Selections of Contemporary Poetry from Taiwan: The Local and the Quotidian—Introduction to the Special Issue on Contemporary Poetry from Taiwan

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In this issue, we have selected works by contemporary Taiwanese poets who reflect Taiwan’s historical culture and scenes from everyday life by choosing local places, cities, everyday life, and material things as their subject material.

1. The Special Qualities of Modern Taiwanese Poetry

In discussing the development of modern Taiwanese poetry, we may make reference to Chen Chien-wu’s (1922–2012) phrase, “two [flower] bulbs,” the implication being that there are two sources and streams. The first finds its roots in the New Literature of the Japanese rule, the other was ignited by the sparks of New Poetry carried by poets who moved to Taiwan after World War II. During the Japanese period, writers such as

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Lai Ho and the group of poets from the so-called Salt Flats Area, advocated vernacular language poetry and poetry of the masses. This was intended to be primarily poetry of socialist realism, but Yang Chih-ch’ang single-handedly established the Windmill Poetry Society, which introduced the French surrealist school via Japanese literary sources. Even though this was out of step with the realism in vogue at the time, it was responsible for establishing an imaginative, exquisite new style of verse with elements of the avant-garde and experimentalism. After the war, Ji Xian, Qin Zihao, and others moved to Taiwan from China. They published journals and founded poetry societies, thereby giving rise to a debate over modernist poetry. By injecting modernist thought into the composition of New Poetry, “modern poetry” thus emphasized the rationalism and purity of poetry, and became very popular in Taiwan.

The most salient feature of the poetic world in Taiwan has been the proliferation of poetry societies. Since the 1950s, groups like the Modernist Poetry Society, the Blue Star Poetry Society, and the Epoch Poetry Society were established one after the other. Among nativist poets, after the Bamboo Hat Poetry Society was formed in 1964, many more poetry societies sprang up, many more young poets joined them, and they developed new modes of composition. Virtually every “ism” had its followers. Aside from modernism, symbolism, surrealism, and “New Objectivism,” nativism, feminism, and environmentalism all emerged in succession. There even were a considerable number of poets who formulated a post-modernist style of writing. Today, having arrived in the twenty-first century, it is fair to say that in terms of poetic artistry, contemporary Taiwanese poets have achieved much that is brilliant and laudable.
2. Compositional Subjects of Contemporary Taiwanese Poets

Poets employ the written word in order to express their inner spiritual worlds. The memories, feelings and imaginations accumulated within those worlds await the reader’s careful appreciation and interpretation. Below we will examine the spiritual worlds of contemporary Taiwanese poets via a few selected topics.

(i) The Convergence of Life Experience and Historical Memory

Taiwanese poets frequently meld historical memory and interest with their personal life experiences. Chen Chien-wu’s “Poem of Childhood” and “An Old Two-Story House” depict his experiences of growing up as derived from his memories. The revelations and pressures of the transition from Japanese rule to the post-war period, language, education, and other life experiences, form unforgettable and important parts of his deepest memories. “Carrier Pigeon” and “Fingernails,” which are memories of being called to serve the Japanese colonial government in the South Pacific war, overflow with the horrified trembling and unsteady breathing of one who has survived the apocalypse.

His “Mazu’s Birthday” is based on traditional folk customs yet makes use of a modernist viewpoint to mock reality. There is no question that “The Drummer’s Song” reflects his inner feelings—“My drum is my beloved life / I am a lonely drummer.” In his verse Chen Chien-wu inscribes the complex traces of the individual with history. When he strikes the bell of human life, it is his warnings and appeals that the careful listener perceives.

Another poet of the older generation, Lin Hengtai, also was a figure of the transitional period. From an early age he devoted himself to writing in the modernist idiom and had a thoroughly experimental style. Taken together, his “Village,” “Rest
at Sunset,” and “Village Opera” are moving depictions of the life and times of early Taiwanese farming villages. His language and mental associations are animated and robust. The two-poem series, “Subtropics” and “Landscape” are vividly imaginative. The two poems of “Landscape” also stand as classic examples of modernist writing. The repetitive, overlapping diction of the poems creates a dynamic sightline between point, line, and face that sets the entire tableau in motion, expanding as if there never is a still moment. The unique, exquisite evocation of Taiwanese folk customs in this set of poems has seldom been surpassed by poets of later generations. Lin’s “Life” reads, “Your voice must have the utmost simplicity.” “Simplicity” implies an attitude of unadulterated purity. When it is deployed in the composition of poetry, the poet is able to make use of an unbounded imagination to transform reality into art.

In comparison to Chen and Lin, Xiang Ming’s life experience reveals another facet of Taiwan’s history. Xiang Ming arrived in Taiwan with the Republican army after 1949, which identifies him clearly as a “mainlander.” His compositions “Plant in a Hanging Basket” and “Tattered Army Blanket” reflect this physical and emotional situation. After the battles have been left behind, life’s minutiae grow dull. Xiang Ming feels, “a soldier / left to be crushed by the passing years.” This strongly expresses his sense of impotence. Yet he is not discouraged. “Tumor” and “Lesson One” demonstrate his spirit of “retiring but not giving up,” and his courage to continue grappling with life. Xiang Ming’s poetry also bears the weight of an important coordinate in time. In 1987, martial law was lifted in Taiwan and restrictions on visits to relatives across the Taiwan Strait were removed. For the first time in forty years, friends and family could finally see each other again. “A Kite Brought from Across the Sea” not only documents the friendship of two poets separated by the Strait, in the background are endless convoluted, moving stories of searching for family and reunion.
Cheng Chiung-ming’s “A Musical Note Reborn—On the Kaohsiung 228 Memorial” provides a footnote to the “228 Incident.” The “228 Incident,” which took place in 1947 as the result of the heavy oppression of the Nationalist government, led huge numbers of innocent Taiwanese, especially those from the social élite, to sacrifice their lives. The setting up of the memorial was a first step towards reconciliation. The Kaohsiung memorial records the names of 148 victims. Cheng writes, “I didn’t come here to ponder the past / I came solely in search of a note reborn,” in that way investing his words with profound meaning. Cheng also has written poems to mourn Yeh Shih-t’ao and Shi Hong. From these and related works we sense the deep fraternity among men of letters. In certain places his “Drum” also responds to Chen Chien-wu’s “The Drummer’s Song.” Both poets held firmly to their idealism, like a drummer who keeps performing for people.

Among laments for the victims of the 228 Incident we also have Xiang Yang’s “Beyond the Streets of Chiayi—For Chen Cheng-po,” which expresses grief over the loss of the talented young artist, Chen Cheng-po.

With regard to the experience of life during the early post-war era, Bai Ling’s guileless words sketch a living image of Taiwan of the 1940s and 1950s. The two poems in the set, “Childhood,” separately describe the misery of seeking refuge in an air-raid shelter during the war, and the pleasures of sampling popsicles during the summertime. “Springtime Comes to Taipei” depicts a Taipei without skyscrapers, without barred windows and without air pollution which, like a young woman wearing a miniskirt in the spring, makes people nostalgic. “Kinmen Kaoliang” relates the surprised exclamations of visitors to the Kinmen (Jinmen) battlefield after it was opened to the public. This verse demonstrates a certain emotional reflection over the splendor and sorrows of Kinmen. It also points out how the fates of Taiwan and Kinmen are bound together.

Working back through his own family history, what Lu 
Han-hsiu proposes is a new identity and re-structuring. The grandfather in “The Wardrobe” has a “That velvet cap bought in Nanking” Nonetheless, Lu unconsciously is reluctant to take it. Far more than his grandfather, he has seen his grandmother's hardship in supporting the family. “Needle” depicts Grandmother, widowed at a young age, using her needle to stitch up the fractures of her broken family. In “My Father was a Train Engineer” we see an even more revised structuring of his family history.

“Solitary Standing Flower” is written for his forbearer, Yang Kui. In 1977, Lu lived for four months in Yang’s East Sea Garden. Yang’s indomitable spirit profoundly inspired Lu, so he used the image of a flower standing alone as a metaphorical reference to Yang. It could be said that Yang Kui was Lu’s mentor in literary matters and he strengthened Lu’s nativist consciousness. In 1991, Lu formally turned to composing poetry in the Taiwanese language (Minnan). In 1994 he published “Gazing at the Rain in April” and “Seventh Lord and Eighth Lord,” both of which draw upon material taken from the store of Taiwan’s local traditions.

The life experience of Chen Ichih was different from that of Lu Han-hsiu. Chen’s “Invisible Rash” evokes the thoughts and feelings of a “second generation mainlander” who accompanies his father on a trip to visit family in China. He describes nostalgia for the homeland as the “Invisible rash eruptions / Or is it the coincident attack of heat and cold.” What he observes on the trip are scenes of ruin and desolation. They are not even able to locate their ancestors’ tombs. Confronted with such scenes, he is much perturbed. It is just like “patiently waiting hives.” When they break out, they itch unbearably. As for Taiwan, where he was born and raised, “Rainy Taiwan,” “Pseudonyms for Hualien,” and “Jade Mountain in Winter,” etc., all provide exquisitely detailed evocations.

When we speak of Taiwan’s history, we cannot neglect the historical culture of Indigenous peoples. The Atayal poet
Walis Norgan studied Chinese and uses it as his written medium. More recently, he has reflected upon his Atayal identity and put much more effort into writing as a means of giving a voice to Indigenous peoples. During the Japanese period, the Japanese colonial government chose a policy of assimilation and oppressive rule. Because of this, in 1930 the village chief, Mona Rudo, led his people to rise in resistance in the “Wushe Incident.” “Cherry Blossoms” evokes the Wushe Incident from the perspective of the Atayal, wherein each gloriously blooming cherry blossom does not represent the beautiful spring scenery, but rather the hearts of the Atayal with their hot, surging blood. In his “Down the Mountain” and “About the Atayal,” we get a glimpse of Walis’ detailed wider view of the results of Indigenous people going to live in the cities, as well as his hopes and expectations for the younger generation.

Aside from Indigenous peoples and ethnic Chinese, “New Residents” are a component in Taiwan’s ethnic multiplicity. The term, “New Residents” began in the 1990s. Previous to that there were many people who, due to a variety of different factors, went to Taiwan for study or work and later became long-term residents. Chan Tah Wei is such an example. In the 1980s he studied in Taiwan as a foreign student, then, after receiving his Ph.D., he taught there at a university. Looking back over his own family history and his national identity, he composed the long verse cycle, “In Southeast Asia.” This cycle consists of eleven pieces beginning with the story of his grandfather emigrating from Guangxi in China to Malaysia. It examines the old home in Guangxi, the history of Malaysia, and the culture of Southeast Asian Chinese. From his grandfather, to his father, to himself; from Guangxi, to Southeast Asia, to Taipei, the verse provides a complex discourse over finding an identity and a place for oneself. From the themes and expression of Chan Tah Wei’s compositions we also gain a sense of the richness of Taiwan’s modern poetry.
(ii) Taiwan's Town and Country from the Perspective of “Place”

Human geography holds that it is through everyday contact that people develop feelings for, and identification with, space. From this they fashion a sense of “place.” “Place” implies the attachment that people feel to their native land, and the special concern that they have formed for various kinds of space. “Place,” and the convergence of individual experience, emotion, and memory, imperceptibly shape a shared language context and culture.

When it comes to concern for Taiwan's countryside, Wu Sheng is without doubt the first poet who should be mentioned. Wu Sheng's depictions of the scenery of Taiwan's rural villages shatter the false imagery of “happy farm families” to reveal the many problems besieging the villages in face of the intrusion of industrialization and capitalism. In “Daybreak Scene,” “Soil,” and “Map of Yams” we observe the major focus of his concerns. Such feelings also make us aware of why, as a poet speaking to his sons and daughters, he has no choice but to write of the farming towns.

He goes so far as to wish that young people would break out of their comfort zones to walk around and have a look at the fields. That is where they will find the truest, most powerful images of life. In this regard, “I Will Not Discuss With You” is a cautious reminder. A more recent composition, “He is Still Young,” is dedicated to Taiwan's highest summit, Jade Mountain. Through a description of changes in the topography, the dispersal of flora and fauna, growth, and of Indigenous people with their life and labors, this verse evinces the idea that humans can live in harmony with nature. From this we can see Wu Sheng's deep affection for Jade Mountain, as well as for the native soil of Taiwan.

Tu Kuo-ch'ing's paean to Jade Mountain is written on the basis of a view from afar. “Gazing up at Jade Mountain” has the poet gazing at Jade Mountain from the saddle of Tataka, the highest point on the northern cross-island highway. Amid the
swirling mists, the blue sky momentarily appears, “Sashes of white cloud / shift in from all directions,” thereby accentuating the mirage-like form of Jade Mountain which seems to embody all of the mysteries of nature. Two other pieces, “At Guanwu Gazing Afar to the Shei-pa Sacred Ridgeline” and “Forest Bathing” also demonstrate his love of the mountain forests of Taiwan. The former narrates the ascent of Mount Shei and Mount Tapachien. The alpine forms of Mount Shei are fine and elegant, while Mount Tapachien is dauntingly steep. The ridge between the two summits appears to form a “majestic great stage of stunning beauty” where both the Bunun people and Saysiyat people act out their legends, songs, and dances, replete with pure and emotionally moving vital force.

The latter poem describes a stroll through the forest areas of Shei-pa Park. There, among the cypress, snow pines and red juniper, the poet enjoys a baptism of phytoncide, a natural antimicrobial chemical produced by trees and other plants. This experience of the mountain forest fills Tu with exaltation and wonder at Taiwan’s highest mountains. He considers each mountain to be a sage, who, “silent a thousand years / Breaths the fragrance of life,” as “the supreme state of wordless expression.” As regards areas immediately surrounding the city, Tu recounts his experience in “Climbing the Elephant Mountain Path” and “Passing Through Da’an Forest Park.” Through his words we see that, although Taipei is a large metropolis, we can still find examples of “climbing on high”, “gazing afar”, “nature”, and “tranquil environments.”

In his early years, Tu Kuo-ch’ing participated in the production of Modern Literature magazine. He translated T. S. Eliot, introducing Modernism to the literary circles of Taiwan. Later, along with some friends, he helped establish the Bamboo Hat Poetry Society. He embraces a profound love of the Taiwanese homeland. In his poems evoking the natural scenery of mountains and forests that we have discussed above, we see a full rendition of his impressions of, and affection for, Taiwan. In “Confessions

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of Island and Well” we find a confession of that deep emotional attachment to Taiwan. He points out how Taiwan’s “… hundred peaks have towered / Its forests dense / its charming forms ever changing.” Everywhere, one finds emerald forests, green rivers, and warm, kindhearted people who live free and at ease. It is a land incomparably blessed.

Xiang Yang, who writes of Taiwan’s homeland in Taiwanese and bilingual verse, inscribes an entirely different vision of the land and customs of Taiwan. Xiang Yang’s home is in Nantou, in central Taiwan. The two pieces, “Fog Descended” and “Small Station,” relate his experience of leaving home to go to university in Taipei, and his thoughts of home. His constant thoughts of his father, along with his memories of the scenery of his hometown, are like the sentiments of a traveler in a distant land. The broadly appealing “Dad’s Bento Box” and “My Brother-in-law the Hand Puppeteer” are reminiscences of his old home written in Taiwanese. The former conjures images of a working-class father, as well as writing of everyday life in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite the hardships, this was a life filled with deep, warm emotion.

The latter piece takes “hand puppet theatre” (budai xi) as a symbol of traditional culture, and reflects upon its tremendous popularity in Taiwan during the 1970s. Through a narration of a child’s memories, this is a delightful tale of how an elder sister and a puppet master from a hand puppet troupe become a couple, and how their relationship shifts from bliss, to conflict, to reconciliation. The “Southeast faction” and “Northwest faction” that represent the good guys and bad guys respectively, are preserved in the communal memory of Taiwanese.

Su Shao-Lian is known for his prose poetry, but in recent years he has produced some outstanding poems based on his unique perception of space. Regardless of whether he engages with the scenic areas of his native place (Taichung), like the Gaomei Wetlands, or streets and alleyways, or portrays the relationship between people and the city, his work is filled with insightful and
meticulous reflection. For example, “Walking the Gray Street—Recollections of a Town in Hard Times,” depicts how his solitary footsteps along the streets of a country village on a lonely winter afternoon burn an imprint like the words of a bleak prose essay. The two pieces, “Retirement Psychology” and “Laolao Pavilion—For Taiwan’s Immigrant Laborers” portray the life of an old man and the situation of foreign workers in Taiwan in subtle detail. The city described in “Into the Creases of the City,” and “In the Unreal City” reveal concrete images of urban scenery and the unique rhythms of city life, but the insertion of the “I” narrator endows that city with abstract meaning, as if it were a city of time, and also an unreal city. The “I” is like a traveler roaming through time, performing an unrestrained dance with his words.

Of late, Du Ye has been actively portraying the places and people of Chiayi. However, his earlier poems dealing with folk customs and antiques have great satiric force. “The Vermillion Cupboard” is tethered to the “228 Incident”; “The Incense Burner of the Xuande Era,” “The Tin Candlestick,” and other works clearly mock history through antiques. The Ming dynasty, Qing dynasty, and Nationalist era all succeed each other, and the antiques seem to provide testament to it all. Du Ye’s interest in historical memory is also evident in “Sketches of Chiayi—The Red-Hairs’ Well” in which a mouthful of well water runs through all the historical eras of Taiwan. If you travel to Chiayi, you must try the turkey rice (literally, fire-chicken rice). Natives of Chiayi also love this popular snack with all its local flavor; thus, we feel a sense of great familiarity upon reading “Sketches of Chiayi—Fire-Chicken Rice.”

Chen Li lives in Hualien, but his depictions of the local color of Taiwan are not limited to Hualien. “The Edge of the Island” and “Formosa, 1661” reveal his broad vision of Taiwan’s history, tracing that history back to the Dutch Period. His images of Indigenous peoples are especially noteworthy. “History” and “Moonlight in the Ravine” belong to the “Imitations of Atayal Folksongs” series. They can also be viewed as the poet’s simulations.

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of Indigenous culture. “Green Onions” uses a combination of Japanese, Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Hakka to weave Taiwan’s historical memory and personal identity together. The activity of “buying green onions” on the abstract, fictional “Green-Onion Ridge (Pamir Mountains)” and on the actual streets of Hualien form an ingenious tour map.

Li Yu-Fang’s passion for her native land is derived from a concern for ecology and environmental protection. “Primeval Love—Sent to the Gaoping River,” “The Tropic of Cancer Slowly Passes through the Wetlands” and “We’re on a Badlands Journey” are good examples. She is particularly fond of making use of images from Indigenous culture in her poetry and has her own view of conflict and reconciliation between ethnic Han (Chinese) and Indigenous peoples, as we see in “Inside and Outside the Portiere,” and “Daughter of the Han People.” “The Southernmost Point in Taiwan” describes Eluanbi. On a cliffside swept by the ocean wind, Li Yu-Fang uses the Paiwan language “Masalu” (meaning “thank you”) to shout, “…give birth / to a child of this island / Masalu,” giving full expression to the wild, abundant life force of the female. This passion for Taiwan is also demonstrated in “The Smell of Rain.”

For a long time, Ling Yu travelled between Taipei and Ilan, and the train became one of the most common tropes in her writing. “Thau-Siann—In Memory of F;” “What I Like;” and “Train” all relate to time spent riding the train. The train elicits her emotions during her journeys on the tracks of the Mountain Line and on the Ocean Line. “My Pastorale” records the distress that Ling Yu felt about the crisis in the countryside where the land, “[H]as been alienated. Sold. Worried / Tea pickers and machines conspire— / The song fades.” In “Distant Places” She writes of the tranquil life of the countryside and rural spaces. Ilan is by the ocean, so from the cottage in the poem she can watch the surging of the ocean waves, “That voice / Brings us life.” Ling Yu’s pastoral verse relates to life in the country villages of Ilan, but it also reaches
beyond that context to present an abstract philosophy.

Chang Fang Ci rose to prominence in poetic circles on the basis of her identity as a Hakka and a woman. “We Are Here” says that her attachment to her native soil is firm and resolute, and that no outside force can stand in its way. “Baby Sling” refers to a sling for carrying a baby on the back and is a touching evocation of a mother’s labors in nurturing her children. Chang’s verse most often displays her concern for her native land and her mother language. “Voice of the Conch—A Message for Lukang Elementary School” was inspired by the poet’s experience of serving on a judging committee at a mother-tongue speech competition at Lukang Elementary School. The poem begins in 1896 during the Japanese rule of Taiwan when Lukang Elementary School became a “National Language Education Center.” However, the national language referred to was Japanese, while the mother tongues of Taiwanese people were suppressed. It was not until the present day, 120 years later, that they could return to their origins through the sound of children reciting from their books. Chang thus asks in earnest, “The conch that is the whole language / Who will come to blow it, who will come to speak?”

The subject of the city in modern Taiwanese poetry has been quite extensively developed. Luo Men’s (1928–2017) “Death in the City” depicted urban scenes during the 1950s and 1960s, projecting his vision of modern civilization, material and spiritual. It deserves to be considered as a classical work. The manner in which later poets have treated the city has presented other modalities. With the coffee house as an indicator of urban recreation, poets have deployed depictions of coffee houses to echo their responses to the times. For example, Chen Ichih’s “Private Room in a Cafe, the 1970s” speaks of the currents of lust flowing in private coffee house rooms with their high-backed seats and dim lighting. There is also implied resistance to the system.

Lee Min Yung’s “Street Scene” and “A Summer Afternoon in the Post-Cold-War Age” both take the coffee house as a salient
of the cityscape. In the coffee house, the ruminations of the poet along with his aloof observations of the world conceal resistance to the structures of reality. Lee has many compositions relating to the city; “This City” and “City Phenomena” both delineate the rapid rhythms of urban life. The scene, “Mixed with the high-decibel sound of a horn / The city, crushed under heavy tires / Screams without stopping” genuinely makes the heartbeat speed up. In Horng Shuling’s “Sparrows,” the hopping and chirping of sparrows is a reflection of life in the city, where the sparrows bring more joy to the city than those who wantonly create an uproar.

The special characteristic of the city that Yan Ai-Lin deals with is the alienating effect of material objects on people. Take, for example, the automatic vending machine. This is a machine of convenience commonly found in various locations in a city. However, while on the surface Yen’s “Super Vending Machine” indicates that these machines are a convenience for people, what she is actually implying is that in high-speed, high-pressure modern society, people cannot avoid feeding their souls to the monster of desire. “Parking Spot” employs car parking spots that everyone competes for in the rush of busy urban traffic as a metaphor for the rapid transformations of modern love. What we find exposed here is the independent consciousness of women no longer fettered by love.

(iii) Awareness of Reality and Poetic Imagination in the Quotidian

Poets reside in their words. It is not that they do not take note of routine daily affairs and the minutia of business. On the contrary, they forge new meaning from those things. Their poetic imaginations give voice to acute, probing meanings and far-reaching contemplation.

In Lee Min Yung’s writing of the quotidian, aside from the above-mentioned verse relating to the city and coffee houses, we also find many pieces that take everyday life as a starting
point for demonstrating a consciousness of resistance in historical memory and political realities. For example, “Sunday Afternoon at the Museum of Fine Arts” appears to be a casual, uncontrived description of life on a day off, but is in fact the poet’s rueful appreciation of a certain Taiwan nativist artist’s painting, while in “Underground Radio Station” he makes use of the occasion of an interview and poetry reading on an underground radio station to console memories of pain: “My poems / Replace the vanished angels / Replace the hidden stars / Search out the wounded hearts.”

In his depictions of everyday life, Li Kuei-shien, a veteran of the Bamboo Hat Poetry Society, also manages to express profound meaning in subtle ways. Of the two poems, “Parrot” and “Sparrows,” the former employs the trope of a parrot that can speak to satirize the obsequiousness of those who submit to power and also mocks the hegemonic posturing of autocrats. The latter piece presents a sparrow that refuses to be controlled and kept as a metaphor for independent subjectivity. “Stone Tablet” may pertain to the erecting of the “228 Memorial Stone Tablet,” but Li abstracts and universalizes his meaning such that the memorial becomes a token representing promise and hope for the future.

When speaking of mundane objects, Taiwan’s tea is world famous. In Taiwan, the growing, processing and grading of tea has long been an everyday sight. However, in recent years, Hsiao Hsiao Hsiao has devoted himself to tea-tasting and writing about tea. We find allusions to Chan/Zen thought embodied in his tea poems where the act of tea tasting takes on philosophical meaning. We see evidence of Hsiao Hsiao Hsiao’s pursuit of Chan in “Four Breaths of a Flower’s Scent,” and “The Wind Enters the Pines.” In “What’s on the Mind of Tea” “One Tea Leaf,” and “Sun Moon Red Tea,” we see further examples of how, through his descriptions of the forms of tea leaves, tea brewing, and tea incense, he reveals a contemplative understanding of time and human affairs: “Clouds and water linger / As for me, I calmly await a single leaf of tea.”
Horng Shuling’s “Earthquake Diary” documents the great earthquake that occurred on September 21, 1999. Faced with this sudden catastrophe, she responds with everyday food items like corn flakes, soda crackers, and instant noodles. Such simple foodstuffs refer to the vestiges of the disaster, like collapsed buildings and human casualties, and they also serve as a means of giving vent to her feelings of grief. “On the Breakfast Table” also draws a lament for economic depression and untimely death from the rhythms of the everyday. The two compositions, “The Rocks of Time—On the Basalt Columns of Penghu” and “Written in Lukang for My Daughter,” portray the scenery of Penghu and Lukang, but the latter piece actually reveals more of a mother’s love for her daughter.

How far is everyday life really removed from social reality? Lee Chin-Wen’s “Sun Yat-sen and I: October Tenth, the One Hundredth Year of Our Republic” provides a unique and subtle commentary on historical memory and political reality. Aside from its poetic imagery and a blending of realist satire with a feeling of hopelessness, the piece overflows with a sense of comedic absurdity. Lee’s creative ability to meld reality with imagination is already manifest in his early verse, “The Independent Travels of a Spanish Coin.” A single Spanish peso is not only a memento of a trip, it is an unrestrained poetic dance that traverses the stage of history in Taiwan and the world. By comparison, “Song of the Puyuma” is a sketch of the scenery of Taiwan’s east coast railway. Lee also yearns to pursue sensations of delight in everyday life. “Like the Light in a Chagall” and “The Little Joys” draw the reader into a world filled with poetic sentiment.

3. Conclusion

Contemporary poetry in Taiwan has flourished and deals with many diverse subjects. However, due to the limitations of
space, in this special issue we have chosen to highlight the themes of “the local and the quotidien” in the hope that in this way we can bring to light certain aspects of the creative artistry of the poets and contemporary society in Taiwan. Taiwan’s geographic positioning is unique. Her ethnic mix and history is complex. Yet her poets have not been remiss in their pursuit of creative artistry. New poetry in Chinese has now traversed a century. As for the development of new poetry in Taiwan, if we do not limit the languages that it was written in, we find that in April of 1924, in the Tokyo-issued Taiwan magazine, the Taiwanese poet Hsieh Chun-mu (pen name Zhui Feng), published his “Poems in Imitation” quartet in Japanese, which included “In Praise of the Savage King,” “Eulogy to Coal Dust,” “Love Grows Robust,” and “Before the Flowers Bloom.” Thus, Taiwanese new poetry has a history of more than ninety years and is about to surpass one hundred years. Chen Chien-wu’s “two flower bulbs of Taiwanese new poetry” have already blossomed and borne fruit. Even more, they have contributed to the great, robust state of contemporary Taiwanese poetry that makes us look forward to the next glorious hundred years.

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