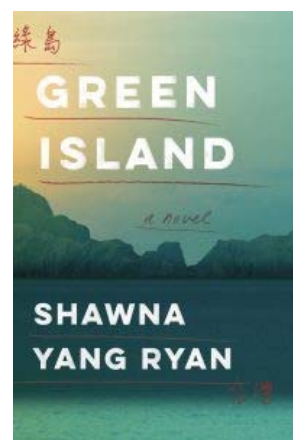
Shawna Yang Ryan 楊小娜 published her second novel [Green Island](#) in February 2016. Her first novel *Water Ghosts* was published by Penguin Press in 2009. She teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, has published widely and was the 2015 recipient of the Elliot Cades Award for Literature for emerging writers. She is on Twitter at [@shawnayangryan](#).

In this discussion with Paul Farrelly, Ryan talks about the process of writing *Green Island* and the importance of history in understanding Taiwan.

*Green Island* is the story of a family struggling to deal with the consequences of the father's arrest and imprisonment during Taiwan's period of Martial Law under the KMT 國民黨 government (1949-1987) and the rapid changes the country underwent as it transitioned to democracy after 1987. With the characters going from Taiwan to the United States and back again, the saga spans almost sixty years and presents a confronting view of life on the island.

Two events loom large in *Green Island* and appear in this discussion: The 228 Incident 二二八事件 and the White Terror 白色恐怖. The 228 Incident occurred on 28 February 1947, just two years after Taiwan's incorporation into the Republic of China. Following the now-infamous beating of a woman selling black market cigarettes, there were nation-wide clashes between local Taiwanese and government security forces, leading to a brutal crackdown on Taiwanese activists and their supporters. The Executive Yuan 228 Incident Working Group estimated that 18,000-28,000 people died at this time. The 228 Incident served as the catalyst for the KMT's declaration of Martial Law in 1949 and the almost four decades-long period of political oppression, police surveillance and strict censorship that followed, popularly referred to as the White Terror.

For a review of the novel, please read Mark Harrison's [Ways of remembering – Green Island](#).— The Editors



**Paul Farrelly:** You spent over a decade researching and writing *Green Island* and mentioned in an interview that you considered writing it from the perspective of different characters. During this process you must have collected a variety of resources – what were they and how did they influence the ultimate form of the novel? What were some of the other perspectives you considered and why did you settle on the final structure?

**Shawna Yang Ryan:** Writing and research was a back-and-forth process. A bit of research to get a framework for the story and get started, then once I started writing, I'd realise I wanted to head in a certain direction and would need to research that topic more deeply. That subsequent research would suggest other possibilities for the story. And so on. For a while, I was overwhelmed by the possibilities. In the earliest drafts, I had a character who was a Shanghai starlet who had come to Taiwan as the lover of a KMT officer because I was interested in performance, the glamour of the that Shanghai film era, and the idea of being a collaborator by way of sex. That character took up glove puppetry, and I found myself taking lessons with Li Tian-lu's 李天祿 son, and then with a pi-li puppet performer who carved his own puppet heads. A few drafts later, I was interested in animism, and wanted to use that premise to cover as much of Taiwan's history as possible, so, for example, I had a section narrated by a camphor tree in the centre of a dispute between the British and the local community, another about the indigenous souls enshrined in the Yasukuni Shrine, one by a woman forced into sex work during World War II, and all of it pulled together by Matsu's 馬祖 recurring narration, who was coming in and out of the text. There was a lot going on!

Going through all these wide-ranging drafts allowed me to travel through a lot of Taiwan's history. And once I'd gotten such a wide perspective, I was finally able to narrow the narrative down to the timeline I ended up with. In the end, I settled on this structure because I had finally chosen the constraint of one narrator and one lifetime, and a time period that allowed me to touch on much of what I ultimately wanted to. Who knows—perhaps the camphor tree will make a return in another book!

PF: I am sure that the camphor tree, or any other of those perspectives, would make for an equally interesting context for the novel. It is interesting that you mention animism and Matsu as I noticed how religion appears at various stages in *Green Island*. For instance, the newly arrested prisoners spend a brief period in a Matsu temple and desperate for news of her arrested husband, the narrator's mother sceptically visits a fortune-teller. Later she and some other family members become enthusiastic Christian converts. The narrator even studies yoga in the Bay Area in the 1970s! Given the political power that frequently undermines the main characters' agency, it seems that religion and the supernatural was important in helping them negotiate and understand these difficulties. Would you agree?

SYR: This is a really interesting question. For the narrator's mother, for sure, religion is a coping mechanism. Overall, I was interested in the place of religion culturally, thinking about the ways it was woven into the daily lives of my friends and family in Taiwan. In some ways, it felt like observance was less about religion and more about ritual. I also wanted to illustrate how diverse religion is in Taiwan, how it doesn't seem to be strictly segregated, how one might be Christian but still bai-bai 拜拜. Like a lot of Taiwanese culture, it feels hybrid.

PF: The hybridity of religious practice in Taiwan is certainly evident in *Green Island*, especially in the tomb-sweeping scene towards the end. I am also interested in how you created the everyday life of the characters, beyond the religious aspect (such as clothes, food, world view). Here I thought you captured some of the hybridity and tensions that have underpinned cultural life there over the decades. What challenges did you face when creating this historical Taiwan (and did you come across any particularly helpful resources)? Likewise, you also depict some of the complexities of the Taiwanese migrant experience in the USA, both politically and domestically. Was it difficult to link these two worlds together?

SYR: Luckily, I had rich resources. I had people's personal stories, and because life works in just that complex way, where the political and domestic are naturally intertwined, all I had to do was be true to their experiences. I also had my mother's experiences to draw on. She had me when she was very young, and not long after she had immigrated, so when I was old enough to be aware of that kind of thing, she was still having experiences that I think are very typical for immigrants. So I drew on the negotiations, the struggles, the micro-aggressions that I saw her experience. Perhaps too, I was able to slip into that fictional consciousness because I feel that I've inherited some of her anxieties about being not-white in America. There's all this dialogue now about how we carry the traumas of our foremothers, and I definitely feel it.

Historical Taiwan was a challenge in a different way, but I also felt more freedom because there are fewer people who remember that era, so I was responsible for more world building. As long as it was plausible, and mostly true, I could cast my own tone over it because it no longer exists in living memory. Historical Taiwan exists as a sort of triangulation of texts, so I had to write myself into that conversation.

The hardest part overall was capturing the right tone of each era. Details are one thing, but what did it feel like? Absolute fidelity doesn't necessarily mean that it feels true. I think we've had that experience in nostalgia movies, say, about the 70s or 80s. They get all the visual details right—but a little too right, to the point that it feels cartoonish. Some important nuance is lost. And that was the challenge—to capture that nuance in the feeling.

PF: I found it interesting how you inserted these real memories (of your mother or of those you interviewed) into the characters. Not only did you recreate a background informed by historical events, you enhanced it through fictionalised memories, grounded in personal experiences.

Memory and the freedom to discuss memories seem integral to the story. The decades-long silencing of Taiwanese to discuss events such as 228 and the White Terror could be seen to prolong the horror of these events and transmit the trauma between generations. Do you have anything to say on this or how in 2016 Taiwanese society understands and engages with aspects of its authoritarian past?

Also, I am intrigued when you say "historical Taiwan exists as a triangulation of texts," what do you mean by this?

SYR: Your question reminds me of my trips to Green Island. I'm really fascinated by the way the prisons are treated there. On one hand, there is the somber Oasis Villa, which is now part of the Green Island Human Rights Culture Park, where you can wander the prison and feel the starkness of it. There is also the memorial, with thousands of names of prisoners etched into its walls. And then there are the tea shops, the shaved ice shops, the souvenir shops that play off the prison theme, that turn it cartoonish and bright. As I was working on this project, I became really intrigued by the layers of remembrance, and how history was commodified. One of the souvenirs I've hung on to from my time in Taiwan is a 228 Memorial sunhat. I mean, the concept is strange, right? Taiwan is the place I've thought about most, so I can't offer examples of that duality existing in other places though I'm sure it does. I think Taiwan, like every other place, is figuring out how to deal with its past, and I believe it will probably be a negotiation that never ends.





The Green Island Human Rights Cultural Park, New Life Re-education Department. Photograph: Mark Harrison

I don't necessarily mean "historical Taiwan exists as a triangulation of texts" to be specifically about Taiwan and how it deals with history, but in the way that any history exists by reading texts against each other. If a period has passed out of living memory, then we know it only through texts. For this book, I found myself reading and listening to many versions of events and places, trying to find the "truth" somewhere in the spaces between all of them.

PF: I agree about the difficulty in trying to find a historical truth, especially with something as complex as 228 and its legacy, which I see being a major topic in Taiwanese society for some time yet. Green Island is a fascinating place to visit, for the reasons you just mentioned. Yet despite it being the title of your novel, very little of the story is set on the island. That said, I feel its legacy manifests on almost every page. With what you say about "layers of remembrance", was this a conscious choice?

SYR: Thanks for this question. I think something as traumatic as 228 and the White Terror gets integrated into society in such a deep way that its legacy is omnipresent, whether people are aware of it or not, and I definitely wanted to demonstrate that in the story. Even when the narrator moves to the US, she can't escape the echoes of Green Island; it's insinuated itself into her family and culture too deeply. And it was exactly the idea I started the project with—how that history gets carried on through generations. I talk earlier about how we carry our family histories in our bodies and family rituals. When I find myself unable to throw away the last rinds of molding cheese or the dried heel of bread, I see myself carrying on my grandmother's war hoarding, despite I myself having grown up in Reagan's 1980s America of relative plenty. It runs so deep. I'm curious if you see this phenomenon in your own family?

PF: Certainly, although it is a far less harrowing example than 228. In my wife's family thrifty living has passed down from generation to generation. Each generation has framed its own practices within different circumstances (be they pre-war scarcity, hippie-era experimentation or the contemporary problems of over-consumption and climate change). The concept has been passed from generation to generation, generating layers of meaning and representation.

The way in which you evoke the abiding intergenerational trauma of 228 is at times confronting – I feel it could make Green Island appeal to an audience beyond those who are familiar with Taiwan's recent history. What sort of responses are you receiving from readers around the world? With the inauguration of the new president Tsai Ying-wen 蔡英文, Taiwan has again briefly stepped into the Anglosphere's media spotlight. What does Taiwan (and stories emerging from there) have to tell the world?

SYR: The responses to the novel have been basically of two types: Taiwanese and Taiwanese American readers have been incredibly supportive and responsive, seemingly grateful that this history is being shared. I've had a number of people thank me, which is really moving. People also often want to share their personal stories with me. I have gotten this in person and by email. The non-Taiwanese readers most often express surprise. They tell me how little they knew about Taiwan, and how taken aback they were to learn what Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 did. 'I grew up thinking he was one of the good guys', is what a number of people have said.

I'm not prepared to answer the question of what Taiwan has to tell the world, but I can speak to what I learned and thought about during the course of this project. Entrenched in a very American view of identity as revolving around race, sexuality and gender, I saw other ways identity could be shaped by shared struggle and also by enforced education. Taiwan taught me to think about national identity and helped me understand the ways communities can be formed beyond the limit of borders. I began to see the nuances of Taiwan's mélange of cultures, how it lays bare the many influences in Taiwan's history. I also began to admire what I see as a real vein of optimism and strength in Taiwan. At the protests I attended, the protestors were angry and determined, but they were also smiling and kind. Depending on how you want to calculate it, the struggle for global acknowledgement and self-determination has been going on for over a hundred years. So maybe what Taiwan can offer the world is an example of indefatigable resilience and hope in the face of long odds.





The Green Island Human Rights Cultural Park, New Life Re-education Department. Photograph: Mark Harrison

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