

[ PAPERBACK: US ]

# America's next president, in his own words

'Dreams From My Father' helped catapult Barack Obama to political stardom

BY ELIZABETH TCHII  
STAFF REPORTER

US president-elect Barack Obama, who takes office on Tuesday, sheds light on how he made sense of his mixed ethnic and cultural heritage in this compelling and entertaining memoir published by Three Rivers Press in 1995, which at the time of its release received little attention.

*Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* was reissued nine years later after Obama, then the junior senator from Illinois, delivered a keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The book became a best-seller in the US as Obama became a rising political star, and as recently as last week was ranked No. 2 on the *New York Times* list of best-selling nonfiction paperbacks.

Born to a white American mother, Ann Dunham, and black Kenyan father, Barack Obama Sr, the young Obama was subject to a wide range of cultural influences, from Kansas, through his mother's side, Indonesia, where he lived with his stepfather, Hawaii, where he was born and educated, and Kenya, through his father who died in 1983 and who Obama met only once when he was 10 years old.

Obama begins his memoir aged 6 when he was living with his mother and stepfather in Jakarta. He returned to Hawaii in 1971 and was cared for by his maternal grandparents. There, he became aware of racial prejudice from white students at Honolulu's Punahou School and began his odyssey of self-discovery, which during his time at university included the use of alcohol and illegal drugs.

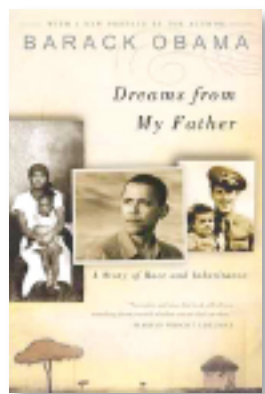
After college, Obama settled in Chicago, filled with the desire to engender social change. While working as a tenant's rights organizer at Altgeld Gardens, a public housing project in Chicago's South Side, Obama gained firsthand experience of the plight and needs of the city's poor, black residents, the influence of community churches, the deficiencies of the public school system, and the complexity of social relations in the neighborhood.

Throughout the book, Obama compares and contrasts the socio-economic dynamics he saw at play in Chicago's South Side with those he found in Hawaii, Indonesia and Africa, and analyzes racial issues as he tackles Altgeld residents' sense of inertia.

Though candid in sharing the frustration, anger and desperation he felt while working as a community organizer, Obama shows a great depth of courage and fearlessness, which is reflected in the book's overall message of hope for the future.

Obama's honesty in sharing his vulnerabilities, the painful path of coming to terms with conflicts of identity, and the loss of his father, is appealing.

## Publication Notes



DREAMS FROM MY FATHER:  
A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE

BY BARACK OBAMA

480 PAGES

THREE RIVERS PRESS

After acceptance to Harvard Law School, Obama took several months off to visit Kenya for the first time. On the trip he met his large extended family and discovered a sense of belonging, but also experienced bittersweet feelings when viewing family photos.

"They were happy scenes, all of them, and all strangely familiar, as if I were glimpsing some alternative universe that had played itself behind my back," he writes. "They were reflections, I realized, of my own long held fantasies, fantasies that I'd kept secret even from myself. The fantasy of the Old Man's [Obama Sr] having taken my mother and me back with him to Kenya. The wish that my mother and father, sisters and brothers, were all under one roof. Here it was, I thought, what might have been. And the recognition of how wrong it had all turned out, the harsh evidence of life as it had really been lived, made me so sad that after only a few minutes, I had to look away."

Rather than embracing cynicism or allowing his experiences to turn destructive, Obama transformed his family's struggles into practical lessons that paved the way for his future success.

Though the fantasies and dreams Obama had about his father failed to materialize, they did help the president-elect construct a system of values.

*Dreams From My Father* covers many important contemporary issues, but reads like a gripping novel. Obama writes like a seasoned professional and vividly brings his family's tale and the people he met along the way to life. It is rare that a writer is able to convey his sensibilities and perspectives on so many issues and people both professionally and personally. Even rarer for a future US president to do so.

SUNDAY PROFILE



I think that a strong case can be made that Taiwan is more important to the potential solutions to transnational threats than its size would suggest.

— Amit Pandya, South Asia expert and international lawyer

# Why Taiwan Matters

Amit Pandya joined the Henry L. Stimson Center in 2007. He had previously served as counsel to the Government Operations and Foreign Affairs committees of the US House of Representatives, and held senior positions at the departments of Defense and State and at the US Agency for International Development.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HENRY L. STIMSON CENTER

Amit Pandya, a senior associate at a policy institute in Washington, is a passionate enthusiast for Taiwan

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The predominant impression I have of Taiwan is of a prosperous, peaceful, vibrant, inventive, friendly, cosmopolitan, and extremely interesting place. Moreover, the development of a democracy that is both recognizable to democrats all around the world, and at the same time very much a reflection of the local culture, is an important dimension of what I feel about Taiwan.

Amit Pandya is, among many other things, a passionate enthusiast for Taiwan. He's an international lawyer and South Asia expert currently working at Washington's Henry L. Stimson Center, a non-profit, non-partisan institution devoted to enhancing international peace and security through analysis and outreach. He just edited a new book, *Regional Voices: Transnational Challenges*. Concentrating as it does on Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Africa and the Middle East, the book doesn't specifically cover Taiwan. It's often mentioned, however, and so I first asked Pandya how the nation fitted into the broader picture.

"First let me say what the broader picture is," he replied. "The book sought to gain insight into how knowledgeable people from the area it covered thought about issues such as threats from environmental degradation and climate change, public health crises and pandemic diseases, maritime security and resources, food security, trade, water shortages or conflicts, demographic shifts, competition for energy and natural resources, terrorism, transnational crime,

and other emerging cross-border or transnational problems.

"Our work was based on a belief that effective US policy towards particular countries and regions, and towards specific global issues, required an understanding of the perspectives, priorities and approaches of societies as well as governments in these regions.

"As for Taiwan, the Western powers and Taiwan's neighbors, seeking to accommodate the sensitivities of the mainland Chinese government, have long made the mistake of pretending that Taiwan can be ignored, or at best marginalized in diplomacy and in the making of international policy. When we started looking at a range of transnational threats and challenges, and the prospects of international cooperation in responding to essentially international threats, it became apparent immediately that Taiwan is as essential as any other Asian nation.

"Taiwan is as much the object or victim of these challenges or threats as anywhere else. It has to be at least as much part of the necessary solutions as any other nation because to exclude from collective responses any large society that suffers from problems such as SARS, Avian Flu or marine pollution is to offer only an incomplete solution. Incomplete solutions that leave the problem partially unsolved threaten the effectiveness of solutions adopted by other nations.

"Indeed, I think that a strong case can be made that Taiwan is more important to the potential solutions to transnational threats than its size would suggest. It enjoys far higher levels of education, scientific research, technology and transparency than almost any other society in its region, on a par with Japan, Singapore and possibly South Korea. Education, scientific research, technology and transparency have been shown to be essential to the development of solutions to the technical and political challenges posed by the inter-relationship between rapid economic growth,

environmental change, environmental degradation, social change and political instability.

"We might also reflect that the new types of challenges demand new types of solutions. The role of governments and of formal diplomatic cooperation (bilateral or multi-lateral) remains important. However, this is now supplemented by more creative mechanisms that are informal, quasi-governmental, or based on cooperation between governments and private sectors and civil societies. Taiwan, owing to the unfortunate circumstances of its diplomatic isolation and treatment as a society that is not a state, a nation that has a government that is not formally sovereign, has learned to inhabit this shadow space and to operate successfully in it to address real-world challenges. It can provide a useful model for the new paradigm that is emerging of governance — we might call it non-governmental governance.

"Taiwan also offers a very useful model of social and economic change and development for Asian, Middle Eastern and African societies. It went from being a predominantly agrarian and relatively poor society to being one of the powerhouses of the high-tech global economy in one generation. It also simultaneously made the transition from autocratic to democratic government. It did this in very difficult circumstances of threat from a much more powerful neighbor and of great diplomatic isolation from the global community. It did all this with significant investments and wise policy on education and workforce development, smart macro-economic policy and business investment strategies, and effective policies on population planning. The developing world could emulate Taiwan to its benefit."

I next asked Pandya what his own impressions of Taiwan had been.

"Most interesting is the feeling of a modern sense of Chinese identity, coexisting with a proud sense of Taiwanese history and culture, and with a

sense of Taiwan's place in an increasingly inter-dependent world. Taiwan appears to have easily and effortlessly taken on the task of developing a sense of cultural identity based on its own history and tradition that is also part of the global and cosmopolitan civilization.

"Taiwan's version of Chinese modernity also seems much more respectful of the rest of the world, and completely free of the belligerent attitude that marks the development of modern Chinese identity on the mainland. I have to say that, in this respect, Taiwan's elaboration of a modern Chinese identity is much more congenial to non-Chinese like myself, and makes us much more curious and eager to enter into a deep study and appreciation of Chinese history and culture. Based on my own basic study of Chinese thought and history, I would say that in an important sense Taiwan has preserved the best accomplishments and standards of Chinese thought and civilization.

"There is also a sense of dynamism, of curiosity about the rest of the world here. I have the feeling that Taiwanese society and people focus on the positive aspects of life rather than the negative ones.

"As for personal experiences, I think my most vivid memories of Taiwan are of hiking in the mountains outside Taipei, walking on the beach at the southern end of the island, eating very well in Taipei (I am a vegetarian and love all types of Chinese cuisine and am always delighted to find so much wonderful Buddhist vegetarian food), of seeing some wonderful theater and art shows, and hearing some wonderful music in Taipei. I'd add to that traveling to other cities and visiting experimental farms and successful factories with the latest technology, and perhaps above all visiting temples and worshipping there and realizing how much Taiwan's spiritual traditions resemble my own Indian Hindu-Buddhist heritage."

*Regional Voices: Transnational Challenges* was published by the Henry L. Stimson Center in 2008.

[ PAPERBACK: US ]

# 'Tropes of spatiality' and other scholarly pyrotechnics

'Writing Taiwan' has some interesting things to say about Taiwanese literature. A pity much of it is obscured by academic jargon and ostentation of learning

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

When I saw this book prominently displayed in the EsLite (誠品) bookstore opposite National Taiwan University at Gongguan (公館), I was immediately drawn to its title. *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History* — this, I thought, was something that had to be read. A new account of Taiwanese literature doesn't appear every day, after all. It would be a perfect volume, I imagined, for both a thorough perusal and future reference.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that it wasn't a literary history at all but a collection of articles that took their inspiration from a conference on Taiwanese literature held at Columbia University in New York City back in the spring of 1998.

Most prospective readers will take it for granted that "A New Literary History" will be a continuous history of important books and writing. Such an account might be penned by different authors, but it would

nevertheless add up to a comprehensive, and probably impartial, narrative. Such things may now be out of fashion, and considered impossibly simple-minded. Nevertheless, this is what "A New Literary History" suggests. But literary academics — and theorizers of all kinds — have long puffed themselves up by claiming to account for all known phenomena. Creators mocking their commentators also constitute a very old tradition, however, most vividly represented by Jonathan Swift's impaling of wordy would-be philosophers, and scientists who absurdly labored to extract sunlight out of cucumbers.

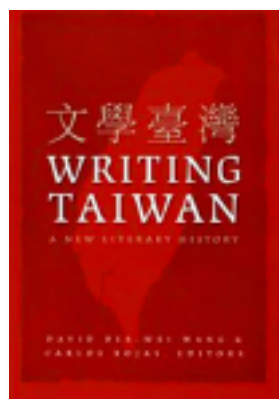
This having been said, I can report that *Writing Taiwan* is occasionally interesting in certain ways. It's by and large very academic, of course, and the ordinary reader will be baffled by much of the terminology. But then the ordinary reader isn't this book's target readership. Its target is students, some of whom testify that teaching from a similar ideological base caused them

acute self-doubt, wondering what could be wrong with them when they couldn't understand half of what they were being taught.

In an eloquent Introduction, Carlos Rojas — who also translated two of the articles himself — lays out the book's general plan. It's divided into four sections, he writes, covering theoretical considerations, modernism versus "nativism" in Taiwanese literature, time, and lastly space. The feeling, however, despite the writer's lucidity, is that Rojas is marshalling his disparate contributions into formal categories into which they don't always quite fit, and making grand claims for them that, by their very nature, they can't really aspire to.

And the categories are nothing if not inflated. Take space, or "tropes of spatiality," for instance. What the co-editor actually means by this includes the simple study of maps — "spectral cartography" in his own chapter on the contemporary Malaysian-born author Li Yongping (李永平)

## Publication Notes



WRITING TAIWAN

EDITED BY DAVID DER-WEI WANG  
AND CARLOS ROJAS

412 PAGES

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

— and the layout of cities that forms part of the interest of the 1997 novel *Ancient Capital* (古都) by Zhu Tianxin (朱天心).

Examples of good work marred by deference to current academic gurus are everywhere. One is a consideration of Taiwanese novelist Su Weizhen (蘇偉真) by Gang Gary Xu. His comparison of themes in Su's *The Island of Silence* (1994) to those of the theater theorist Antonin Artaud, prompted by the concern of both writers with Bali, are fascinating. Only when you come across allusions to theorist Julia Kristeva, and a lament at the "Orientalism" bewailed by Edward Said, do you register disappointment that Xu couldn't manage to be more independently minded.

Another such instance is an examination by Michelle Yeh of the Taipei periodical *Modern Poetry Quarterly* (現代詩季刊), published from 1953 to 1964. Modernism's hostility to popular culture, and its role in Taiwan's official anti-Communist line, is well described. Only when it starts referring to the theories of French intellectual Pierre Bourdieu does this otherwise astute analysis falter.

One essay that manages

to plow an almost entirely independent furrow is Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang's piece on the two-part novel *Backed Against the Sea* (1981 and 1999) by Wang Wenxing (王文興), Taiwanese modernists' faith in the liberal literary tradition of the West is well anatomized, and one of Taiwan's great modernist masterpieces excellently described, both without the props of reference to the babble of literary theory.

Among the book's other interesting insights are how the plotless nature of European modernist fiction of the 1920s was taken over by Taiwanese modernists as late as the 1990s (with a curious aside on the US trade practice of dumping unwanted turkey testicles onto the Taiwanese market), and how China's analysis of modern Taiwanese writing was already well advanced by the end of the century.

But Taiwan's creative writers all too often appear in awe of these contemporary theorists, as was the case with Chu Tien-wen's (朱天文) Taipei novel *Notes of a*

*Desolate Man* (荒人手記), reviewed in the *Taipei Times* on March 9, 2003 and discussed here in an article by Ban Wang. There an otherwise promising text was choked with references to Michel Foucault and Claude Levi-Strauss.

Most top-class writers get the pretensions of their former teachers out of their systems early on. The Vietnamese-American author Monique Truong, for example, in her already-classic *The Book of Salt* (2003), is clearly well aware of critiques of the modernist writer Gertrude Stein, who the book is partly about. But no mention of that background appears in her superb novel.

All in all, academics who wing their way to conferences in order to impose the straitjackets of Benjamin, Said, Barthes, Bourdieu, Kristeva, Deleuze, Guattari and *chef d'ecole* Derrida on the cautiously emerging creative voices of Taiwan, and then publish a book with an at best ambiguous title, should be seen as the heirs of Swift's sunshine-extracting scientists, and deserving of similar mockery.