CHAPTER TWO

REST & RECREATION IN THE CITY

US hegemony in Cold War East Asia

This chapter explores literary responses in Japan and Taiwan to the geopolitical hegemony exercised by the US in East Asia throughout the time-frame under analysis here. Whilst it is now a crude truism to observe that scarcely a corner of the globe has remained untouched by the military, economic, and cultural clout of the US in the decades since WWII, the case of America’s client states in East Asia and the Pacific Rim arguably belongs under its own separate rubric. Indeed, many of the observations made about Japan and Taiwan in the pages that follow hold equally true for the other East Asian societies which have found ‘shelter’ under the American umbrella—in particular South Korea, the Philippines, Guam, and Thailand. Diplomatic alignment within this zone—the so-called ‘Great Crescent’ of US-orchestrated anti-Communist containment—entailed continuous and high-level exposure to American power and influence throughout the postwar years for all these nation-states; and this exposure, in its turn, has given a discernible shape and contour to their respective modernities. In the case of Japan and Taiwan, the Pax Americana has signified on multiple levels. Few could argue, for example, that both societies owe their post-war economic dynamism, increasing democratization, national security, and greater cultural pluralism in some measure at least to US influence and intervention. Yet it is equally undeniable that the role of protectorate—some might say vassal state—is a compromised, even subaltern position that is freighted with both risk and anxiety.

To be more precise, both Japan and Taiwan have been aligned as co-operative partners in US Cold War strategy within the Asia Pacific Region, an alliance which finds its root structure in patterns of economic and military dependency. These patterns have left both Japan and Taiwan vulnerable to the vagaries of US foreign policy, and the two societies have intimate experience of Uncle Sam as a sometimes more capricious than avuncular guardian. Examples of this are the ‘reverse current’ undertaken by the MacArthur administration during the Allied
occupation of Japan, and the frequent and painful voltes-face that the US has performed in its stance toward Red China and the Republic of China on Taiwan. Both countries, moreover, have been required to welcome tens of thousands of American military personnel on their shores; and whilst these hospitality stints have varied greatly in length and number, their impact on the domestic sphere has been strikingly analogous. Indeed, the encounter with America, both long-range and at close quarters, has been instrumental in the emergence of new modernities—ranging across politics, economics, and culture—in both societies throughout the span of the later Cold War era.

These modernities, and the structures of unequal co-dependency on which they are predicated, have inevitably bred their discontents. Writers and intellectuals in Japan and Taiwan have responded with visceral fear and anger to the diminished sense of sovereignty that is the quid pro quo for American protection. What is more, their protests have extended beyond the easy and obvious foil of the US to encompass more sensitive targets at home: their respective governments and societies—and the willingness with which both have accommodated to the American way. Indeed, although a pronounced critique of US military adventurism and Coca Cola culture runs through the literary narratives examined in this chapter, their ultimate concerns tend to lie at home. In text after text, writers direct their most pointed criticism at the local state regimes that have sanctioned alliance with the superpower, and at those elements of mainstream society which have happily complied and even collaborated with the Pax Americana. Their critiques articulate anxieties about the loss of political autonomy, economic self-sufficiency, and cultural identity in the face of American domination; and they typically operate through extended allegorical structures in which politics, economics, and culture are pushed into highly stylized interaction.

Diverse writers from both Japan and Taiwan locate their critiques of the US order within a metaphorical pattern that pivots on the two rhetorical figures of the city and sexuality. This metaphor, repeated across a significant body of texts, reads American military patronage of the urban sex trade in East Asia as a densely detailed microcosm of the crisis of sovereignty referred to above. The texts explored here use the theme of GIs let loose in the red-light districts of urban Japan and Taiwan to question the military mission of the US in the region, the attitudes of compliance adopted by state and society in both countries towards the outworkings of American power, and the rapid changes