Foreword to the Special Issue on Contemporary Poetry from Taiwan

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Taiwan Literature: English Translation Series, launched in 1996 as a biannual journal, is devoted presenting works in English translation reflective of significant literary developments and prominent writers in Taiwan, with a primary focus on fiction. For more than two decades, it has been our intention to introduce contemporary poetry as well, to introduce another important dimension in the history of Taiwan literature. Now, with the publication of this special issue, we have finally made some progress towards this goal.

The historical development of Taiwan’s poetry before the imposition of Japanese rule in 1895 was closely related to trends in Chinese classical poetry during the late Qing period (1662–1911), be it shi (verse) or ci (lyrics). This is evident in a series of collections of verse from that period published by the National Taiwan Literature Museum, including Quan Tai shi [Complete Collection of Taiwanese Verse, 12 volumes, 2004], Quan Tai fu [Complete Collection of Taiwanese Rhyme-prose, 2 volumes, 2006], and Quan Tai ci [Complete Collection of Taiwanese Lyrics, 3 volumes, 2017]. As for the emergence of new poetry in colloquial languages,
this was clearly due to the combined influence of Hu Shi (1891–1962), who advocated a new poetry in colloquial Chinese, as well as to Japanese literary trends during the Meiji period (1868–1912), with the genbun ichi yundō (unification of writing and speech movement) and the publication of Shintai shishō [Collection of New-Style Poems] in 1882. Hu Shi’s Changbi ji [The Experiments], published in 1920, was the first collection of new poems in colloquial Chinese, while Zhang Wujun’s Luandu zhi lian [Love Poems in a Chaotic Capital], published in December of 1925, just five years later, was the first collection of new poems in Taiwan, and there are correspondences between the two. However, the first Taiwanese poet who attempted to write new poems, even though in Japanese, was Hsieh Chun-mu (1902–1969, penname Zhui Feng), who published four short poems under the title “Shi no mane suru” [Poems in Imitation] in April, 1924, more than a year earlier than Zhang Wujun’s collection. Thus, Hsieh can be regarded as the originator of new poetry in Taiwan.

For this special issue, we asked Professor Horng Shuling of the Department of Chinese Literature, National Taiwan University, to serve as guest editor. Professor Horng’s expertise is folk literature in classical Chinese and modern poetry. The purpose of this issue is not to present a systematic historical trajectory, nor to trace all the literary trends in vogue during given eras of the past. Rather, we hope simply to highlight the diverse and multiple features of contemporary poetry from Taiwan and to advance the case for considering that the special characteristics of this verse warrant placing it in a unique position among world literatures in the Chinese language.

Professor Horng’s introduction provides a concise summary of her intention to focus on two main issues: the characteristics of modern poetry from Taiwan, and the major themes that concern contemporary Taiwanese poets. Regarding the characteristics of modern poetry from Taiwan, her views are brief and to the point, as we can observe from the following remarks:

Taiwan Literature
1) With regard to its historical development, we may invoke the words of the poet, Chen Chien-wu, who asserts that Taiwan’s new poetry has two sources: one sprouted from Taiwan’s new literature carried on from the period of Japanese rule. The other is the spark of China’s new poetry in the vernacular brought to Taiwan by the poets who moved there from the mainland after World War II.

2) As far as the path forged by new poetry in Taiwan is concerned, from the 1920s under Japanese rule, through until 1945 and after the war, the basic dynamic is a confrontation between two main literary trends that rise and fall in relation to each other: realism aimed at reflecting nativist consciousness and social realities, and modernism, which pursued modernity and innovative artistic expression.

3) In terms of the actual developments and transformations that occurred in the context of poetic circles, the greatest feature was that poets of like mind, devoted to a common cause, gathered in groups to form poetry societies and publish coterie magazines in which they issued their creative works and poetic views. Through such media, various contention and literary “isms” gained currency for varying lengths of time, displaying the diversity and vitality of poetic styles among contemporary poets in Taiwan.

Based on the selected works of twenty-four poets, Professor Horng further explains the common themes that most concern contemporary poets in Taiwan. From those themes she summarizes three main viewpoints and then goes on to discuss the inner world explored by those poets based on those viewpoints:

A poet reveals his or her inner world through written expression, which the reader savors through reading the works. Professor Horng deduces the following three themes through
which we may explore the inner world of the contemporary poets of Taiwan:

1) A merging of life experience and historical memories;
2) Hometowns and cities in Taiwan seen from a “local” perspective;
3) The consciousness of daily life realities intersecting with poetic imagination.

Viewed from the above three perspectives, we can see that after the baptism of modernism during the 1960s, and the reflections on nativist literature debated during the 1970s, modern poetry in Taiwan after the 1980s evolved as a combination of realism and modernism, and displays both the local sense of the nativist consciousness and the artistic awareness of the modernist school. We find these characteristics fully represented in the poems selected for this special issue.

This issue contains the verse of twenty-four poets. The oldest, Chen Chien-wu (1922–2012), belongs to the generation who crossed the language barrier from Japanese to Chinese. In the history of new poetry as it developed in Taiwan, Chen Chien-wu and Lin Heng-tai represent the bulb of a flower carried over from the Japanese rule, while Xiang Ming, who migrated to Taiwan with the Nationalist government, represents the mainlander poets who, as claimed by Ji Xian, brought with them the spark of the new poetry from China. This latter group maintained that blood is thicker than water, and the attachment to Chinese culture can be found in the works of many poets of the 1940s and 1950s. The Taiwanese consciousness of most of the other poets, has become more and more conspicuous with the passing of the generations.

Ethnic consciousness also appears among non-mainland Taiwanese. In addition to the ethnic consciousness of Hoklo Taiwanese, whose ancestors came to the island from Fujian province, there are works that express the ethnic consciousness of Hakka, Indigenous peoples, and new immigrants. For Hakka poets, we have selected Chang Fang Ci and Li Yu-Fang. As to
the voices of the Indigenous peoples and new immigrants from Southeast Asia, we selected Atayal writer Walis Nokan and Chan Tah Wei from Malaysia as representatives. In other words, as far as ethnic consciousness is concerned, the selected poems from the twenty-four poets in this volume embody the mindset and cultural proclivities of the broad spectrum of the Taiwanese populace, from mainland Chinese, to Hoklo, Hakka, Indigenous, and new immigrants. From the works selected, Taiwan’s open society, and its diverse, globalized cultural phenomena are revealed.

In short, as Professor Horng has pointed out in her introduction, starting from 1924, when Hsieh Chun-mu first published four “Poems in Imitation,” the development of new poetry in Taiwan has a history of almost one hundred years. The roots of new poetry in Taiwan with its “twin flower bulbs,” to use the phrase coined by Chen Chien-wu, has now bloomed and borne fruit. It manifests diversified themes, and places great stress on both artistic expression and social concern. It recognizes globalization as the major trend of the times, and maintains a dynamic balance between nativist consciousness and the sensibilities of the Chinese cultural diaspora. Taiwan literature and its new poetry written in Chinese should have a place in the Chinese world community, as well as in the history of world literature. Limited by the space allowed for the journal, we could only select works related to “local” and “quotidian” writing. Yet we hope to observe through these works the manner in which the unique charm and gracefulness of contemporary poetry from Taiwan has blossomed in the garden of world literature.

For this special issue, we are very grateful to Professor Horng’s well-conceived planning in the selection of twenty-four poets, while recognizing that incompleteness is hardly avoidable and that, regrettably, many excellent works are left out. For translation, Professor John Balcom and Yingtsih Hwang’s continued assistance and unfailing support as professional translators is particularly appreciated. Professor Brian Skerratt,
from the Graduate Institute of Taiwan Literature and Cross-Cultural Studies at National Chung Hsing University, has joined us, and the contribution of his expertise in modern poetry and Chinese-English translation has greatly enriched our translation team. My co-editor, Terence Russell, copy editor Fred Edwards, and office assistants at the UCSB Center for Taiwan Studies, Angela Borda and Raelynn Moy, have provided essential assistance and their devoted efforts deserve my special gratitude. In this issue, the authors and selected titles have far outnumbered those of previous issues, and that has necessitated considerable extra work throughout the editing process. Since last March, due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, and under the state order to shelter in place, communication between those involved in the editing work had to be shifted entirely online. This is inefficient and inconvenient and forced us to delay the publication date. But thanks to the understanding and cooperation of National Taiwan University Press, this issue can now finally go to press, and I herewith express my sincere appreciation to everyone who has contributed to achieving that goal.