

Poetic Taiwan: Island of Dreams, Doubt and Hope

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Often overlooked in a contemporary age that commercially and perhaps even artistically assigns more weight to the novel, short story and autobiography, poetry seems to be a particularly apt medium to culturally represent Taiwan, where both the island and literary form constitute marginalised entities. This paper seeks to examine the varying attitudes of modern and contemporary Taiwanese poets towards their native land through a historical lens, acknowledging but ultimately moving beyond the formal categories of major poetic schools such as the Modernist School (代派), Blue Star(星), and Epoch (世). The first part of the paper will provide a brief historical overview of the rise of modern poetry in Taiwan, highlighting the relationship between literary and political developments –in particular, how poetry had a very direct role to play in creating a Taiwanese identity that was ultimately distinct from its various political influences –the Japanese, mainland China, and Kuomintang regime. The remaining bulk of the paper focuses more on the literary, closely analysing the form and content of specific works. Regardless of which “school” of poetry each example comes from (if any) and despite any stylistic differences, what emerges is a shared ambivalence towards three aspects of the Taiwanese experience: the island’s geography, the people’s social and cultural identity, and the poet’s craft itself. Under each issue, poems from the mid-20th century and late 20th to early 21st century are used to explore each issue, drawing comparisons and parallels between the modern and more contemporary era to underscore the constant negotiation between idealism, cynicism and optimism that will continue to characterise the experience of being Taiwanese at both an individual and national level.

The Legacy of Language

Tracing Taiwan’s colonial and political history through language offers a preliminary but essential timeline to understanding the development of a unique literary scene. To begin, during

the Japanese occupation, Chinese was ultimately banned in public and Taiwanese students were also discriminated against in the educational system, denied opportunities for higher learning (Frontier 13). The earliest modern poems published in Taiwan were therefore written in Japanese, and the few native students who were deemed worthy of further education often received training in Japan. It was precisely these youth who went abroad who began to form organisations and publications that rebelled against colonisation and asserted a Taiwanese identity, including the use of Chinese despite censorship (Frontier 14). Nonetheless, those who grew up under the Japanisation programs knew little about their mother tongue and by the time the island was returned to mainland China in 1945, the cultural and linguistic backgrounds between the two countries were significant. Under the Nationalist government's policies of decolonisation, Japanese and the native dialect Hokkien were both banned, along with any Taiwanese literature from the colonial period (Frontier 20).

These fluctuations of the national language thus placed Taiwan's postcolonial culture in a unique and middling position, with significant implications on its literary landscape. Taiwanese writers were essentially caught between two languages they could not fully identify with: Japanese which was no longer permitted, and Chinese which they had yet to achieve full command of (Frontier 20). This linguistic narrative in turn profoundly shaped a literary generation distinctive to Taiwan –the “silenced generation” who continued to write and publish in Japan, or simply stopped altogether, and the “translingual generation” who made the transition from Japanese to Chinese. Yet even the latter group's persistence in continuing to contribute to a national literature was stunted by the decade or so it would take for them to attain enough proficiency to write and publish in China. For this reason, the poetry scene was particularly affected; indeed, it is no accident that the majority of modern poetry published between 1949 and

1955 were by émigré writers (Frontier 21). In addition, the three poetry societies that formed the main pillars of modern poetry in the 1950s –the Modernist School, Blue Star and Epoch –were dominated by émigré poets who held cultural capital with their more advanced linguistic skills (Frontier 21). In their new homeland, it would be up to them to carve out and consolidate a space for a distinct Taiwanese literature.

Taking the Politics out of Poetry

That the very material of the Taiwanese poet's craft –language –was dictated by the ruling regime which in turn had significant effects in phasing out certain writers and favouring others, demonstrates an almost inextricable link between literature and politics that would continue to be reinforced by the Kuomintang regime after the civil war. The government's strict anticommunist line extended into an official cultural policy that encouraged "combat literature and art" with anticommunist or nationalistic messages, and provided incentives in the form of publication and lucrative prizes (Frontier 22). The anticommunist agenda had even further ramifications that specifically hindered the growth of modern poetry. Despite a vernacular movement in the 1920s and Zhang Qingrong's 1924 definitive essay "The Terrible Literary Scene in Taiwan" which attacked classical poetry and called for a new iconoclasm, the tradition and prestige of classicism remained firmly ingrained as late as the 1950s –no less because of the KMT's promotion of it as a strategic tool to consolidate its power. Indeed, preserving the classical Chinese tradition was part of its justification for being the sole legitimate government of China (Frontier 24). The general cooptation of the literary landscape by such a political agenda thus had direct ramifications on the development of modern poetry: on the one hand, it instigated a renewed effort at a literary revolution, spearheaded by Ji Xian, founder of the Modernist school, who pushed for the separation of modern poetry from the state's official and political discourse. At

the same time however, most modern poetry journals were independently funded, and financial restrictions meant that poets also conceded to anticommunist discourse and its rewards in order to sustain their publications (Frontier 27). By strategically engaging with the government's prescriptions, these poets were able to appropriate some cultural capital and gradually transformed the literary field from within. By the mid-1960s, the modern poetry scene in Taiwan was firmly established and in addition to classical poetry no longer posing a threat came the emergence of native Taiwan poets who had successfully made the linguistic transition from Japanese to Chinese. Having broken free from the cultural dictates of the KMT, Taiwanese modern poetry was finally carving out a liberated space for the flourishing of its art.

A Collective National Poetry

As the discussion so far indicates, it is natural and even necessary to an extent to draw connections between the emergence of a distinctly Taiwanese tradition of modern poetry and the island's provocative political history. Dominic Cheung adds the further explanation that when the Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan in 1949, it naturally turned to a Western model for its political and intellectual content, actively opposing the leftist influences that pervaded the literary environment on the mainland. This distinction was explicitly outlined in the poetic manifesto of Ji Xin in 1956 to mark the formation of the Modernist School of poetry: "We are patriotic, anticommunist, and support freedom and democracy." Interpreting this as an ethos of transplanting western modern poetry into Chinese soil, the Blue Star poetry society was founded in 1954 as a reaction, advocating the Chinese lyric. In the same year, Epoch was created and promoted a "national poetic form" which focused on the presentation of images.

Although these categories are useful to some extent in providing an outline of the kind of literary circles that existed at the time, trying to assign poets and their writing to corresponding

groups would be to oversimplify and homogenise their works. In fact, the boundaries of the groups were more fluid than restricted; many major poets from Epoch were once active Modernists, and others such as Lo Men were involved in all three societies. Furthermore, one should be careful about conflating artistic expression and political ideology, and the official mandates of each group should not be taken as prescriptive criteria. The Modernist manifesto was more of a personal mission statement on Ji Xin's part –in fact, many writers consciously avoided anti-communist poetry that would fall in line with the KMT's propaganda, a telling sign of how art and literature, though often politically charged, ultimately occupy their own realm and remain autonomous from the political sphere. Indeed, it is a fine line that distinguishes it from propaganda.

Instead of analysing the poetry from each of these groups as three different representations and perspectives of Taiwan which would ignore the nuances and contradictions within each group, it is far more useful to keep in mind that they are subcategories under the larger umbrella of modern poetry in general. The overarching common characteristic that all share is a departure from the classic tradition, identifiable in the transition to the Chinese vernacular language, and the adoption of free verse over formal and prosodic conventions. These shifts away from elevated diction and rigid constructions importantly signified a kind of literary liberalisation in the production and consumption of poetry, where writers were able to experiment artistically, and their works were made more accessible to the general public.

The Land, People, and Poets of Taiwan

The marginalised status of Taiwan from the mainland at the time no doubt formed a significant topic, and poets both embraced and lamented its special status. In “Beautiful Island”

(1950) (Sailing to Formosa 18), Yang Huan (杨 欢) depicts a highly idyllic, almost fantastical image of Taiwan:

She is a kingdom of honey-sweet sugar,
as lovely as a fairy tale, a lovely treasure island

Nature and abundance dominates the island, where “beautiful flowers”, “green coconut palms”, “bananas and pineapples” all make up a kind of prelapsarian world that recalls the Garden of Eden, an allusion that is reinforced by the symbolic presence of children in their innocent and unfallen state “as happy skylarks”. Moreover, Taiwan is personified as a maternal figure, “loyally keeping watch” over her creation which is kept safe in “mama’s arms”. The overall impression is one of pure bliss and contentment, to such an extent that it almost alerts the reader to be sceptical. The references to “fairy tale” and “treasure island” point to a childlike perspective and the unreal quality of this island is heightened by the speaker’s question:

Are you, little girl, dreaming of bananas and pineapples
dancing in the street?
Why else would you be smiling
as you sleep in your mama’s arms?

The key words subtly inserted here are “dreaming” and “sleep” –suddenly the poem enters the interior realm of imagination, throwing all prior descriptions into doubt. As the line between fancy and reality is increasingly blurred, the reader is left questioning the authenticity of Yang’s island. The poem is not so much a sensory description so much as a psychological construction of Taiwan. Nonetheless, this wishful thinking still reveals a hopeful, optimistic perception of Taiwan as a “kingdom” that stands in its own right, able to provide for and protect its people.

“The Promised Land” (1993) (Sailing 116) by Wang Tianyuan (王添源) forms an interesting point of comparison in its contemporary echoes of “Beautiful Island’s” high idealism. It too contains Biblical undertones in its title, and lines such as “bread, milk, and honey” also connote the American dream and pioneers. But just as “Beautiful Island” exists more in a dream world than reality, so too does this promised land lack materialisation. Instead, it is something “they’ve pledged” –and the ambiguity that surrounds “they” –whether it refers to the government, or some higher god-like force –only adds to the sense of detachment from the “rose garden we cannot enter”.

In stark contrast to the romanticised and even naive depictions of “Beautiful Island” and “The Promised Land” that seem unattainable, Luo Dayou’s (羅大佑) “The Orphan of Asia” (1983) (Sailing 76) portrays Taiwan’s isolation not as a surreal fabrication, but a gritty case of abandonment:

The orphan of Asia is crying in the wind
 Nobody cares to play fair with you
 Everybody tries to take your favourite toy
 Tell me why you are crying my dear boy

In an inversion of the mother figure that characterises “Beautiful Island”, Taiwan is personified here as a forgotten child. The last line, “Dear Mother, can you tell me what this is all for” refers to an external parental figure that represents an appeal to the mainland and perhaps the larger world. Indeed, this Taiwan lacks security, confidence and self-sufficiency –the geography of the land is symbolically conflated with the boy’s “yellow face stained with crimson mud”, emphasising an earthiness in contrast to the lush “beloved Spring” environment in Yang Huan’s poem. The tone of “helpless dejection” is particularly condensed into the poem’s last stanza,

where the consecutive repetition of “How many” produces an unrelenting rhythm that effectively creates a tone of despair. Moreover, the lack of a question mark is also significant in underscoring a lack of expectation for a satisfactory response to “the unanswerable question” concerning the country’s silent suffering, where people “wipe away their tears without a word”.

Also significant is the form of the poem being in fact a popular song –not only an indication of its relevance and dissemination amongst the broader public, but also a hearkening back to Ji Xin’s earlier distinguishing of poetry from song as a way to distance modern poetry’s development from classicism. The fact that Luo’s piece of writing is a conflation of both genres and is able to be read as poem in its own right represents a further move towards accessibility, straddling the borders of art, politics and popular culture.

Reading “The Orphan of Asia” in conjunction with “My Pen” (1976) (Sailing 74) by Chen Xiuxi (修喜) provides further insight into the theme of marginalisation, where the former poem’s sense of victimisation can be understood as “The sorrow of having been colonised” espoused by the latter. Like Luo, Chen also employs the human face as a symbolic canvas of Taiwan –a highly visual technique that speaks to the intimate relationship shared between one’s country and one’s identity. Unlike Luo’s boy however, Chen’s face is a woman’s –a significant choice that strongly conveys a historical and social narrative of oppression and occupation:

Eyebrows are the colony of the eyebrow pencil

Lips the enclosed territory of the lipstick

There is a two-fold commentary that is taking place in this extended metaphor. At one level, the face functions as a microcosmic map, where the association of certain features with “colony” and “enclosed territory” are subject to the overriding control of “the eyebrow pencil” and “the

lipstick” –clear allusions to the rule of the Portuguese and Japanese that formed a colonialist legacy for the island. On a more social level, Chen’s opening lines also speak to the experience of being a woman, where her facial features are quite literally colonised and taken over by the application of make-up. Associating these feminine actions with the aggressive language of colonialism adds violent undertones to the standards of beauty that women are expected to conform to, and Chen contrasts these artificial cosmetic pens with the pen of truth:

I am happy my pen

Paints neither eyebrows nor lips

These self-referential lines draw attention to the role of the poet and the function of writing, which to Chen seems to be to discover and affirm one’s identity –something that is achieved by the end of the poem in her repetition of “I am Chinese/I am Chinese/”. There is an implicit criticism of those –writers or not –who “paint” Taiwan as something external to themselves. For Chen, it is the pen of self-expression –filled with “surging blood” of both pain and passion –that forms an individual’s identity, and by extension a more authentic understanding of one’s country, a conclusion embodied in the last line’s collective statement “We are all Chinese”.

If “The Pen” had a contemporary counterpart, it would likely be Li Kuixian’s (李魁 ▪) “I won’t write poems for you anymore” (1994) (Sailing 1994) –a sweeping address that both exhibits the power of expression whilst at the same time calling it into question. The overall irony embodied by the poem exemplifies the modern sentiment of ambivalence that seems to increase with the progression of the modern age: the only way that the speaker can articulate his rejection of Taiwanese poetry is through a poem. He acknowledges that “My poetry cannot prescribe cures” and claims that “it has begun to shrink/and slowly wither” –a contradiction to the expansive and free-flowing form of the very poem he has written. Moreover, the trajectory of

the poem gradually moves from bitterness and resentment to hope and anticipation. Again, the physical environment of the land is used to draw an analogy to the spirit of the land:

Taiwan you still remain muddled
 your rivers are still putrid
 your air still sneezes
 your soil is still cancerous
 your leaders still play politics

Here, geographical pollution is equated to political pollution and corruption, and a causal relationship that goes both ways seems to be insinuated. Once again, repetition plays an important stylistic role in evoking a tone of attack and assignment of blame in “your”, and the double meaning in “still” highlights the perpetual stasis and lack of change in the country. However, a turning point of occurs at the signal of “Only”, which singles out “an undying heart” as immune to the feeling of pessimism that pervades the poem. More specifically, it “awaits the rebirth of poetry”, signifying the cyclical and regenerative process of poetry. Indeed, this is what the speaker has undergone himself –it is exactly through voicing his cynicism about self-expression that he resurrects it, and this revival of the poetic self extends to a new understanding about one’s cultural and national identity. In the same way that Chen proclaims “We are Chinese”, so too does Li identify himself with a larger consciousness, looking forward “to see our own flag waving” and “to hear our own song ringing”. Taken together, these poems are not overt political or nationalist statements, but rather insights into the complex and conflicted processes of accepting, challenging and creating the many images of Taiwan, and in doing so constantly evaluating what it means to own a Taiwanese identity.

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