

Chinese Fiction from Taiwan

Critical Perspectives

Edited by Jeannette L. Faurot

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STUDIES IN CHINESE LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

Editors

Irving Yucheng Lo Joseph S. M. Lau Leo Ou-fan Lee

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J.L.F.

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Jeannette L. Faurot

Introduction

On February 23–24, 1979, A Symposium on Taiwan Fiction was convened at the University of Texas at Austin, the first symposium in this country devoted solely to the study of contemporary Chinese fiction from Taiwan. The present volume includes the eight papers delivered at that symposium, along with three additional papers which have been presented or published elsewhere, and one prepared especially for this collection. A revised transcript of C.T. Hsia's Closing Remarks concludes the volume.

Not since the May Fourth-1930s period on mainland China has such a wealth of first-rate fiction been written in Chinese as we find published during the past two decades (1960–1980) in Taiwan. The general prosperity of the island and the universal accessibility of education, to name only two considerations, have produced a sizeable middle class with leisure time for reading. There is a hunger for fiction among Taiwan's general public. One sign of this is the sheer volume of fiction that rolls off the presses. All the major daily newspapers have literary pages which publish new fiction in serial form; several fine literary journals appear regularly; and the literary publishing houses are flourishing.

Not surprisingly, the vigorous literary climate of present-day Taipei, like that of Shanghai fifty years ago, produces its share of ideologues of the right and the left, sensationalists and sentimentalists, earnest young reformers and aging literary hacks. Much of the fiction is escapist entertainment; among the best sellers are

boy-meets-girl romances and *kung-fu* stories. Yet this ferment also gives rise to some fine writers who excel at their craft.

In many ways they echo their May Fourth predecessors. Some, like Lu Hsün, use the pen as a scalpel to lay open the cancers of society. Some, like Yü Ta-fu, seek to record with painful accuracy the thoughts of a sensitive mind; or, like Shen Ts'ung-wen, to evoke the bucolic life of remote rural regions; or, like Lao She, to sting the reader's consciousness through the use of satire. Today's young Taiwan writers may never have read Lu Hsün, Yü Ta-fu, Shen Ts'ung-wen, or Lao She—May Fourth-1930s writers having been systematically banned until quite recently in Taiwan, except for a few harmless poets and essayists—but many of them share the same concerns and use the same literary devices.

Many Taiwan writers have studied in the United States and consciously look to modern Western writers as their models. In so doing, they too are following in the footsteps of May Fourth writers, who also studied abroad (mostly in Japan) and drew inspiration from the latest Japanese and European writers. The authors and trends in vogue today are different, but the spirit of experimentation remains the same. Honesty and experimentation are allowed to a degree not possible a few decades ago on Taiwan, or any time during the past thirty years on the mainland.

There are fewer overtly political or revolutionary works of fiction in Taiwan today than in the China of the 1930s. There are more experimental, modernistic works, and more writers are paying greater attention to style. Yet a strong commitment to social issues and a search for personal and national identity emerge as the major themes of serious Taiwan fiction today, just as they were decades ago on the mainland. The coupling of stylistic sophistication with social engagement results in a number of stories and novels which rank among the finest Chinese literary works of the century.

Four essays in this collection discuss general literary historical or critical topics, and the remaining eight examine separately the works of eight of the best contemporary writers—Chang Hsi-kuo, Chen Jo-hsi, Ch'en Ying-chen, Ch'i-teng Sheng, Hwang Chun-ming,* Pai Hsien-yung, Wang Chen-ho, and Wang Wen-hsing. Many other

*The standard spellings of the names Chen Jo-hsi and Hwang Chun-ming are Ch'en Jo-hsi and Huang Ch'un-ming. However, some contributors to this book have followed the authors' preferred spellings as given.

writers could equally well have been included, but these eight already illustrate the scope and variety of literary excellence in Taiwan.

The first three papers, representing diverse viewpoints, and focussing on different aspects of contemporary Taiwan's literary history, provide historical and sociological background for a study of recent Taiwan fiction. The term *hsiang-t'u wen-hsüeh*, which comes up in almost any discussion of contemporary Taiwan fiction, appears in many of these papers, and may require a note of explanation. Literally, the words mean "homeland-soil literature," but the intense emotional content of the term is lost in translation, and many writers in this volume, after offering tentative equivalents such as Regional Literature, Literature of the Soil, Nativist Literature, or Homeland Literature, have preferred to revert to the Chinese term in their discussions. Basically, the term *hsiang-t'u wen-hsüeh* refers to literature written about the ordinary people and customs of the local region, as opposed to literature about college students, middle-class housewives, army officers, or the like. Variations and expansions of this meaning abound.

Prior to, and now concurrent with, the *hsiang-t'u* literature runs a strong stream of modernism, commanding a relatively small, elite audience. Leo Lee describes the circumstances which led to a turn toward modernism in poetry and fiction in Taiwan, and discusses the works of four writers—Pai Hsien-yung, Wang Wen-hsing, Ou-yang Tzu, and Chen Jo-hsi—who pioneered in this movement. In the last part of his paper he examines the works of Ch'iung Yao, a writer of popular romances, and finds there a betrayal of the May Fourth romantic spirit.

S.K. Chang sees the popularity of *hsiang-t'u wen-hsüeh* as representing a search by the new middle class for roots in the Taiwan soil, and he contrasts it with what he calls *lang-tzu wen-hsüeh*, or Literature of the Wanderer, in which the main characters leave their homeland and seek historical roots in China. These two he designates the twin roots of realism in Taiwan fiction, and he explores the relationship between them in his paper. In the following paper, Jing Wang gives a detailed account of the various stages of the *hsiang-t'u* movement in Taiwan, and discusses the work of some of the major *hsiang-t'u* writers, notably Wang T'o, Yang Ch'ing-ch'u, Wang Chen-ho, and Hwang Chun-ming.

Turning to literary criticism we come to Cyril Birch's paper, in which he uncovers in stories by Chu Hsi-ning, Wang Chen-ho, and Hwang Chun-ming powerful archetypal images of suffering in Taiwan. Mr. Birch suggests that the unbalanced social relationships described in these stories reflect the ambiguous position of Taiwan in its cultural and political relationships with mainland China. The bewildered, panicked, or dully passive behavior brought about by such broken relationships results in a pervasive atmosphere of suffering. Lucien Miller also examines the writings of Ch'en Ying-chen in terms of the suffering caused by fragmented relationships. Using insights from the French writer Gabriel Marcel, he analyzes the reflective mode and existential concerns manifested in the "broken worlds" of four of Ch'en's stories.

Two of the stories Mr. Birch discusses, "His Son's Big Doll," by Hwang Chun-ming, and "Oxcart for a Dowry," by Wang Chen-ho, are discussed from other points of view in Howard Goldblatt's and Robert Yang's papers on these two writers. Though Hwang and Wang are both considered to be *hsiang-t'u* writers, their styles are quite different. Mr. Goldblatt emphasizes the sensitivity and humanity portrayed in Hwang Chun-ming's rural stories, while Mr. Yang explores Wang Chen-ho's authorial tone and finds it to be satirical in the manner of Swift and Juvenal.

One of the most versatile and independent of the contemporary writers is Chang Hsi-kuo. Though he is certainly not a *hsiang-t'u* writer in any commonly accepted sense of the word, Joseph Lau, in his study of Chang, identifies in his works an "obsession with Taiwan." An intense (but by no means blind) patriotism and a searching ethical consciousness pervade his writings.

The four remaining writers discussed in this volume—Pai Hsien-yung, Wang Wen-hsing, Ch'i-teng Sheng, and Chen Jo-hsi—were all frequent contributors to the journal *Hsien-tai wen-hsüeh* (Modern Literature), which Leo Lee has shown to be the vehicle that introduced modernism to Taiwan readers and promoted writing in the same vein. Ou-yang Tzu, herself an editor and frequent contributor to *Modern Literature*, in her paper analyzes the thematic patterns which run through the fabric of Pai Hsien-yung's collection *T'ai-pe'i jen* (Tales of Taipei Characters)—the interplay between past and present, soul and flesh, life and death. James Shu shows the integral relationship between the complex formal structure and the content

of Wang Wen-hsing's controversial novel *Chia-pien* (A Change in the Family). And C.H. Wang explores Ch'i-teng Sheng's use of fancy in his fiction "to expose the imposing realities as he experiences them in a changing society." These three writers of fiction, each very different from the other, write in styles which may strike the average reader as overly difficult or even opaque. We have thus come across the spectrum of serious writers, from the popular to the elitist.

The fourth writer of the *Modern Literature* group is Chen Jo-hsi, who has recently received much acclaim for her chilling first-hand accounts of life in the PRC during the Cultural Revolution. K.Y. Hsu documents her development as a writer, from her early romanticism to a later powerful restraint.

C.T. Hsia's final remarks bring into perspective the writers discussed in this volume in relation to their predecessors on the one hand, and the most recent young writers on the other.

The decade of the 1980s may mark the end of an era in twentieth-century Chinese writing. It appears that readers in Taiwan will no longer be strictly isolated from the writings of the best Chinese writers of the first half of this century. Recently the government on Taiwan has somewhat relaxed its censorship to allow the publication of critical or historical works on May Fourth writers. The Chinese version of C.T. Hsia's *History of Modern Chinese Fiction* can be counted as one of the most significant trend-setting events in this direction.

At the same time, cracks are clearly appearing in the long-frozen world of literature in the People's Republic of China. It will be interesting to see how Chinese fiction develops as the two artificially separated streams merge again.

Leo Ou-fan Lee

“Modernism” and “Romanticism” in Taiwan Literature

In this paper I wish to explore two significant strains in modern Taiwan literature—one elitist, the other popular—and to assess them in the general context of modern Chinese literature. My main concern here is not to establish or dispute the historical continuity from May Fourth to Taiwan literature. Rather, as a literary historian, I am interested in making a special kind of comparison: to see how certain literary trends which emerged in earlier periods of modern Chinese literature have met with similar or different receptions in Taiwan, whether or not there have been any direct influences. This seeming imposition of a May Fourth perspective on Taiwan literature is not intended to aggrandize the former and to belittle the latter. My purpose is merely to show how, in a different social milieu, a minor trend in the early thirties became a major literary force in Taiwan three decades later, whereas some of the most vaunted values in May Fourth literature became utterly meaningless once they were popularized and vulgarized in a post-May Fourth commercial setting.

1.

Most literary historians tend to agree that the Literary Revolution in 1917 ushered in a general trend of realism—a major mode of literary creation which focused on the writer's perception of his immediate reality. This realistic perception, however, was highly subjective and was characterized by an effusive exaltation of the

writer's personality and feelings. I have therefore considered the dominant temper of the May Fourth literary scene as essentially romantic.¹ By the early 1930s, however, a post-May Fourth reaction was already in motion: romanticism waned and was replaced by an increasingly acute sense of social crisis. Literary creativity became less self-centered and more oriented toward the socio-economic problems of the day, as most writers made their melodramatic journey to the left. Thus, a decade of "romantic realism" (ca. 1917–1927) gave way to an ideological era of "social realism" (ca. 1927–1937).

This leftward trend in the early thirties all but eclipsed certain groping efforts on the part of a small number of writers—mainly poets—to come to terms with the more recent Western strains of literary "modernism," which represented a reaction against the nineteenth-century legacy of realism and romanticism.² The earliest proponent was probably Li Chin-fa, a French-educated poet who openly proclaimed his indebtedness to Baudelaire and, beginning in the mid-1920s, experimented in his poetry with images and symbols which he made no attempt to elucidate. Aside from Li, a few other poets and critics—notably Tai Wang-shu, Pien Chih-lin, Ai Ch'ing, and Shao Hsün-mei—likewise became interested in French symbolism (Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud). From a fascination with symbolist poetry, some of them soon found themselves reading and translating the works of Yeats, Auden, and T. S. Eliot. In 1932, Tai Wang-shu and two other men of letters—Shih Chih-ts'un and Tu Heng—founded a new monthly journal, *Hsien-tai* (The Contemporary, or "Les Contemporaines," 1932–35). Despite its eclectic content and politically neutral stance, the magazine was used by its editors as a showcase for what they considered to be the most "contemporary" trends in the European literary scene and as a mouthpiece for their championship of "pure modern poetry." In an editorial on poetry published in volume 1, number 4 of the journal, we find the following revealing statement:

The poems contained in *The Contemporary* are poetry, pure modern poetry. They constitute the poetic form composed of contemporary phrases and idioms written by modern men with the sensibilities of present-day life. . . . The poems in *The Contemporary* are mostly rhymeless, their poetic lines untrimmed, but they all contain quite accomplished texture: they are the modern shape of poetry, they are poetry.³

This statement can be regarded as the beginning formulation of modernistic poetry: its emphasis on texture as the shape of "pure" poetry is in sharp contrast not only to the romantic-flavored poetry of the early May Fourth (e.g., Hsü Chih-mo, Chu Hsiang, etc.) but also to the dominant socio-political temper of the 1930s. Predictably, poets of the Contemporary group came under leftist critical fire as decadent, bloodless, sickly, lifeless, senselessly formalistic, and incomprehensible.

In 1936, Tai Wang-shu founded another magazine, *Hsin-shih* (New Poetry), in order to further advance his cause. On the editorial board were a number of writers who were interested in Western modernist poetry: Feng Chih, Pien Chih-lin, Liang Tsung-tai, Sun Ta-yü, Hsü Ch'ih, and Chi Hsien. After its auspicious beginning, however, the magazine was forced to stop publication in June 1937, when its printing plant was destroyed by Japanese cannon fire. What promised to be a major effort in modern Chinese poetry thus came to an abrupt end.

The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 brought to a close a decade of artistic maturation in modern Chinese literature, of which poetry was but one manifestation. As the eastern cities were occupied by the Japanese, the majority of modern Chinese writers were compelled to make the exodus to the rural hinterland. Confronted with the problems of rural depression and prompted by a conscience-ridden patriotism, most of the poets consciously abandoned their modernistic experiments, which they now regarded as "ivory-towerish," and replaced them with a simple, proletarian style. As Li Chin-fa, Tai Wang-shu, and other modern poets receded from the scene, the new generation of "patriotic" poets—Tsang K'o-chia, T'ien Chien, Ai Ch'ing, and Ho Ch'i-fang—began to evolve a more positive outlook on life, to depict mainly "flesh-and-bone" figures of the Chinese countryside, and to employ a more colloquial idiom for poetic effect. Thus, as a result of the war, both poetry and fiction converged on themes of immediate reality. And the urban tradition of symbolism and modernism disappeared forever from the Chinese mainland.

2.

If the socio-political milieu of Mainland China has not been conducive to the growth of modernistic literature, the situation in

Taiwan since 1949 has proved just the opposite. The Nationalist government rules on the basis of a political myth—that they will “recover the mainland”—which serves both to reinforce the feeling of transitoriness among mainlanders who fled to the island and to alienate the indigenous Taiwanese population who have never set foot on the Chinese continent. The generally authoritarian style of the KMT government further induces political apathy, if not self-enforced silence. Since the 1960s, the success of the land reform programs and the commercialization of society have given rise to a pervasive middle-class mentality which is basically apolitical. The “masses” in Taiwan demand escapist entertainment: they are in no mood to confront a political reality which promises no certain future. Hemmed in from without and unable to find ready solutions to their political frustrations, the Chinese writers in Taiwan—mainlanders and native Taiwanese alike—have gradually turned inward, “to dwell in the personal world of sensory, subconscious and dream experience.”

The publication of *Wen-hsüeh tsa-chih* (The Literary Review, 1956–60) marked an important chapter in the history of Chinese literature in Taiwan. Edited by the late Tsi-an Hsia, the magazine called for “realism as a canon for fiction writing.” In its inaugural issue, Professor Hsia set guidelines which were decidedly reminiscent of the general literary stance of the 1930s: “Though we live in a time of great chaos, we do not want our literature to be chaotic. . . . We do not intend to dodge reality. . . . Our conviction is: a serious writer must be the one who can reflect for us the zeitgeist of our time. We are not after the beauty of language for its own sake, for we feel that it is more important for us to speak the truth.”⁴

As Joseph Lau has convincingly shown, “truth was apparently not what the reading public nor the would-be contributors were after or prepared for.”⁵ Ironically, Professor Hsia’s seminal contribution lay precisely in nurturing the creative talents of a younger generation of writers who were not so much interested in reflecting the socio-political reality of their time as in “the beauty of language for its own sake.” Insofar as they felt compelled to describe the “truth,” they had to resort to “the art of innuendo in numerous forms of ‘modernism’ to express their claustrophobic fears, their sense of insecurity and . . . their bewilderment at being used as hostages for the sins of their fathers.”⁶ The climate was thus ripe for the unprecedented blossoming of modernistic literature.