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Chapter 23 Modern Taiwan Literature

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# To update our last interpretive account of modern Taiwan literature, we highlight two more recent trends: postmodern parody and vernacular cosmopolitan. They largely grow out of a context in which Taiwan must cultivate its international visibility as it is constantly threatened by China in the forms of economic, military, and diplomatic pressure. To find new ways to rearticulate the local traditions has become a disruptive impulse for many Taiwanese writers, when they realize that they can’t naively claim themselves to be just cultural members of the Sinophone (or a Greater China) community. In many respects, postmodern cynicism or parody offers a vernacular alternative or twist in exposing the global cultural politics as provincial and unstable, or even deepfake and implosively obscene. A new ethical and aesthetical awakening about what makes Taiwanese culture relatively unique enables writers such as Chu Tianwen to offer parodic views of postmodern cultural products from the West—simulacra, mindfulness, or even queer discourse. Younger generations even go steps further by giving voices to the local, in learning from the environments, the subaltern, or the almost obliterated, if not totally forgotten. Wu Ming-yi’s semi-autobiographical novel regarding father’s stolen bicycle, for one, takes us back to not merely the family histories, but the multiple traces of Taiwan’s colonial past. His more recent work, *The Land of Little Rain,* draws on a cosmopolitan work by Mary Austin while revealing instances of climate science across borders. Contemporary Taiwanese authors follow their footsteps in tracing the hidden clues and by unearthing what lies buried. As a result, ghost stories prevail, often fused with science fiction and LGBTQ, local politics, social media, artificial intelligence, multisensorial (memory, affect, among others) dimensions.

# As we have discussed in 2016, a number of interpretive accounts regarding the trends of modern Taiwan literature are available. They tend to highlight a set of dialectics such as nativism/modernism, first/third world, or local/global cultural economy in response to uneven development and outsourcing processes (Chang 1993; Yip 2004); dwell on the displaced Chinese authors and their “post-loyalist” nostalgic memories of the homeland well lost (David Wang 2013: 93–116); examine the resistance to regionalism (Hillenbrand 2007); or zoom in on the political impact of the trans-Pacific Cold War and of the White Terror (Xiaojue Wang 2013). Over the years, scholars like Kuei-fen Chiu, Ying-che Huang, Liang-ya Liou, and several others have also proposed to describe the historical trajectory of modern Taiwan literature in terms of alternative, colonial, multiple, vernacular, or translated modernity. More recently, Shu-mei Shih has advocated, on the other hand, Sinophone discourse in view of Taipei as a cultural capital of such a publishing industry.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To some extent, these modalities can help us conceptualize the island state’s innovative energy and dynamics, but to comprehend its complex, entangled cultural fields we may have to consider artists’ critical genealogies and competing identities as shaped by local linguistic and social constituencies, among other aesthetic, ethnic, political, regional, or trans-regional factors. This is most manifest in the ways the postwar Taiwanese writers struggled with unstable bilingual situations between 1945 and 1949, when Mandarin Chinese was forced on them under the name of “re-sinification” or decolonization. The time lag between the Han Chinese and aboriginal writers who acquired and familiarized themselves with modernist modes of expression is even more uncannily revealing. Authors belonging to the latter category have only just begun to make their voices heard since the mid-1980s, after a long period of silence and reticence. Part of the conceptual framework problem seems to lie in an ethnocentric practice deeply rooted in the prevalent ideology of the Sinophone, often to the neglect of the other systems of cultural and psycho-social signification that have been repressed and even rendered obsolete by the multiple colonial regimes and neo-colonial presences on the island state.

A small island state rich in biodiversity, Taiwan is notable for its relatively unique expressive cultures around complex life situations generated by an entangled web of history and ethnicity. In many respects, modern Taiwan literature is built upon such a dynamic and diverse parameter of psycho-social formation, especially in the ways through which writers articulate mixed feelings about the differential communal and temporal experiences with modernization and democratization processes on unevenly local and global scales. Aboriginal authors, descendants of the Austronesian peoples who have lived in Taiwan for at least 15,000 years, re-invent their oral narrative traditions to highlight the minority’s frustrating sense of deprivation in their struggles to grapple with residual belief in ancestral spirits, while trying to be assimilated into a modern, neo-liberal society largely dominated by the Han Chinese. Hakka writers elaborate on their individual or family saga as “guests” in inner-exile, as strangers in their new homes. Though in the majority, Fujianese-speaking Taiwanese poets and novelists often appropriate the third-world rhetoric to cultivate the nativism and modernism that attempt to resist the Cold War ideology, state fetishism, and encroachment of the global cultural economy. The mainlander Chinese and their offspring develop Sinophone discourse through the tropes of nostalgia, mourning, and revival.

In terms of these historical trajectories and racial heritages, modern Taiwan writers are constituted by varying factors of immigration, not to mention by the multifaceted constituencies and effects of colonial modernity: early globalization and Dutch/Chinese co-colonization in the seventeenth century; Japanese imperialism (1895–1945); internal colonialism under the Kuomingtang (KMT) government (1947–1987); the US-led Cold War with its global deployment strategies; and international marginalization since 1972 (when America and Japan began diplomatic relations with the PRC) on top of a new world *dis*order. Because of the entanglements of temporality and ethnicity, we will need to question the validity of such arbitrary periodization schemata that a literary history of Taiwan should fall into three stages, as Fangmin Chen has advocated: colonial, re-colonial, and postcolonial (Chen 2011: 30). Even for years after 1987, a pivotal year which supposedly marks the beginning of Taiwan’s “postcolonial” era, aboriginal writers like Walis Norgan (1961–) still sarcastically comment: “This is 1996, but it’s like being back in the days when the island / belonged to the Japanese emperor” (Balcom 2005: 167). In his stories and essays, Norgan would often place his confused narrator, a stranger in his homeland, at the crossroads where the Democratic Progressive Party demonstrators are violently engaging the KMT police force, as if there were two raging bulls entangled to mutual destruction. The tribal peoples are left in the dark as to where the country is heading.

To do more justice to the trends in modern Taiwan literature then, I suggest that we take into account these critical genealogies and time lags while singling out seven dominant themes, and without losing sight of the differential temporalities: local Taiwanese writers’ anti-colonial resistance literature; Chinese diaspora and their modernist Sinophone articulations; nativism and hometown discourses; the aborigine’s eco-political writings; overseas student and global Sinophone literatures; post-1987 urban postmodern and queer discourses; and vernacular cosmopolitan rearticulations. While this assumes that some ethnic groups tend to be more informed and start earlier than others, we do not rule out the possibility that latecomers can be sometimes more advanced and forward-looking (into ethics or ecology, for example).

# Anti-colonial and translingual critical realism: 1920–1945

The first modernist trend in Taiwan literature was launched under the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945) when local writers and scholars began to experience what Karen Thornber aptly calls the “transculturation” processes with “texts in motion” across East Asia in the early twentieth century, so as to acquire modernism in the form of anti-colonial proletarian fiction, surrealist poetry, political drama, and critical realism, as more students from Taiwan and Korea traveled to study in Tokyo to expand their information networks and nebulae. Exposures of colonial racial discrimination, brutalities and corruptions, incongruities and mimicries, and so forth, are often at the core of such works as those by Lai He (or alternatively spelled as Lai Ho, 1894–1943), Yang Kuei (1905–1985), Lu Heruo (1914–1951), Lung Ying-tsung (1911–1999), Wang Chang-hsiung (1916–2000), and many others. In his seminal essay on “protest literature,” Yeh Shi-tao (1925–2008) highlights resistant motifs as found in Lai’s “The Steelyard” (1926), Yang’s “The Newspaper Carrier” (1932), Lu’s “Oxcart” (1935), and Lung’s “The Town with the Papaya Trees” (1937),[[2]](#footnote-2) to suggest that these works provide the keys to “unlock the door to freedom and democracy” (Yeh 2007: 158). However, the door to freedom and democracy would only open much later, while the “spirit of protest literature is to be carried onto the next generation,” a generation who found themselves to be Asia’s orphans, to quote Wu Zhuoliu (1900–1976), first caught in the Sino-Japanese War; then World War II, followed by the Chinese Civil War between the Nationalist and the Communist regimes, ending with up to two million mainlanders fleeing to Taiwan where Martial Law was soon introduced after the February 28 tragic incident in 1947.

In many respects, Lai He and the New Literature Movement inspired by him mark the beginning of anti-colonial resistant vernacular modernist discourse in Taiwan. A physician by profession, Lai He wrote to dissect social malaise and to expose political corruption, very much like Lu Xun or Frantz Fanon did. He made critical fiction in the tradition of realism a popular form, and several of his contemporaries pushed it further to show how the Taiwanese were exploited, mistreated, and tormented by the Japanese colonial regime. Lai not only wrote in Japanese, like many at the time, but also in classical Chinese and new vernacular prose (*baihua*), which was beginning to prevail in the mainland after the May Fourth Movement. In the 1920s, Taiwanese idioms mixed with Classical Chinese written characters were reinvented to give voice to new local expressions in the reaction against the colonial official Japanese language imposed on them and the imperial subjectification process known as “*kominka*.” Even the traditionalists tried to experiment with new science fiction, modern sentiments and sensibilities, popular culture, and a rich diversity of technological imagination, so that they could compose lyrics about the disparate world views, caught in the ambiguous third space of being neither quite Chinese nor Japanese.

When Sato Haruo (1892–1964), a distinguished writer in post-Meiji Japan, visited Taiwan for three months in 1920, on the invitation of a high-school classmate, he compared the customs and discursive practices of the Japanese and the Taiwanese, while being fascinated by the aborigines’ tall tales. Sato showed his keen interest in meeting a prominent poet in Taiwan, Hung Qisheng (1867–1929), of whom he had heard as being capable of doing all sorts of experiments with classical Chinese. Sato associates Hung’s poetry with Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal*, suggesting that the Taiwanese writer deploys the Chinese language in such innovative fashion that it sounds very French and modern. Sato considers this episode a climactic moment charged with “inexhaustible poetic thrills – even though accompanied by excruciating pains of extreme indigestion” (Sato 2002: 295). The way Sato praises the poet in terms of literary modernism and nativism, highlighting the aesthetic value of strangeness and obscurity while savoring the humor and cynical reason embedded in the poem, puts him totally apart from many of his Japanese colleagues who tend to be condescending and even in denial. Because of such a Sinophone reading encounter, Sato developed sympathetic affinity with local cultural dynamics to such extents that he found Taiwan’s tropical heat and humidity very refreshing. He even concluded his travels to the colony by predicting that Taiwanese would endure and might eventually outdo Japanese with their diligence and capacity to survive harsh weather.

# Chinese diaspora and cosmopolitan modernism: 1926–1986

Sato was, of course, not the only writer who traveled across Asia to discover modernism elsewhere. Inspired by Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929), a number of Taiwanese writers traveled in China to help introduce British, French, and German high modernist discourses. Liu Na’ou (1900–1940) was among many Taiwanese writers who returned to the imagined homeland to build a new China, to launch projects of translated modernity in 1926. Wu Zhuoliu also visited Nanking in 1933, and his bad experiences there are reconfigured in his masterpiece *Orphan of Asia* (1946), to allegorize about Taiwan’s ambiguous status and its uncertain future. Another Hakka writer, Zhong Lihe (1915–1960), moved with his fiancée to Manchuria in 1940, then advertised by the Japanese colonizers as a “brave new world” and a “land of equal opportunities.” After one year, Zhong was fed up with the colonial regime and racial discrimination there. He moved and spent six years in Beijing (1941–1946). He witnessed all sorts of political corruptions and incompetence in the government. One diary entry, dated October 13, 1945, compares the corruption of the time to disgusting scenes in a classical novel that discloses the “true insolent faces of the offices,” and suggests them to be even uglier: “No way will such horrendous, obscene Chinese stories end.”

Zhong returned to Taiwan in March of 1946, but was hospitalized in January 1947 because of tuberculosis. While in National Taiwan University Hospital, he was able to observe and offer first-hand accounts of the February 28 Incident and its drastic consequences. As he had no papers at hand, he recorded his concerns and confusions on the margins and backs of the prescription notes. He was shocked by the bloody violence and chaos. Traveling a long way back, suddenly Zhong found his homeland to be strange and un-homely, torn apart by sheer brutality and madness. Zhong didn’t live to see what happened to Jiang Wenye (1910–1983) and many Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution. Jiang traveled back to China in 1938; the nostalgia for his imaginary homeland almost got him killed when his Taiwanese identity was discovered by the Red Guards.

However, Zhong’s travel experience and his sagas of land and people portray Taiwan in a very different light, compared with those Chinese mainlanders who fled to the island between 1947 and 1949. Speaking of his formative years in the diaspora, the film maker Wang Tong, the son of a Chinese general retreating to the small island state after the KMT government was defeated by the Communist regime in the mainland, observed: “Living in Taiwan is like living in a foreign country. It’s very strange. When I arrived here, I felt like I was in Japan. But this place was full of Chinese people, Chinese temples, and so on. Later, American soldiers came onto this island. The complexity of this place makes it an excellent environment for filmmaking. There is no such country like Taiwan in the world” (Interview on July 16, 2002; Yeh and Davis 2005: 79). Wang Tong’s diaspora experience and mixed feelings about the island are exemplary, especially with his cultural background and ethnic heritage. In fact, Wang’s generation played vital roles in introducing Euro–American high modernism to Taiwan, most notably writers like Bai Xianyong (1937–), Wang Wenxing (1939–2023), Ya Xian (1932–), and many others who founded journals such as *Genesis*, *Modern Literature*, *Epoch*, *Modern Poetry*, and so on, to publish their own works side by side with translations of Apollinaire, Baudelaire, Beckett, Eliot, Faulkner, Hemingway, Joyce, Mallarme, Woolf, etc.[[3]](#footnote-3) In mid-October of 2014, the founding fathers (Zhang Mo, Ya Xian, and Luo Fu) of *Genesis* (launched in 1954) reunited in Taipei to celebrate its 60th anniversary, and their works, representing Chinese modernism at its best, are meticulously documented in a film series titled *Writing the Island* (*Daoyu xiezhou*). Let us quote a poem by Ya Xiang here to illustrate how trauma and memory of the homeland and nation well lost become abruptly banal and almost meaningless:

 Born of fire
In a buckwheat field where they met the most decisive battle of the war
His leg was parted from him in 1942.
He has heard history and the laughter of history.
What is imperishable –
Cough syrup, a razor, last month’s rent and the like?

(“The Colonel,” 1960)

In many ways, Bai Xianyong and his colleagues add new aesthetic dimensions to the embarrassingly rich corpus of modernist literature, not only in appropriating modern western textual strategies and sensibilities, but also in enriching avant-gardist, existential, feminist, and surrealist traditions by bringing the Sinophone, diasporic discourse in dialogue with world literature, especially with the Anglophone and Francophone traditions. Wang Wenxing, for example, is indebted to Joyce, while critical of Chinese patriarchal values and more elaborate on the Chinese diaspora. These modernist writers in Taiwan, together with overseas Sinophone writers like Chen Ruoxi, Chang Xiguo, Nie Hualing, and many others who live in the United States, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, France, and many parts of the world, have published their works in Taiwan since the 1960s, making Taiwan a hub of Sinophone literary and cultural articulations, especially with its emphasis on traditional Chinese written characters and the island state’s status as “Free China.” From the 1980s (especially 1986) on, social movements triggered by the new demands of democratic representation, gender equality, human rights, gay discourse, fair distribution, class mobility, multiculturalism, local community reconstruction, and so forth helped push Taiwan farther apart from China. Writers in these categories tend to appropriate postmodernism and magic realism from such diverse sources as Japanese, French, German, Eastern European, and Latin American, that they consider themselves to be no longer just Chinese. Even in terms of syntactic structure, their sentences drag on and frustrate very much along the lines of Joyce or Borges. Wang Wenxing, Wu He (1960–), and Qiu Miaojin (1969–1995) are most notable examples. Their use of the Chinese language also differs from Chinese writers who tend to draw on colloquialism and everyday speech.

# Nativist modernism and hometown literature: 1965–1989

It is in the innovative synthesis of literary modernism and nativism that Taiwan writers of the 1960s and 1980s like Huang Chunming (1935-), Wang Zhenhe (1940–1990), Chen Yingzhen (1936–2016), and Li Ang (1952–), among others, would carry on the tradition set by Lai He. Set against the background of the US-led Cold War, these “nativist” (*xiangtu* or sometimes called “hometown”) writers touch upon Taiwan’s ambivalent roles in the era of industrialization, trans-Pacific segregation (South versus North Korea; free versus Communist China), and the global market economy by incorporating local dialects and pidgin English into their literary expressions, to assert Taiwan’s identity as distinct from China. They explore everyday life in Taiwan, with specific references to local social settings and landscapes. Mainly using traditional Chinese written characters, but occasionally drawing on Indo-European languages, these “native” sons and daughters try to capture their mother tongues’ idiomatic expressions and syntactic structures. Huang Chunming’s *Taste of Apples* (1980) is a good example of such nativist discourse, with stories around common, rural characters who are struggling with illness, debt, uncertainties, and all sorts of bitter-sweet life situations, like becoming a sandwich man or infant’s puppet-clown. But Huang also presents Taiwan’s modernism and nativism with a deeply disturbing Cold War face. In the story titled the *Taste of Apples*, the American military and neo-colonial presence is satirized, while in many others (like the novella around a dog named Mary, a local hybrid left behind by the American boss) Taiwanese people are portrayed to be idolizing just about anything from the US. As if to push this logic further, Chen Yingzhen famously blames the American empire for the many crimes and the corruption in the Taiwanese government, both in his creative writing and critical essays.

Chen began his literary career in 1959 with his fiction novel titled *Mantan* (*Noodle Stand*), published in *Bihui* (*Pen Ensemble*). “From then on, he pushed open inch by inch the door to the depths of his unconsciousness, seeking to invent the constellation of marvelous, fantastic, mysterious, and uncanny personae, to give voice to his petulant youth, dreams, and anger, to a more radical sense of solitude and anxiety,” Chen (aka Xu Nanchun) thus reminiscences. Since 1959, Chen has published numerous short stories, novels, and critical essays. In 1988, the initial collection of his writings amounted to 15 volumes. Chen’s works appeal not only to scholars in modern Chinese fiction like Jeffrey Kinkley, who hails him as “Taiwan’s greatest author,” but to a number of Chinese New Left critics, among them, Qian Liqun and Wang Molin, who tend to interpret Chen’s protest literature as a political outcry that can be traced to the legacy of Lu Xun’s critical realism. But such insightful comments are generated often to the neglect of nuanced local detail and historical contexts. For Chen also draws on Japanese socialist (as well as modernist) tradition, Christian humanism, and existentialist thoughts. These aspects are most noticeable in his White Terror trilogy.

In his memoirs, Chen discusses the ways in which he developed entangled conceptions of modern Taiwanese history, indelibly marked by the departure of the Japanese colonial regime and the arrival of the KMT government, a Nationalist Party that continued to pursue internal colonization and terrorized the Taiwanese people as well as mainland Chinese refugees who came with the government between 1947 and 1949. In the name of upholding martial law and the anti-communist campaign, the KMT received military, material, and diplomatic support from the US government. Using his pen name, Xu Nanchun, Chen writes, “Tormented by surrealistic, conflictive dreams, with Red flags everywhere in strong contrast to the fear and despair that were produced by the regime in power, he creates a series of fictional characters who entertain ambiguous, idealistic visions but often see them mislead, self-deconstruct, and fall apart.”

Because of such anti-government (and anti-US) radical stances, nativist writers like Chen are often labeled as Marxist, though in fact many of them are more concerned with ecological degradation and industrial pollution, with their sights mainly concentrated on the local/regional. Such localism, however, was targeted in the 1978–1979 media debates over issues around the use of dialect, the representations of the subaltern, and the functions of literature for class warfare. Nativism is twisted by the official discourse to be proletarian and provincial, quickly associated with Communism and later (particularly after the Formosa Incident in Kaohsiung) with the opposition party, which is said to have attempted to subvert the KMT government.[[4]](#footnote-4)But as Huang Chunming’s work inspired the new wave film directors such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Wu Nian-chen, Wang Ren, etc. nativist literature increasingly gained popularity, with the localization movement led by the former president Lee Teng-hui winning the battle. As Fan Mingju suggests, new nativist literature by authors like Liao Hongji, Lai Xiangyin, Liu Kexiang, etc. continues to flourish. However, a point of departure may be around the controversial debate over the demise of Taiwan new wave films in 1989, when critics raised questions about Hou Hsiao-hien’s late films regarding their political correctness and commercial nature. Recently, the pursuit of “small comfort” in “trivial matters, cosy moments” such as eco-tourism or local food consumption has raised eyebrows as an indicator of Taiwan’s failure to globalize.

# Aboriginal literature and counter-modern discourse: twilight of the ancestral spirits?

Among the ethnic groups which took advantage of the localization movement in the 1980s, aboriginal writers were the most vigorous in resisting the moral and political authority of a dominant Han culture, especially after a major earthquake that shook their homes and livelihoods on September 21, 1997, and which only served to highlight the marginal and miserable existence of the aborigines. But with the population of the aborigines becoming even smaller than that of foreign brides and indentured labor from Southeast Asia, the worry over minoritization is constantly at the heart of critical writings on land rights and the autonomy of the tribal nations. Sun Tachuan, for instance, cautions us that even though identity politics and localism have emerged as prominent foci in public discourse since 1987, the boom in aboriginal literature is very fragile, as the indigenous languages are having a tough uphill climb and suffer (regular) setbacks even within the tribal communities. Sun asks if the trendy boom that aboriginal cultures have enjoyed lately is at its twilight phase or rather faces dawn – and quite a few writers seem to share his pessimistic view about the future (Balcom and Balcom 2005: xxi). Several stories collected in *Indigenous Writers of Taiwan*, for instance, alarmingly bear the gloomy title of “last” days, as if to refute the celebratory “postcolonial” or “postmodern” framework used (or abused?) by many literary historians in Taiwan. After all, postmodern queer or lesbian discourses pale before the aborigines’ struggles for survival when the tribal peoples are forced to leave ancestral homes, with whole communities wiped out by mudslides or torrential storms.

However, rainbow imagery is constantly brought in to symbolize hope in spite of fears, and lots of aboriginal literature zooms in on the legendary “Hunter Goddess” or “Mother” figures – work by Liglave A-wu, for example. In fact, Sato Haruo was quite amazed to find the perseverance of the aborigines when he traveled far into the mountains, and he would often draw on the rainbow imagery to retell indigenous stories of the mythic home to return to. A prominent author of nature and oceanscape writing, Syman Rapongan (1957–), usually puts his narrator in a very paradoxical situation in which he suddenly recognizes himself as a stranger in the stained mirror of modernity: “There were many of our young people, who, after they had wandered about in Taiwan for many years, would return home to see their families for three or four days. During that time, all that the older generation could smell on their bodies was the scent of makeup, cologne, and the heavy odor of alcohol. There was not a hint of the smell of sweat or fish on them.” Syman goes on to admit: “The reason my mother questioned my strength was not because I have been tarnished by bad habits, but rather, in her eyes, because I had the qualities of a Chinese, and not the flesh and blood of the Yami people. I had become estranged from the trees and no longer smelled of the soil” (Syman 2007: 718). Thus the aboriginal poet Monaneng (1956–) writes:

 If you’re an aborigine
Then wipe away your tears and blood …
Then sing out with your highland voice
In anger about your deep sufferings
Like desperate roaring waves …
Then set off the violence of your life
Like an explosive charge beneath the ground
Fiercely blowing open a pack of hypocrisy.

(Trans. in Balcom and Balcom 2005: 160)

In cracking open the riddle of modernity the aborigine can do “the only thing you can:/Fight with your back to the mountain.” Their voices echo in the mountains and rivers, and increasingly on the streets of the metropolis.

#  Overseas Chinese sojourners and global Sinophone writings

As a bastion of anti-Communist campaigns and a hub of global expressive cultures in Chinese, Taiwan has been a cultural capital of numerous literary publications in complex written scripts to sustain traditional values with modern and democratic characters. Not only would overseas Chinese student authors like Bai Xianyong and Zhang Xiguo contribute to Taiwan’s leading newspapers’ literary supplements, but Sinophone writers from various parts of the world often publish their literary works in Taipei, among the most notable, being Eileen Chang, Lu Qiao (Nelson Wu), and Gao Xinjiang.

Writers like Bai and Zhang first studied abroad, launching their literary careers by offering diasporic visions of overseas Chinese students struggling to cope with hardships and alienation, while blending new social or technological imaginations into subtle treatments of the global Cold War order to explore alternate sub-genres like queer or science fiction. Then they settled in the new homes as professionals but continued to be inspired by the environments of trans-cultural pollination that cross-cut on the Sinophone and Anglophone (or Francophone, in the case of Gao Xingjian), so as to develop new linguistic innovations and narrative voices, to expand the horizon of world literature in Chinese. However, their decision to publish in Taiwan seems in part a reaction to Chairman Mao’s introduction of the simplified scripts and his repressive regime in the PRC that launched a series of catastrophic schemes to wipe out traditional Chinese systems of signification and to persecute intellectuals.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), for instance, books were burned, Confucian temples toppled, and writer/critics sent to remote farms for re-education. And to writers growing up under the long shadow cast by the almost endless years of violent purgation and censorship, the Tiananmen Event of 1989 served as yet another wake-up call that they would need to seek shelters elsewhere for freedom of expression. Using the pen-name of Lu Qiao (Deer Bridge), the late fiction writer Nelson Wu (1919–2002) told me in an interview six months before his death that he wrote about his early years back in China but persistently refused to have his novels, especially *Weiyangge* (*Song of Youth*, or *Never-ending Saga*, 1959), published in his home country. Such a gesture is both aesthetical and political, as Wu himself was a leading scholar in the field of Chinese calligraphy and painting, who cherished traditional values along the line of modernization and democratization. He found the simplified Chinese scripts to be crude and insensible: the new Chinese written character for “love,” for instance, hasn’t even “a heart at the core.” Selling more than a million copies, *Weiyangge* has been considered to be among the top one hundred most influential novels in modern China on both sides of the Strait, but its authorized version is only published in Taiwan and not in the PRC.

Eileen Chang (or Zhang Ailing, 1921–1995) presents another intriguing case of Sinophone articulation or writing on the borderline where the Sinophone and Anglophone literary traditions intersect. It is well known that Eileen Chang won recognition with critics like C.T. Hsia, Leo Oufan Lee, Joseph Lau, and others praising her since the 1960s as the most talented woman writer in modern China. However, her fame in the Sinophone world might have owed much to the wide circulation of her work as promoted by Taiwan’s Huang-guan (Crown), a major publishing company which made available romance novels and popular fiction by leading women writers in the 1970s and 1980s. Eileen Chang came to the US from Hong Kong in 1955 as arranged by the Information Service Agency, so that she could write about the corruption in Communist China to endorse America’s interventions across the Pacific in terms of freedom and human rights during the Cold War period. But Eileen Chang’s English novels were not well received in America. Lots of scholars have tried to explain Chang’s years in the US in terms of American Orientalism or her self-translation project. Eileen Chang’s English-language ethnographic articulation of Chinese peasant consciousness, *Rice-Sprout Song* (1955), for example, is looked upon as a text not only suggestive of a new global order established by the US defeat of precedent colonial powers, but also reminiscent of colonial cartography and Orientalist desires.

In fact, during her stay in the US, Eileen Chang was attracted to the new environments, especially Hollywood’s screwball comedy. She developed a “late style” to start her diaspora project to re-link with Hong Kong and Shanghai by rewriting or re-translating some of her early novels. How do we come to terms with all these conflicting interpretations, particularly now with more and more posthumous materials by Chang coming to light, and with calls for renewed critical inquiries regarding her late years in the US? The correspondences between Chang and Song Qi, William Tay’s memoirs, Sima Xin’s book on her second marriage, on top of Yingjin Zhang’s illuminating book chapter on Chang’s use of Hollywood screwball comedies, not to mention some of Chang’s late novels and journals, help shed a different light on Chang’s post-Cold War days in the US. In this regard, Chang’s late work might well be considered as not just “reminiscences” or about Shanghai and even China, as David Wang and Leo Oufan Lee duly noted in their work. Rather, it is her multilingual and polyphonic project, aiming to piece together the broken glass in a new home where a Sinophone writer attempts to reach out to the Anglophone world in spite of a profound sense of being deserted and estranged. Therefore, she tries her hand with new genres and media, writing film scripts, appropriating Hollywood comedy or musicals, and readjusting her textual strategies in response to the demands of the film industry. To paraphrase Theodor Adorno (who is speaking of Beethoven), we may say that Chang’s late works are processes in which extremes and catastrophes are forced together, to produce moments of friction and dissonance.

Eileen Chang is certainly not alone in authorizing her complete works to be published in Taiwan. Sinophone Hong Kong writers like Xi Xi (Saisai, 1938–2022), Leung Ping-kwan (1952–2013), Liu Yichang (1918–2018), Wong Bik-wan, Dung Kai-cheung, and many others have also opted for Taiwanese publishers. Part of the reason is not only due to the common complex written scripts shared and familiar cultural ambiance, but also political concerns over censorship and harassment in China. Writers like Leung are constantly viewing Hong Kong identity as arbitrary, contrived, and ephemeral – as “moving signs that come and go.” Xi Xi, for example, depicts Hong Kong as a mysterious city floating in the air, while Liu Yichang’s fictional characters are often flaneurs or wanderers in transit to stranger, duplicitous worlds. For these Sinophone Hong Kong writers the solid ground beneath one’s feet frequently gives way or transforms itself into something no longer easily recognizable.

But a large portion of global Sinophone writings published in Taiwan are by Malaysian authors who migrate to the island as overseas Chinese students and then stay on as writers in residence. Remarkably, these writers develop layered, nuanced textual strategies in response to the perils and rewards of multilingual and postcolonial encounters back home. Li Yongping (1947–2017) is in this regard very different from Zhang Guixing (1956–), his younger colleague who also decided to leave Malaysia and find a new home in Taiwan. As a proto-modernist, Li confesses that his desire is to “purify” his mother tongue: “I cannot bear the kind of Chinese that has been ‘aggressively Westernized.” He goes on: “I later wrote *Retribution: The Jiling Chronicles*. For eight years, on and off, I painstakingly worked on it so as to build a pure, Chinese literary form” (Trans. and cited in Tsu Epilogue 2010: 708). Li’s Sinophone project is to reinvent his literary identity “through the purification of the Chinese language … to purify the language brought from one’s native land, to de-nativize, and to get rid of the impure sediments from one’s native home” (Tsu 2010: 708). As a result, his narrative is in a reconstructed, idealized vernacular style reminiscent of *All Men Are Brothers* and does not in any way correspond to the colloquialism of any Malaysian or Taiwanese locality. On the other hand, Zhang Guixing celebrates linguistic creolization and frequently evokes the rainforest of his native Borneo as a crucial (albeit entangled) site in which aboriginal, Chinese, Malay, and other local dialects intersect. Zhang draws on tropical flora and fauna to call for a neo-primitivism, so that all sorts of violence done by native inhabitants, European and Japanese colonial officers, and Chinese settler migrants can be brought together to illuminate each other, to criticize them from within, and to reconsider the uncontrollable mix of racial heritages and languages in light of their residue, survival, and decay. Zhang’s novels such as *My South Seas Sleeping Beauty*, *Elephants*, and *Monkey Cups* stage crucial scenes of ethical reawakening in the jungle or tropical garden.

Lots of Sinophone Malaysian writers fill in the gaps between Li and Zhang. Ng Kim Chew (Huang Jinshu) treats Sinoscript as if it were dead, or at least composed of antiquarian national souls or specters; he remains the most vehement critic of Chinese nationalism even though he attempts to make the Chinese language more descriptive and precise. Wang Renhua and several of the older generation Sinophone Malaysian writers provide nostalgic narrative accounts of their home country, while Pan Yu-tong, Chan Tah-Wei, Choong Yee Voon, Li Zishu, and Wen Ruian write about diaspora experience, travel and transnationality, blending modernist and magic realist traditions. Kim Tong Tee, a Malaysian writer–critic, teaching at Taiwan’s National Sun Yat Sen University, has offered an overview of Sinophone Malaysian literature since 1919 and discussed the legacy of “Nayang local color literature” and of more globalized modernist or postmodernist fictions as inspired by contemporary Latin American and Chinese writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Su Tong, Wang Anyi, and Chang Dachun. Tee mentions quite a few artists as Sinophone writers who stay in Malaysia and actively engage local cultural politics, among them Wan Kok Seng, Tan Kee Keat, and Ng Neoh Leng. However, many Sinophone Malaysian writers publish their works and live in Taiwan after they finish college degrees there as “overseas” Chinese students. As a hub of Sinophone literature in its publication and dissemination, Taiwan in fact holds a special place in not only attracting a rich diversity of writers like Xi Xi, Eileen Chang, Bai Xianyong, Gao Xingjian, and many other Sinophone writers to either publish their works there or even to stay on as artists in residence, but also producing prominent Sinophone scholar–critics such as David Der-wei Wang, Jing Tsu, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Shu-mei Shih who were born or received college education (in the case of Shih) on the island.

To Shu-mei Shih, a majority of Taiwanese writers may be qualified as Sinophone, especially those who write to complicate our thinking about the relationship between “roots” (Chineseness) and “routes” (Taiwaneseness). In her follow-up to her seminal work *Visuality and Identity* and in the introduction to the more recent collection of essays titled *Sinophone Studies*, Shih begins by outlining Sinophone articulations as literary expressions in response to “China proper” and its continuing continental or settler colonialism. In her version of Sinophone articulations, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and other minority territories represent different voices against Han Chinese nationalism. She advocates that “Sinophone studies has as one of its objects the culture, history, and society of minority peoples who have acquired or are forced to acquire the standard Sinitic language of Mandarin, often at the expense of their native language” (Shih, Tsai, and Bernards 2013: 3). And none other than Gao Xingjian illustrates this point better. In many ways, Gao is like his Chinese colleague Ha Jin, except that Ha goes for the Anglophone while Gao appropriates the Francophone tradition.

Rather than depending on China for literary existence, Ha Jin opts for a model set by Conrad and Nabokov, “who didn’t represent their native countries and instead found their places in English.” Even though the bulk of his fiction is often set in China, the Chinese authorities have accused Ha Jin of “betraying” his native country and “uglifying” the Chinese to please the West (Ha 2013: 122). He finds nationalism and patriotic sentiments to be problematic, if not self-serving. He asks: “What if your country has become a fascist state? What if your country invades another country or commits genocide? What if your country bullies its own people and robs them of their voices? What if your country makes your life miserable and insufferable?” (Ha 2013: 123). As a migrant and a writer, Ha Jin thus employs English as a mode of communication and of expression to “speak truth to power.” In the same way, the Nobel laureate Gao Xinjian also turns to French writers like Marguerite Duras for inspiration. He calls his own writing “cold literature,” as detached in every way possible from political, moral, and social concerns. According to him, “Chinese literature, exhausted by almost a century of having to be politically and ethically correct, has now fallen into a morass of isms, ideologies and debates on creative methodology that have little to do with literature but from which it cannot extricate itself” (Gao 2005: 6). “It is only by being an unwaveringly solitary individual without attachments to some political group or movement that the writer is able to win a thoroughgoing freedom,” he concludes. Ha Jin and many other Sinophone writers would certainly agree.

# Queering the Island and Playing with the Postmodern Neon God: new urban and global popular

# New urban discourse and social movements flourished in 1980s Taiwan, especially on the eve of 1987 as the 40-year-old martial law was lifted. Lee Teng-hui, a local Taiwanese statesman, became president after the death of Jiang Jingguo in 1988 and launched a localization movement. Lots of critics discuss the period after 1987 in terms of “posts:” postmodernism, postcolonialism, post-humanism, and post-martial-law, etc. (Liao 1999: 199–211). However, to do justice to the local constituencies and differential critical genealogies, we may be better off by describing the new phenomena in terms of their diverse cultural dynamics. The late 1980s saw the publication of numerous postmodern and post-humanist poetry or fiction on local political subjects, X and Y generations born after the introduction of the internet, new urban lifestyle changes in response to global cultural economy, feminist and queer movements, sexual intimacy and private histories, and so on.

A language poet who likes to do experiments with almost anything new, Lin Yaode (1962–1996) published in 1989 a poetry volume titled *Dushi zhongduangji* (Urban Terminal) on Taiwan as a computer land, in which men and women in the offices act like robots, hooked up with and hyperlinked to terminals that help generate a perverse, obscene, and virtual cyberspace of networks to transform sociality, intelligibility, and above all, humanity. A disciple of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, Lin imagines a post-human world where business transactions, data mining, and information processing, and indeed everyday practice, including even sex, are all dictated by intelligent devices in a frenzy. As a result, the human body is fragmented and partially connected to super semiconductors or advanced machineries, functioning as if it were an empty set of simulacra, stimulated only by pornographic video games.

Another language poet but more into food and cultural politics, Jiao Tong (1956–) comes up with postmodern recipes punning on all sorts of slogans and propaganda that Chiang Kai-shek famously introduced in the hope of reclaiming the Chinese mainland and of winning US support during the Cold War. In a collection of poems entitled *Zhuangyang shipu* (*Food Recipe for the Enhancement of Sexual Potency*, 2000), Jiao Tong correlates sexual intercourse with the national recovery project, prolonged sexual gratification with military preparatory strategies to recapture the lost land, and so forth. The poem “*Wuwang Zaichu*” (I shall rise again) carries sexual and political overtones, referring to Generalissimo Chiang’s echo of the US’s claim to return to the Pacific in terms of a postmodern parody on carnal desire for endless sexual conquest, while bringing out comic relief at the post-martial-law age.

In the field of postmodern fiction, Zhang Dachun (1957–) zooms in on things great and small, events public and private, to interrelate them. His world is characterized by skepticism about how language represents reality, full of postmodern parodies on what everyday politics entails. But it is in the hands of Luo Yijun (1967–), Zhu Tianwen, Zhu Tianxin, Shu Weizhen, and Chen Yuhui that personal choices and private histories blend into new urban culture, fragments of memory suddenly flashing up to illuminate a larger world outside. Often, these fiction writers dwell on family histories, alternative lifestyle consumption patterns, or travels abroad. Zhu Tianwen is particularly successful, as she works with the Taiwan New Wave film director Hou Hsiao-hsien, turning her novels into scripts.

Among the many social movements in the 1980s, the feminist and queer groups are constantly featured in the media to challenge authority and patriarchy. Though not a self-proclaimed feminist, Li Ang (1952–) has brought out scandalous novels on perverse sexual relations, beginning with *Safu* (*Butcher’s Wife*, 1983), *Miyuan* (*Lost Garden*), *Beigan xianglu* (*Sticks in the Incense Burner*), and so on, to expose the patriarchal system of domination and to deconstruct the foundation of social norms. The suicide of a lesbian writer, Qiu Miaojin (1969–1995), sent shock waves through both the literary community and the public sphere. Of course, Qiu was not the first to promote gay or lesbian identity. Bai Xianyong has written quite a few short stories since the 1960s on delicate sexual partnerships among men, climaxing in 1977 when *Crystal Boy* appeared*.* But with the tragic death of Qiu and ensuing public mourning over the difficulty of coming out in homophobic Taiwan, queer discourse suddenly found a special niche and ethical bonds in raising awareness. At the same time, queer discourse has also benefited from the radical cultural feminism of the 1980s in deepening thinking about gender and genes, to win over critics, and to stage Taiwan as East Asia’s first queer nation. As a result, the 1990s saw the burgeoning of new urban or postcolonial fiction by writers such as Li Ang, Li Qiao, Shi Shuqing, Wu He, Yang Zhao, and Lai Xiangyin, and queer-themed fiction by writers like Qiu Miaojin, Chi Ta-wei, Hung Ling, and Zhu Tianwen. Shu Shuqing’s Taiwan Trilogy, in particular, sums up postcolonial, Sinophone, aboriginal, feminist, and queer motifs, with characters from China and Japan interacting with the local, crosscutting class, gender, and race hierarchies, to represent the complex scenario of history and ethnicity on the island state.

1980s also saw Taiwanese authors grappling with postmodernism, a global trend, and with an interesting twist. Zhu Tianwen’s *Splendors of fin de siècle* (1990) and Shi Shuqing’s *Slightly Drunk Make-up* (1999) are most notable examples. In the style of postmodern parody, Zhu’s novella on the end of 20th century Taiwan zooms in on all sorts of excessive, exorbitant fetishism in a globalized city like Taipei, mostly through the smell and sight of Mia, our female protagonist, who witnesses the rise of all trendy lifestyle consumption patterns. Each chapter highlights Mia’s multi-sensorial experiences with fragrance, fashion, fetishism, meditation or new spiritualism that are circulated and reproduced in the global cultural economy as if they were the most desirable commodities or perhaps simulacra to obtain and to cherish. For Mia, a rose is not a rose, but a sign of St. Valentine’s love token. Even incense burning is about Zen spirituality and otherworldly translucent experience of enlightenment. In the novella, Zhu pushes the postmodern world of simulacra to its extreme that phantasmagoria replaces phenomena, until the final de-sublimation scene. It is not surprising that after this postmodern parody, Zhu comes up with a novel titled *Notes from a Barren Man* （1994）in which a gay man self-indulgently pursues his world of futile decadence. But it is in Shi Shuqing’s *Slightly Drunk Make-up* that we see another postmodern Mia, this time as a pathological case of powdering one’s face to simulate the enticing appearance of being slightly drunk, so that a pretty girl can seduce her men.

Both Zhu and Shi utilize the postmodern notion of the simulacra to poke fun at the mechanical reproducibility of global trends at the local level, to expose the limits of postmodern fashion at its most skin-deep—famous brands, expensive perfumes, plastic surgery, affectatious cosmetics, bio-medically orchestrated Zen practice, among others. Both writers attempt to cultivate their verbal and pictorial arts in capturing the fascination of sensorial experiences when the faculty of smell, sight, or sexual appetite are being fed (or served in the “post-industrial” consumption) through mimetic mimicry as if those fetishisms were all too real and here to stay. They are writing in critical response to the frenzy receptions of the postmodern theory in the 1980s Taiwan, with tongue in cheek, so that we as readers may laugh with them at the local postmodernist experiments that have gone awry. Of course, without the 1980s postmodern artists or theoreticians in Taiwan, we may not be able to appreciate what Zhu and Shi do in their critical fictions. In fact, Luo Qing should be credited for introducing postmodernist poetry as early as 1972 when he publishes “Six ways to Eat a Watermelon,” suggesting that despite lots of signs and simulacra theory disseminated about eating the fruit, it only takes a real bite to enjoy it. And on the idea of simulacra and implosion, Lin Yaode famously draws the analogy between human bodies and robots in his “Urban Terminals” (1985), in which computer-generated pornography connects men and women in virtual sex as if they were desiring machines. However, it is Tsai Ming-liang who stands out in camping the gay subjects and in coloring the postmodern deities, as in *The River* (1997).

It is well known that Tsai Ming-liang tends to use the same cast to re-stage gay family scenarios, and his films are always about alienation, marginalization, and the folksy, earthly (albeit vulgar or less than refined) working class. (Yeh and Darrell 249-250) Critics often discusses Tsai’s films in terms of minimalism and of bleakness, as if he was a high modernist. But one cannot miss the colour-saturated and neon lighted temple scene in many of his films in which the shaman (often a woman) would perform the ritual of exorcizing the evil spirit or curing the wounded. Unlike other major episodes that are represented to be bleak and minimal in action, the cure or prayer scene are very dynamic and sensational by contrast. One way to explain this away is to resort to Tsai’s Sinophone heritage in embracing Chinese folk religion and spiritual tradition. However, we can venture to a different line of interpretation by suggesting that in Tsai we have a postmodern theological and vernacular turn.

The healing ritual in the movie as staged by Tsai is conducted in a small, private gathering, so that the prayer may be placed to approach the postmodern deities “most intimately,” as Jacques Derrida suggests in a different but relevant context. This sort of postmodern intimacy is at the core of gay subjects’ identity stance in maintaining privacy and confidentiality. As a matter of fact, Xiao Kang, the protagonist in *The River*, is shown to visit a gay bar immediately after the ritual and to discover his father there as a potential sex partner. Such an ethical act of dwelling on an intimate and small community runs against the grain. For a lot of mainstream Zen congregations in Taiwan are often orchestrated and elaborated to constitute a large society of public spectacles, with huge turnouts in a chosen arena to display wealth and power. By contrast, Tsai Ming-liang’s approach is more personal and honest, always revealing that postmodern gods seldom work miracles: Xiao Kang never fully recovers, even after going through numerous sessions to attain union with the divine forces. Here, Tsai has also to negotiate with the derogatory representations of Taiwan’s religious rituals in such international media as CNN or BBC that consider it “postmodern” and even ridiculous the local deities’ pilgrimage should be blasted by tons of bumblebee firecrackers during the lantern festival or the odd practice of hiring nude girls to perform and to feign mourning in the funeral service. Tsai is certainly not alone in this case. Essay Liu’s 2010 semi- confessional novel, *Seven Days in Heaven,* immediately comes to mind.

*Seven Days in Heaven* elaborates on the uncanny scenes of a dutiful daughter attending her late father’s funeral for a very intense week in honouring the dead. Both pissed and inspired by the practice of hiring outside professionals to help mourn the dead, the daughter becomes more involved and in the almost routine process of working out the mourning the deceased, with the help of the shaman and mortician, she begins to relate more to her departed dad and to gain more inside knowledge about him. As a result, she cries her heart out, no longer just out of filial piety or in pretence, on the seventh day. In the story, the shaman declares himself to be a poet, not only writing panegyrics paying tribute to the dead, but composing lyrics and music to advocate wisdom for the trouble times. The shaman is in this regard a postmodernist and a mimic man, in parodic and at the same sincere manner, building his career on reintroducing the “nostalgic” memory of the Confucian theological order of honoring the parents as a fad and fetishistic cultural performance for a new time in which people are too busy to be pious or even to attend funerals, while constantly drawing on new technological and business tool kits to put on the theatrical kitsch show, so that both the deceased and the living would enjoy the funeral spectacle. He is a bricoleur blending the premodern with the postmodern, familiar with local spiritual traditions, versed in global popular culture (ranging from Hollywood movies to K Pops), able to improvise and to respond to local current situations, and cynical enough to be superficial but also profound at the same time, always well managed to remind of the living of not only the legacy and inheritance, but life lessons they can benefit from the dead.

**From Old Boy to the Land of Little Rain: Cosmopolitan Vernacularism**

Throughout our essay, I have framed modern Taiwan literature around the idea of “vernacular cosmopolitan,” of finding new modern and worldly ways to rearticulate the local traditions. Yang Fumin’s *Sixty-Year-Old Boy* (2010) can illustrate my point further. The noveltraces the trajectory of a young man growing up in the rural south and becoming preoccupied with the idea of ageing and with the funeral rituals; therefore, he thinks his hair turning grey and already reaching sixty something even as a boy. We can regard the series of stories in the novel as following up on *Seven Years in Heaven.* In fact, the narrator (the “old” boy) goes several steps farther. He relates how the mourning ritual gets everybody so into it that they re-connect it to those being mourned in the past and bring them back in the ever expanding, incorporating repetition in difference, to such an extent that it becomes an ensemble and even a chorus. “Sometimes, I would even have such fond memory of the four funerals that occurred over the last ten years,” the narrator recalls, “they are magnificent, in providing a unique opportunity to see how prosperous a family was. The ritual with its elaborate and demanding details actually serve to break our alienation and usher in a chance for our performance. I remember how my sister and myself, accompanied by more than thirty aunties and cousins, began by fake crying and weeping around the big coffin in which great granny rested in peace. All of a sudden, we completely forgot about the turmoil outside. We dedicated to one thing only, that is, to cry.” (Yang 30) He goes on to suggest that this does not happen just once. In fact, it gets repeated or reinforced at least three more times, like in the episode of mourning the big Auntie’s fate, her life and her existence. In the hymns to her, “we re-narrate and indeed revitalize her life experience, as if all of us relived her life. Suddenly we find something to do, something meaningful with new purposes. We find a home, with a coffin to hold on to.” Again, in another great aunt’s funeral, “in a large gathering of folk artists performing, chanting, caroling, drumming, strippers dancing to electronic music, and everybody forming a big circle in front of the traditional three-gabled house to burn billions of paper money for the deceased to spend on expenditures in the Hades.” (ibid.) The funeral rituals work as a “big web” of connectivity, with all members becoming one, abandoning the whole world, simply to cry, to weep, and to laugh, in the postmodern world of redundancy, in spite of a sense of an inevitable but also regrettable ending--someone passing, something lost, or even bygone of the good old days. And with all these, another sense of something much bigger—the loss of local identity. “What is,” the narrator asks, “left in our small town?” (Its name as “Big Interior” or “Great Palace” is not without irony here), and is there any room for a country like Taiwan in the world today? “A gigantic dome of observatory grows like a mushroom on the top of the hill,” it may look “pretty” but “no local has climbed up to investigate or showed any interest.” (Yang 31). Of course, we know it to have been set up by an international space science community, having little to do with the local, the way Taiwan contributes to the global economy and technology as a chip maker.

Yang uses local vernacular expressions to the full to parody and to cherish the cultural poetics of collective crying, weeping, and laughing in light of postmodern redundancy. In his preface to Yang’s novel, Ken Xianyon Bai praises it as developing a “new voice” of the vernacular, in the style of a singer of tales but often with black humour to render the passionate voice ridiculously funny and parodic, as if the young boy cannot wait to grow old and to be worldly. By lamenting the local being left out and forgotten, very much in a metonymic way to suggest the twilight of gods, Yang’s old folks get reinvigorated only to find their world (and the young one’s as well) gone. Only through recollection in the manner of cosmopolitan vernacularism that Yang gives a new meaning to the idea of postmodern exhaustion and redundancy.

In contrast, Wu Mingyi’s *The Land of Little Rain* (2019)interweaves transnational orphanage, global warming, ecological degradation, human and natural disabilities, among many other themes to establish imagined and real connections between Taiwan and the rest of the world. Wu rewrites Mary Austin’s classic on American desert but with lots of twists. In the first story, Sophie is an aboriginal child left behind by her underage mom and then adopted by German parents. It is only after reading her decreased father’s dairy about his travels in Taiwan that Sophie comes to know why she looks so different from others and where she might originally belong. Several characters from various backgrounds and their lives intersect with Sophie’s climate science project and her critical path, in intricate ways to reveal not only the failings and problems in their smaller world but global disparities, climate change, species extinction, pandemics, among other crises in our planet. The title of the novel actually refers to the worsening drought situation all over, especially alluding to Taiwan, an island surrounded by the ocean but ironically suffering from the shortage of rain and even sidelined by typhoons during the summer or monsoon season. Of course, the island does not stand alone here; California, Australia, India, China, and indeed the list expands, are all experiencing abnormally lower levels of rainfall for consecutive years. When Wu’s 2019 work came out, Covid-19 began to rage in Wuhan and soon threatened lives of hundreds of millions worldwide. The ensuing lockdowns across global cities turned people into avid readers; as a result, Wu’s latest novel got reprinted eight times within a year. Wu has received quite a few international awards for his science fiction and nature writings. His work can be considered to be contributing to our ethical awareness of sustainability, not to mention winning a place for Taiwan in the world republic of letters. It is very cosmopolitan but also vernacular, as it draws on Taiwan’s aboriginal traditions of planetary intelligence.

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1. Shih writes, “Sinophone studies has as one of its objects [sic] the culture, history, and society of minority peoples who have acquired or are forced to acquire the standard Sinitic language of Mandarin, often at the expense of their native language” (Shih, Tsai and Bernards 2013: 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One may well add Wang Chang-hsiung’s *Honryu* [“Strong Current,” 1943] to the impressive list. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Most of their statements are now made available and included in Chang, Yeh and Fan (Eds.), *The Columbia Source Book of Literary Taiwan* (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A group of dissidents, many of them later on leading members of the Democratic Progressive Party, rallied in Kaohsiung City on December 10, 1979, to push for human rights and democratization in Taiwan. Demonstrators used their placards to fight the heavily armored riot police, and 38 of the leaders were arrested after the Incident. It won international attention, and with pressure from the US government, the dissidents were set free – Lin Yi-hsiung in 1984, Annette Lu in 1985, Chen Chu in 1986, Huang Hsin-chieh and others in 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)