

How to Do Things with Poetry—An Introduction to Modern Poetry from Taiwan

By Michelle Yeh

Who carries the memory of the soil on their back

Who refuses the fantasies of the wind?

—Ma Yihang, 'Family Tomb'

In the century-long history of modern poetry in Chinese, Taiwan stands out for its unparalleled diversity and creativity. Even during the Japanese Occupation (1895–1945) and the White Terror (1949–1987) under the rule of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT), poets in Taiwan never stopped writing and publishing. Modern poetry originated in Taiwan in the 1920s, when poets drew on modern Japanese poetry on the one hand, and the New Poetry 新詩 in mainland China on the other, as models. It is no wonder that the earliest modern poetry in Taiwan was written in both Japanese and Chinese. Those who wrote in Chinese either spent time on the mainland for education or employment, or received an education in Chinese in their childhood and expressly resisted the colonial rule on the island.

However, as the colonial rule entered the 1930s, Japanese became the only literary language for most, if not all, poets. For example, the Le Moulin Poetry Club 風車詩社, active in 1933–1934, consisted of seven poets, four of whom were Taiwanese and three were Japanese. The name of the group was inspired by the famous cabaret in Paris on the one hand, and the common presence of windmills in the poets' hometown, Tainan. More importantly, it embraced Surrealism in sharp contrast to Realism, which was the mainstream at the time. Although short-lived, Le Moulin represents the earliest influence of Surrealism in Taiwanese history, which predated similar developments in mainland China by a few years. After the Sino-Japanese War broke out in July 1937, Japan instituted the policy of *Kōminka* 皇民化, which aimed to turn all Taiwanese people into 'imperial citizens'. Henceforth, all Taiwanese literature was written in Japanese, even as some of it critiqued colonial rule.

In the post-war period, the KMT banned Japanese as part of its effort to re-sinicize Taiwan. As a result, poets who had been educated in Japanese could no longer publish their work. With a few exceptions, it would take them years to learn Chinese and be able to write and publish again. The poet and literary theorist Lin Hengtai 林亨泰 (b.1924) coined the term ‘the translingual generation’ 跨越語言的一代 to refer to those poets. A direct consequence of the silence of Taiwanese poets was that the poetry scene in the 1950s was dominated by the new émigrés from mainland China at the end of the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. They popularized the young tradition of modern poetry from mainland China: from Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897–1931) in the formative period to the Modernists in Shanghai in the 1930s, with the caveat that those who were considered leftist or Communist were banned. Moreover, despite the conservative socio-cultural climate in post-war Taiwan, Anglo-American and Western European literatures were permitted, even welcomed, by the KMT. Combined, these sources inspired a new generation of poets to engage in a wide range of literary experiments, from Romanticism and Symbolism to Modernism and Surrealism. Poetry clubs and poetry journals thrived; their influences even spread from Taiwan to Hong Kong and South-east Asia.

Therefore, it is only appropriate that this special issue begins with some of the first-generation poets in post-war Taiwan: Bai Qiu 白萩 (1937–2023), Lin Ling 林冷 (b.1938), Fang Xin 方莘 (b.1939), Luo Ying 羅英 (1940–2012), and Yang Mu 楊牧 (1940–2020). They were all associated with the major poetry clubs in the 1950s–1960s: the Modernist School 現代派, the Blue Stars 藍星詩社, and the Epoch 創世紀詩社. Although their creative careers display dramatically different trajectories, these trajectories have become familiar patterns among poets in Taiwan. For example, Bai Qiu started out as a Modernist in the 1950s. In 1964, he became one of the founders of the Bamboo Hat Poetry Club 笠詩社, which, in its early years, continued to display the Modernist ethos before it embraced Nativism. The contestation between Modernism and Nativism rose to the surface in the 1970s, against the background of the setbacks that Taiwan suffered in the international arena and the progress of the democracy movement on the island. The former caused some poets to advocate a return to the Chinese roots and Taiwanese society, and the latter eventually led to the lifting of martial law in 1987 and full democratization in the 1990s. In the intervening

decades, many poets reoriented their writing in subject matter and language, from Modernism to Neoclassicism and Nativism.

To this day, it is common to see a mix of these styles in a poet's work. Even when some poets deal with social issues in a Realist mode, it does not preclude them from using Modernist techniques. The same is true of Neoclassicism. At least until recent years, classical Chinese has been the core of mandatory education from elementary through high school. Generally speaking, poets in Taiwan are more versed in the Chinese classics—philosophical essays, literary prose, and classical poetry—than their counterparts in the mainland, with its different educational system. Even though most younger poets write in the colloquial language, they don't hesitate to use classical allusions. 'Encountering Sorrow' 離騷 by Xu Peifen 徐珮芬 (b.1986), on p. 136, is an example.

Since the May Fourth period, many modern poets have studied abroad. For example, many of the pioneers of New Poetry—such as Wen Yiduo 聞一多 (1899–1946), Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), Xu Zhimo, Li Jinfa 李金髮 (1900–1976), and Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905–1993)—studied, respectively, in the United States, Japan, Britain, France, and Germany. This tradition has continued in Taiwan to this day. Among the first-generation Modernists, Lin Ling and Fang Xin left Taiwan after they graduated from college and pursued advanced education and established themselves as professionals in the United States. Often characterized as an 'academic poet' 學院詩人, even the foremost poet of the 'academic school' 學院派 in Taiwan, Yang Mu received his PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley and had a long and distinguished career as a professor and scholar in the United States, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This has become a familiar pattern among poets of subsequent generations. Many have graduate degrees in literature—from domestic or foreign institutions—and hold positions at universities in Taiwan. In this special issue, Ling Yu 零雨 (b.1952), Sun Weimin 孫維民 (b.1959), Jiang Wenyu 江文瑜 (b.1961), Yang Jiaxian 楊佳嫻 (b.1978), and Ma Yihang 馬翊航 (b.1982) are all professors. While overseas experience and academic training are no guarantee of good poetry, they certainly broaden one's horizon both in life and in literature.

As Taiwan became democratic and censorship ended, we have seen diversity on full display in the authorship and language of modern poetry. Indigenous poets, Hakka poets, and gay and lesbian poets have been active and prominent

in the poetry scene, and poets are free to write about any subject matter in any manner. In this special issue, Ma Yihang comes from the Kasavakan tribe of the indigenous Puyuma ethnic group, and Sao Xia 騷夏 (b.1978) is well known for her poems about lesbian desire. Diversity is also manifest in experiments in hybrid multimedia representations of poetry. Some poets are no longer content with writing poetry in the conventional sense but treat poetry as contiguous with other forms of expression. For example, Wu Yu-Hsüan 吳俞萱 (b.1983) not only combines poetry with photography, which others have done, but turns poetry into action art by responding to each reader's word of choice and placing the poem thus created in a physical site associated with the word and the poem. This special issue also includes some of the ninety-nine Tarot cards created by Ye Mimi for her spiritual counselling sessions, with each card composed of a one-line verse. These recent innovations are consistent with Taiwan's history of making poetry a part of public space and everyday life since the 1970s, through music, dance, theatre, video, and other media.

It is intriguing that many innovations in recent years have come from women poets. The fact that seventeen of the twenty-three poets featured in this special issue are women is indicative of their vitality and impact. They write about romantic and familial relationships, the female body and sexuality, as well as nature and society. While those born in the 1950s, such as Ling Yu and Chen Yuhong 陳育虹 (b.1952) included here, continue to write exciting work, younger generations born in the 1970s and 1980s are bold in pushing the boundaries of poetic form and content. Many of these women don't simply write poetry but live it in everyday life.

Taiwan's achievement in modern poetry has much to do with its uninterrupted development in a relatively open and free environment. The contrast with mainland China could not be starker when we consider the fact that the 1950s–1960s were a golden age for modern poetry in Taiwan, whereas under Mao, with a series of political movements targeting the intellectuals, poets stopped writing—the lucky ones were allowed to focus on translation and scholarship, but others were silenced for decades. Political disasters not only caused irreversible interruptions in literary development but, more fundamentally, eroded the cultural legacy—including the classical literary tradition—of China. Last but not least, the large number and significant

impact of women poets distinguish Taiwan from mainland China, where, with the exception of a handful of famous women poets, the poetry scene is still dominated by men. For all of these reasons, we celebrate Taiwan with this special issue.

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Hsu Yu-Jen. 'Sea Flowing Unstopping...Forms
Floating Sinking...', 2006. ink on silk, overall:
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