

“Because the bees buzz underground, / we have earthquakes”: Chen Li’s *The Edge of the Island* at the Brink of the Anthropocene Ruin

Li-hsin Hsu
Department of English
National Chengchi University, Taiwan

Abstract

This essay studies Chen Li’s poetry collection *The Edge of the Island* (2014) by examining his imagery of the island as a site of ecological crises, rethinking how his island poems, written over three decades, might be read in our age of Anthropocene emergencies. I look at several poems about ecological disasters written in the 1970s-1990s, seeing how Chen Li’s work anticipates what Heidi Lynn Staples and Amy King would call “big energy” poets in the Anthropocene—poets who “think climate changes” (13)—by placing his island aesthetics in the context of the Pacific region as a Cold War inflected, militarized, quake- and typhoon-stricken, and radiation polluted zone of ecological crises. Coinciding with the political isolation of Taiwan internationally and the intensification of industrialism and the establishment of nuclear power plants since the 1970s, the emergence of environmental activism in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the cross-strait military crisis and earthquakes in the 1990s, his island poems speak subtly to the connection between the Cold War and the Anthropocene narrative, disclosing the environmental urgency of our time for a less human-centric and more energy-aware mode of thinking and writing, where the earth system takes the place of the isolated island ecosystem to account for the poet’s world consciousness. I explore the island as a site of planetary crises in poems by Chen Li, including “In a City Alarmed by a Series of Earthquakes” (1980), “Rainstorms” (1981), “The Edge of the Island” (1993), “A War Symphony” (1995), “Sonnets” (1998), “Butterfly Air” (1996), and “On the Island - based on Yami myths” (2004). I examine Chen Li’s representation of the island as earth in those poems and show how his island poetics might speak to a more materiality-oriented, energy-sensitive geopolitical possibility.

Keywords

Chen Li, Cold War, ecological crises, earthquakes, rainstorms, the Anthropocene

Introduction

“For humanity to survive in the Anthropocene, we need to learn to live with and through the end of our current civilization.”

—Roy Scranton

Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization

What do Ping-Pong balls have in common with ballistic missiles? One of Chen Li’s most well-known concrete poems, “A War Symphony” (1995), depicts how Ping-Pong-like warfare might turn the island, and indeed, the planet, into an Anthropocene ruin. The poem uses four Chinese written characters—”兵” (*bing*, soldiers), “乒” (*ping*, sound of collision), “乓” (*pong*, sound of collision), and “丘” (*qiu*, hills)—to represent the gruesome reality of war, with ping and pong embodying the clashing sounds of weapons and the ideographic progression of the characters changing from soldiers with two legs in the first stanza (兵) to soldiers with missing limbs in the second stanza (乒, 乓 and 丘).¹ Toward the end of the poem, the character “丘” embodies the remaining torsos of the soldiers, with their limbs truncated and fragmented. Semantically, the word “丘” can refer to both hills and tombs. The aftermath of war is thus visualized as piles of corpses and tombs forming hills in the shape of a block. The poem segues from marching soldiers to the irregular arrangement of “乒” and “乓” that disrupts the order of the military regime in the middle of the poem. The final stanza returns to the orderly alignment of “丘” again, with a suggestion of human debris eerily prefiguring the impending end of humanity.

Indeed, the analogy drawn between Ping-Pong games and military confrontation explicitly evokes the Ping-Pong diplomacy in the early 1970s between China and the US. The thirty-first World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan initiated an unexpected friendship between the Chinese and US players, leading to an ice-breaking moment between China and the US after the visit of American President Richard Nixon to China. As the acting president of the China Table Tennis Association Song Zhong states, “A tiny ball turned the big globe upside down” (qtd. in Itoh 1). The seemingly inconsequential Ping-Pong games in Nagoya marked a turning point in the Sino-US relationship after four decades of the Cold War. And yet, a small Ping-Pong ball also upended previous Taiwan-US ties, since the thawing of Sino-US relations resulted on the other side of the Taiwan Strait in the removal of

¹ The poem is available in both its written version and audio version read by the poet on Chen Li’s official webpage: <http://faculty.ndhu.edu.tw/~chenli/WarSymphony.htm>.

the Republic of China, the government in Taiwan led by the nationalist Kuomintang Party of Chiang Kai-shek, from the United Nations and the subsequent breaking up of the island's diplomatic ties with the US and most countries in the world.² Chen Li's "A War Symphony," written in the 1990s, serves as a helpful footnote to understand the island's political isolation on a global scale and the subsequent cross-strait military crises due to the indeterminacy of the island's political status. And yet, as a critique of war, the poem also discloses an ecological subtext as an allegory for an anthropogenic endgame in which a world populated by soldiers eventually is emptied and reclaimed by nature again. In a way, the poem can be read as an Anthropocene requiem and an EcoGothic symphony that speaks to a posthuman world free from human dominance, a post-apocalyptic vision of nonhuman existence devoid of the survival narrative more conventionally seen in Western imaginaries.

In this essay, I contextualize Chen Li's island imagery within the Anthropocene narrative, reconsidering him as an established poet in the contemporary global context. I explore how his geopolitical references can be understood as an epistemological "earthquake" that seeks to generate an energy-driven mode of thinking about the seismic shift of perspectives from the local to the planetary scale, exhibiting a decolonial, ecological sensitivity not critically recognized. As an award-winning contemporary Taiwan poet, Chen Li (1954-) grew up during the Cold War in Hualien on the east coast of Taiwan, where earthquakes and typhoons frequent. Chen Li thus is deeply invested in the precarious experience of living on the edge—the border space in-between various geopolitical and geo-climatic forces. I study Chen Li's poetry collection *The Edge of the Island* (2014) by examining his imagery of the island as a site of ecological crises, rethinking how his island poems, written over three decades, might be read in our age of Anthropocene emergencies. The island has faced intensified cross-strait tension since the Nationalist Party retreat from China in 1949, and before that, it has also experienced numerous military occupations and settlements since the seventeenth century by various colonial powers, including the Spanish, the Dutch, the Han Chinese, and the Japanese. The political uncertainty of the island's border status is compounded by the geo-climatic volatility of the Pacific region. The island is situated at the edge of the Pacific and on the longitudinal valley fault line off the east coast, one of the most active colliding zones between the Philippine Sea Plate and the Eurasian Sea Plate. Geo-stratigraphic instability is an integral part of one's quotidian experience. In Chen Li's poems, wars, earthquakes,

² I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the essay for drawing my attention to the link between Chen Li's poem and the Ping-Pong diplomacy of the 1970s.

rainstorms, and tsunamis serve as compelling geo-historical forces that subvert the existent social hierarchy in favor of potential planetary transformation. I examine some poems about ecological disasters written in the 1970s-1990s to see how Chen Li's work anticipates what Heidi Lynn Staples and Amy King would call "big energy" poets in the Anthropocene—poets who "think climate changes" (13)—by placing his island aesthetics in the context of the Pacific region as a militarized, quake- and typhoon-stricken, and radiation-polluted zone of ecological crises.

Well-known for his concrete poetry, Chen Li enacts an imagistic opacity, mythological quality, and allegorical ambiguity in his poems about the island's geopolitical and geo-climatic volatility. In her discussion of the island as a literary trope of either utopia or dystopia in the Western colonial tradition, Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey remarks succinctly that "ecological damage to the island is understood as staging the potential for planetary apocalypse. . . . the island is understood not just as the Earth, but as its anticipated future, demonstrating how space is rendered into time" (166). While DeLoughrey's observation is mainly formed in the context of the European colonization of Caribbean and Pacific archipelagoes, her understanding of the island as a literary trope finds resonance in Chen Li's allegorical writing about the island of Taiwan in a paradoxically apocalyptic-futuristic form, with its long shadows of colonial histories trailing along. As DeLoughrey comments on the function of allegory in literature, "allegory has been revitalized and reinvented to represent this perceived disjunction between humans and the planet, between our 'species' and a dynamic external 'nature'" (4). Chen Li's work shows a similar allegorization of the human/nonhuman disjuncture through the narrative of disaster and extinction. Along with previous critics such as Donna Haraway, Christophe Bonneuil, and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, DeLoughrey laments that "Anthropocene scholarship produces a globalization discourse that misses the globe" (2). Since the island regions in the global south "have been and continue to be at the forefront of ecologically devastating climate change," DeLoughrey calls for attention to "the historical continuity of dispossession and disaster caused by empire" and a deeper "engagement with postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives" (2). Chen Li's island poetics speaks precisely to such an urgent need for postcolonial and Indigenous representation.

But how do we understand Chen Li's poems about an island as a site of ecological emergencies, written in an age before the notion of the Anthropocene entered the public consciousness of our discourse about globalization? How can his depiction of the island with a strong sense of post-apocalyptic survival help us rethink the narrative of the Anthropocene? How do we understand industrialism and

capitalism, as well as Cold War politics, as competing narratives to account for climate change and disasters before human activities were recognized as having a geological impact and a legitimate way to perceive the evolution of planetary history? With poems composed mostly in the 1980s and 1990s, a time of rapid urbanization and industrialization in Taiwan, Chen Li's poetry collection is rarely associated with environmentalism or Anthropogenic issues of natural exploitation, biospheric pollution, and mass extinction. Most critics have focused on his political stance as a postcolonial poet, with his geo-poetics reflecting the island's Cold War conditions, its perspectives of multiple ethnicities (Han Chinese, Indigenous, Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese, etc.), and its complex histories of settler colonialism.³ What seems less noted is how his island poetics anticipates the Anthropocene, the acknowledgment of the human race as a "geological force" whose damage to the earth can be increasingly felt on a planetary scale. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer point out the long-lasting impact of humans on the planet: "[w]ithout major catastrophes like an enormous volcanic eruption, an unexpected epidemic, a large-scale nuclear war, an asteroid impact, a new ice age, or continued plundering of Earth's resources by partially still primitive technology . . . mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come" (18). While Chen Li does not explicitly address Anthropocene crises, he consistently involves catastrophes, man-made and natural alike, in his island poems, expressing a recurring emphasis on the tension between modernity and nonmodernity, between the human and the nonhuman.

In particular, Chen Li's island poems often vacillate between the material and the ephemeral, the historical and the geological, a poetic strategy that enlarges one's epistemological capacity not only through temporal scalar thinking but also by translating and transmitting the vibrating tremor of the island's tectonic movement onto his textual landscape. Indeed, Chen Li's poems assert the vitality of the more-than-human by conflating the geopolitical situation and military tension of Taiwan with its stratigraphic reality as a volcanic island, a poetic gesture intimately entangled with the three-fold increase of energy generation on the island—the "great acceleration" of electricity production and consumption since the 1970s and 1980s ("Energy Statistics"). Coinciding with the political isolation of Taiwan and the intensification of industrialism since the 1970s, the establishment of nuclear power plants, and the emergence of environmental activism in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the cross-strait military crisis and earthquakes in the 1990s, these poems subtly address the connection between the Cold War and the Anthropocene narrative,

³ See Lai; Lao; Gu; Liu; F-m. Chen.

disclosing the environmental urgency of our time to enable a less human-centric and more energy-aware mode of thinking and writing, where the earth system takes the place of the isolated island ecosystem to account for the poet's world consciousness.

Drawing on the recent ecocritical turn to material ecocriticism, I look at how human conflicts and natural phenomena like battlefields, earthquakes, and tsunamis in Chen Li's island poems can be seen through the lens of the Anthropocene. I examine how the poems in *The Edge of the Island*, which were mostly written between the 1970s and 1990s, can be read beyond the postcolonial literary context of Taiwan's modern poetry. Rather, they voice a subtle posthuman concern about the existential threat of the island that requires a repositioning of the poet not merely as a provincial writer with a global outlook, but more specifically as a geo-climatic poet (or "ropewalker" in Chen Li's language) writing and balancing precariously between the cracks of constant geopolitical fragilities and spheric-tectonic instabilities, between the island and its surrounding military, tectonic, hydronic, and atmospheric surges. I draw on Tobias Menely's idea of "geohistorical poetics" to rethink the counter-Anthropocene implication in Chen Li's poems. Menely argues that "any poem can be understood, in its world making and time shaping, to offer a meditation on the enigmatic yet omnipresent nature of energy, in its planetary and social manifestations" (14).⁴ In poems such as "In a City Alarmed by a Series of Earthquakes" (1980), "Rainstorms" (1981), "The Edge of the Island" (1993), "A War Symphony" (1995), "Sonnets" (1998), "Butterfly Air" (1996), and "On the Island - based on Yami myths" (2004), Chen Li articulates such a geo-historical perspective, illustrating the "inescapable imbrication" of human identity "in the Earth system" and encapsulating moments of planetary transformation beyond human-centric concerns.

And yet, Chen Li's island poems further call for a renewed planetary imagination by embodying what Jane Bennett calls "vibrant matter" in a cognitive paradigm shift from an anthropocentric view to a sharper focus on the agency of the nonhuman world as reconstituting a part of his island-world vision. In her discussion of the "agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things" (ix), Bennett draws on philosophers like Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau and the like to "articulate a vibrant materiality" that focuses on the "vitality"

⁴ As Menely elaborates, "a poem will reflexively condense a broader set of mediations that, exceeding human identities and relations, give expression to the individual poet's and his or her society's inescapable imbrication in the Earth system, the condition of all productive activity" (13). Poetry, according to Menely, "offers an archive of geohistory because poems formalize the activity of making as a transformative redirection of planetary energy" (15).

and “capacity of things” such as “edibles, commodities, storms, metals,” which not only “impede or block the will and designs of humans” but also “act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). Focusing similarly on the “material recalcitrance” of things in their “resistant force” (Bennett 1), Chen Li shows a preoccupation with the vital force generated through human-nonhuman interaction that goes beyond the instrumentalization of objects for human purposes. His island poems resonate with Bruno Latour’s down-to-earth politics as a New Climate Regime, with his poetic segue from aesthetic experimentation as a form of postcolonial resistance to the emergence of a demodernized, non-anthropocentric planetary consciousness. By evoking various geopolitical and climatic phenomena, Chen Li envisions an earth-shattering cosmic force beyond Anthropocene dominance. I examine Chen Li’s representation of the island as earth in his poetry collection and show how his island poetics might disclose a more materiality-oriented, energy-sensitive geopolitical possibility.

Chen Li’s War Symphony and the Anthropocene Ruin

Let us return to “A War Symphony,” also collected in *The Edge of the Island*, for a moment, and see how the poem, while manifesting the Cold War politics embedded in the Sino-Taiwan-US triangulation and its ripple effect, also foregrounds Chen Li’s island imagination about the environmental potentiality of Anthropogenic emergencies. The ideograph of the word “兵” (*bing*), soldiers, comprises two components, with tools like axes in the upper part and human hands in the lower part. Such weaponry-human hybridity evokes the idea of the Anthropos, with its axe-wielding capability pointing toward the dexterity (as well as potential monstrosity) that the human-nonhuman compound word represents.⁵ The combined character embodies the Anthropos “as a natural being and force *within* nature” (Horn and Bergthaller 70), in which humans work with technologies and instruments to obtain and utilize resources from their environment (“丘”) and to alter and reshape the earth system.⁶ The visual resemblance of the first character “兵” with the last character in the poem, “丘” (*qiu*), hills, further discloses how “soil” and “wood,” two of the five Chinese elements—wood, fire, earth, water, and metal—remain the only linguistic

⁵ As an ideogrammic compound, the word “兵” is composed of two parts—the lower part “卂” (a pair of hands) holding up the upper part “斤” (“a short axe”).

⁶ More information about the Anthropos and their relationship to the technosphere as one of the major features of the Anthropocene, see for example, Horn and Bergthaller (67-83). See also Chakrabarty; Haff.

unit sustained throughout the poem, despite, or because of, the war. Stacy Alaimo sees the four elements proposed by the Greek philosopher Empedocles—water, earth, fire, and air—as conveying “a countervailing sense of that which is more impervious to human alteration—less fragile, less compromised by the events that strike or swirl through time” (307). Chen Li’s poem, in a similar vein, draws one’s attention to the impervious elemental forces and invites one to reassess the instrumental repurposing of human practices.

Chen Li’s “A War Symphony” unveils our Anthropocene anxiety, with the explicit sarcasm in the “war-word” symphony highlighting the violence of human manipulation of the nonhuman world through technology, where the traces of environmental disturbance and the consequences of human self-destructiveness are laid threadbare, as exemplified in the chaotic visual presentation in the second stanza and the thematic and visual parallel (as well as contrast) between a militant marching forward in the first stanza and a complete stall in the final stanza. While the ideographic representation of the character “兵” indicates some kind of human-nonhuman intimacy, toward the end of poem, the word “丘” no longer serves as nonhuman resources used, possessed, extracted, or appropriated for military purposes. Conversely, they replace the bodies of the soldiers and bury them within. With their limbs missing, human soldiers, and by extension, the *Anthropos*, are no longer mobile or enabled by their weaponry. The word “丘” implies ultimate human immobility and mortality, as is embodied by the textual arrangement of the “block” of hills as mass graves. In this way, the poem ironizes Anthropocenic arrogance by exposing the fragility of human existence.

The soundscapes of the poem assist such an Anthropocene irony, in which the stillness of the earth song in the end takes over the grandiose “symphony” of the Ping-Pong war. Chen Li deliberately juxtaposes three different sound scales in the poem—a symphony, a Ping-Pong game, and the mono-tonal sounds of the four words—to accentuate the elasticity and multiplicity of perspectival and scalar changes. The four Chinese characters are pronounced with the first tone throughout, the flatness of the tonal choice forming a sharp contrast with the title’s indication of an elaborately orchestrated musical piece. The use of the onomatopoeic phrase “乒乒” (*ping pong*) evokes the sounds of table tennis games and thus undermines the gravity of war by drawing a parallel between a sport and the battlefield.⁷ As mentioned earlier, the major conceit of the poem might have been predicated upon the Ping-Pong diplomacy

⁷ The note from the poem’s translator Fen-ling Chang, Chen Li’s wife, mentions that the two Chinese characters “乒” and “乓”, which resemble “one-legged soldiers, are two onomatopoeic words imitating sounds of collision or gunshots” (139).

of the 1970s that reshaped Sino-American political relations, with the international isolation of the island as a political result. Chen Li's Ping-Pong/war analogy thus suggests that war can be as militant and dramatic (as well as artificial) as an orchestra piece, and yet it can also be as arbitrary and unpredictable as the unforeseen, and perhaps unforeseeable, consequences of the triangulated China-Taiwan-US political Ping-Pong games. Placing the poem in the context of the Anthropocene, one sees how what Chen Li calls "a war symphony" sounds a different tune of human despondence with an almost triumphant return of the planet from a chaotic anthropogenic crisis. It ushers in a human-free world of quietude and signals a depopulated world devoid of Anthropocene aggression and military commotion. The word "symphony" manifests the epic scale of warfare devastation, but the poem's tragicomic tone—the juxtaposition of war, a symphony, and a Ping-Pong game—also points to the constructedness, artificiality, and randomness of the war and the critical distance of the speaker-poet from such a spectacle of human self-destruction.

Poems like "A War Symphony," written during the peak of the cross-strait tension, a military crisis triggered by the American visit of then-President Lee Teng-hui in 1995, testifies to the island's precarious geopolitical existence.⁸ The four ideographs "兵" (*bing*), "乒" (*ping*), "乓" (*pong*), and "丘" (*qiu*) visually and semiotically intertwine with each other, simultaneously embodying the teleological progression of the military narrative and yet disrupting it with their intimate, almost circular entanglement. The transformation of the characters from "兵" to "丘" suggests an allegorical movement from depopulation to decomposition, as well as the world's potential regeneration. Human-human collision in war is bound up with human-nonhuman collision, resulting in an ecological narrative that foresees a de-human-ed, posthuman future. Without a specific setting, the poem allows the images and sounds of the four Chinese characters to preserve the traces of the Anthropocene at the brink of its ruin. It also captures the poet's ambivalence towards an overtly politicized, human-centric perspective and implies a shift from a human-oriented worldview toward an object-oriented and ecologically relevant mode of thinking and writing.

⁸ The cross-strait crisis was triggered by President Lee Teng-hui's acceptance of an invitation from his alma mater, Cornell University, to give a commencement speech on Taiwan's experience of democratization in 1995.

Earthquakes, Rainstorms, and the Planetary Imagination

Chen Li in *The Edge of the Island* experiments with the rhetorical power of apocalyptic narratives through all kinds of disasters, both man-made and natural. The eponymous poem “The Edge of the Island” (1993), for example, compares the island, after its being ousted by the United Nations, to a loose button on the global map in urgent need of being sewn back to the “blue uniform” of the sea and reattached to “the heart of the earth” (Chen, *Edge* 107-108). Another poem, “The Ropewalker” (1995), creates a ropewalker persona performing a balancing act who faces the threat of “A ball like the earth, pouring onto your face the unfastened / islands and lakes . . .” (Chen, *Edge* 129), evoking again the Ping-Pong ball/ballistic missile Cold War analogy also discernible in “A War Symphony.” Through various end-of-the-world scenarios, Chen Li’s island poems anticipate mass geo-climatic extinction triggered by some kind of planetary derailment “just like a wheelbarrow with a loose screw” (Chen, *Edge* 129).⁹ In his poems in the 1970s and 1980s, the climatic and stratigraphic movements in the earth system, rather than a background or a stage for the human drama to unfold, serve often as a dominant shaping force for the making and rebuilding of a new world. In the early poem “In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes” (1978), earthquakes function as a kind of divine justice that, through the geo-social process of trembling, rocking, and convulsing, brings the city people to confess, repent, and reform themselves:

In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes, I heard
a thousand black-hearted jackals say to their children,
“Mother, I was wrong.”
I heard the judge cry
and the priest repent. I heard
handcuffs fly out of newspapers, blackboards drop into a manure pit. I
heard literary men put down their hoes, farmers take off their glasses,
and fat businessmen take off their clothes of cream and balsam one by
one.
In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes,
I saw pimps on their knees returning vaginas to their daughters. (Chen,
Edge 44)

⁹ I provide a more detailed reading of the two poems in another essay. See Hsu.

The poem presents an allegorical display of characters and people from all walks of urban life, like “black-hearted jackals,” judges, priests, “literary men,” “farmers,” “fat businessmen,” and “pimps,” emphasizing the complicity of various social groups with the structured technological violence and systematic oppression imposed upon the victims of social and moral injustice during urbanization, particularly women and children. Deviating from the extinction crisis or last-man narrative that dominates the contemporary Anthropocene imagination, the poem obviates the survival-ship stereotypes of apocalyptic scenarios, alternatively evoking maternal imagery like “Mother” and “vaginas” to bookend the poem. This suggests how geo-climatic vibration propels cosmic labor for a potential return to a new geo-social-political order.

While environmental exploitation is not explicitly addressed in the poem, political powers, familial relations, and social roles are depicted in vivid, object-based terms to highlight the technospheric imposition of the Anthropocene order, and the energy-bursting force of these earthquake-provoked transformations unsettle the rigid and obstinate construction of modernity. “Handcuffs,” signs of police power, “fly out of newspapers” to arrest criminals. “Blackboards,” emblems of education, “drop into a manure pit” and become part of human excrement. In “literary men put down their hoes, farmers take off their glasses,” not only are the social functions of writers and farmers exchanged, but their “putting down” and “taking off” the instruments or tools they work with point to an economic and social reconfiguration of their livelihood and worldviews. The “clothes of cream and balsam” worn by “fat businessmen,” presumably acquired through unjust means and embodying capitalism and consumerism in their most intimate, private forms, are stripped from the body. “Vaginas,” a metonym for prostitution, similarly emphasizes the retrieval of female individual bodily agency from social, economic, and biological exploitation. The poem conveys a Bakhtinesque, carnivalesque moment of restoration for social and political justice, where hierarchical structures between parents and children, authorities and subordinates are interrupted, subverted, and even reversed (“a thousand black-hearted jackals say to their children, / ‘Mother, I was wrong’”). And yet, it also foresees an ideally posthuman vision where the human monopoly and manipulation of resources no longer holds primacy. Even the speaker “I” remains a bystander of these catastrophic events rather than an utterer and bestower of a new social order or meaning. The repetition of “I heard” and “I saw” in the poem points to a detached, observing human voice witnessing the calamitous event and its tremendous impact without interference. It predicts a quasi-Blakean, cosmic

compound vision for rebirth without a clearly articulated, sublimated promise for the human species.

Indeed, nonhuman agencies in Chen Li's poems play an increasingly significant role and enabling position in these geospheric events with their brittle, unsteady volatility and plasticity, a point illustrated more specifically in the poem "Rainstorms" (1981), written around the same time. In the poem, Chen Li performs a hydro-genetic oracle, with the speaker "I" watching the agitated, fluctuating motions of the hydrosphere, which animate "rotten iron," "the world's rubbish," and human waste into renewed cosmic energy:

I hear the rainstorm shouting at us,
ten thousand acres of trembling starlight and shadows.
I hear the vast ocean crying for her lost babies,
dark sighs and breaths.

Rotten night,
rotten night.
An ideal has died here.
Do you see that?

Rotten night,
rotten night.
An ideal is about to resurrect.
Do you hear that?

I hear mud and sand carrying pollen,
stinking water carrying honey.
I see excrement fostering rice,
rotten iron supporting insects' chirps.

Swinging among waves is the world's rubbish:
kernels, waste paper, dead sperm.
Agitating among waves are people's words:
prayers, love poems, obscene shouts.

Tear the shore open!
Tear the shore open!

Do you hear them yelling,
washing our guardian dam of morality like the rainstorm?

Tear the shore open!
Tear the shore open!
Do you see their shadows,
rising from the secret ocean of life like giant trees?

And you— are you still the proud cliff?
Plunge into that ocean!
Plunge into that ocean!
A great love is to be born here! (Chen, *Edge* 58-59)

The poem begins with the anger of the nonhuman against the human, with “the rainstorms shouting at us” and “the vast ocean crying for her lost babies” signaling the diminishing of species due to human activities. The next two quatrains present a cognitive twist with the repetition of the phrase “Rotten night / rotten night,” in which a dying ideal in the second stanza (“An ideal has died here”) drastically leads to a renewed hope in the third stanza (“An ideal is about to resurrect”). The fourth stanza elaborates on the vitality of rotten matters by showing how inorganic, slimy, and repulsive things, such as “mud,” “sand,” “stinking water,” “excrement,” and “rotten iron” are entangled and integrated with the organic, the regenerative, and the nourishing, such as “pollen,” “honey,” “rice,” and “insects’ chirps” through the intermingling force of the rain and the wind. The womb-like oceanic water serves as an elemental conduit through which the boundaries between the pure and the polluted, the edible and the inedible, and the biotic and the metallic dissolve. Verbs like “carrying,” “fostering,” and “supporting” further indicate a symbiotic cycle of these vibrating matters, in which decayed and rotten materials are subsumed and transmuted into living beings.

The second half of the poem pivots toward an animistic celebration of such a messy and yet intimate entanglement between the human and the nonhuman. While the fourth stanza depicts the nurturing quality of waste and dirt, the fifth stanza further interfuses “the world’s rubbish” with “people’s words,” quotidian daily consumption with religious piety, love, and politics. The juxtaposition of unwanted human waste and human ideas draws one’s attention to the dire environmental consequences of the Anthropocene, with the development and execution of ideologies and idealism leading to the very demise of planetary existence. And yet in the poem, Nature’s

revenge also entails a sense of empowerment, a glimpse of the possibility of regeneration. The “swinging” and “agitating” of the waves generate a revitalizing force. The last three quatrains feature the cosmic rebirth of a vexed and damaged planet, with the speaker urging the rainstorm to wash “our guardian dam of morality” while declaring “a great love” to be born. The hydro-genetic energy, embodied in the “swinging” “yelling” “shadows” of these objects, rubbish and writing alike, is “rising from the secret ocean of life like giant trees,” linking the aquatic with the arboreal, the inanimate, dead or passive with the active and the protean. The poem climaxes with the volcanic and quasi-religious chanting of “Tear the shore open!” in the sixth and seventh stanzas and “Plunge into that ocean!” in the ultimate stanza. The reference to “our guardian dam of morality” in the sixth stanza implies how institutional practices, an embodiment of civilization and enlightenment thinking closely associated with the Anthropocene as we know it, might be the very root cause of such a hydro-spheric revolt. The addressee “you” eventually shifts from the supposed human reader at the beginning of the poem to the nonhuman, “the proud cliff” in the last stanza (“And you—are you still the proud cliff?”), gesturing toward the embrace of an orgasmic, terrestrial-oceanic intercourse and the resurrection of the “lost babies” with “dark sighs and breaths” who symbolize the wronged, extinct species of the past (“Do you see their shadows, / rising from the secret ocean of life like giant trees?”).

In poems like “In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes” and “Rainstorms,” Chen Li utilizes geo-climatic disruption to unsettle Anthropogenic forces and envision a new planetary order. Earthquakes in the first poem enact a form of cosmic justice through violent geo-social dislocation. Rainstorms in the second poem further provoke an oceanic revolution and a hydrogenic form of world-remaking. For Chen Li, earthquakes and rainstorms exert an immense rhetorical power to subvert human-centric cosmologies, with the startling, inciting, and shaking power of the geo-climatic force turning human complacency on its head. In “Sonnets” (1998), Chen Li presents a series of sonnets consisting of three intimate conversations between the speaker “I” and “you.” The last sonnet in the series discusses earthquakes and their metaphysical significance:

The earthquake is the topic we haven’t talked about yet. Yesterday
a violent quake hit Chiayi. Houses caved in; landslides blocked
highways.

Today there were ceaseless aftershocks in Hualien. The biggest
one’s epicenter was on your bed. Scattered on the floor were

our gasps. The earthquake is over; the rhythms remain . . .
 Earthquakes make us beware of peril in peacetime. Suppose all
 the fleshly constructions collapsed, what would it be
 that pillars our love? Slanting metaphysics? Metaphors deformed
 and reformed? Earthquakes make us cherish peace in time of
 danger, thinking of the holy empire of senses that is both spiritual
 and physical, of gossip, suspicion, poverty, and sorrow that
 strengthen its columns, roofed corridor, and overhanging eaves.
 Thunder and lightning help form the music of blacksmiths; at
 earthquakes we feel sorrow, write, and keep music going. (Chen, *Edge*
 161)

In poems of ecological crisis like this, Chen Li's island-planetary vision prescribes what Bonneuil and Fressoz would describe as the shock of the Anthropocene, which challenges human confidence in an "industrial modernity" that, "having claimed to free itself from the limits of the planet, is striking Earth like a boomerang" (27). Earthquakes manifest themselves as a hyperobject-like presence, collapsing houses, causing landslides, and blocking highways, as well as undermining or destroying the products of modernity and fossil capitalism. They also accentuate the interconnectedness between the western and the eastern part of the island, with their rhizomic, subterranean tectonic plate system ("Yesterday / a violent quake hit Chiayi. . . / Today there were ceaseless aftershocks in Hualien."). Furthermore, they instigate the quake within, the ontological crisis of human fragility.

As the speaker notes, the biggest shock, the epicenter of the earthquake "was on your bed," with "our gasps" being "[s]cattered on the floor." Erotic desire and seismic shock, physical consummation and planetary annihilation are coupled in this love sonnet. Chen Li's geo-climatic imagination here comes close to what Timothy Morton would call the "hyperobject" that brings out "the end of the world" (6), the planetary scope of which constantly unsettles and destabilizes a unified, transcendental, and anthropocentric vision. Morton describes one's recognition of the Anthropocene as a being-quake:

The ground of being is shaken. There we were, trolling along in the age of industry, capitalism, and technology, and all of a sudden we received information from aliens, information that even the most hardheaded could not ignore, because the form in which the information was delivered was precisely the instrumental and

mathematical formulas of modernity itself. The Titanic of modernity hits the iceberg of hyperobjects. (19)

While Morton focuses more specifically on man-made hyperobjects like global agriculturalism, which according to Morton has resulted in the Anthropocene crisis we are facing now, Chen Li returns instead to the vibrating, shaking, and clashing interfaces between the earth and the ocean, among objects from the human and the nonhuman alike, and seeks geo-mythical rebirth through their bursting energies. As the speaker repeats in the poem, “Earthquakes make us beware of peril in peacetime” and “Earthquakes make us cherish peace in time of / danger.” Toward the end of the poem, stratigraphical vibrations seem to submerge into the narrative possibility that the poem embodies. The verse form of the poem, loosely following the European sonnet without rhymes, resembles a “fleshly” building-like block with fourteen carefully arranged, even lines, creating an intriguing contrast with the themes of landslides, collapsed houses, and deformity in the poem and self-referencing the sonnet as a “metaphysical” textual block that stabilizes and restores the slanted, damaged, and caved “columns, roofed corridor, and overhanging eaves” of human construction. While the speaker also questions the functions of “slanting metaphysics” and “redeformed” words and “metaphors,” the poem draws our attention to its own formalistic as well as visual construction, accentuating the significance of linking “thunder and lightning” with “the music of blacksmiths,” “the rhythms” of the “ceaseless aftershocks in Hualien” with the poet-speaker’s own artistic creation (“at earthquakes we feel sorrow, write, and keep music going”). For Chen Li, narratives about earthquake survival contain vibrating, revitalizing power for the poet to “write, and keep music going.”

Nuclear-Power Plants and Energy-Thinking/Writing

While Chen Li’s island poems echo the contemporary political sentiment of his time with their strong sense of isolation, reflecting the UN and US cutting off diplomatic ties with Taiwan in the 1970s, they also provide an alternative imagination about Taiwan’s postcolonial condition, particularly its relation to modernity and energy production when the island was experiencing intensified industrial development and urbanization. Since the island has a very limited domestic energy supply of its own, mostly from nuclear power and other renewable energy like solar power, wind power, and hydroelectricity, the majority of its energy consumption has been relying on coal, liquefied natural gas, and petroleum importation from

elsewhere.¹⁰ The energy consumption per capita in Taiwan increased threefold from the 1980s to the 2000s and peaked around 2007.¹¹ During the 1970s-1990s, four nuclear power plants were being planned and constructed to cope with the island's dependence on foreign energy imports and its pressing demand for energy and electricity generation, since manufacturing and industrial sectors, working in tandem with the development of the fossil fuel regime since the twentieth century, depend closely upon the obtaining, retaining, and containing, as well as generating, delivering, and recycling of power.

Nevertheless, the use of nuclear power energy in the Pacific region, frequented by earthquakes, typhoons, and tsunamis, remains a controversial topic for heated political debate. The Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, for example, was triggered by the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami and led to one of the most severe radiation leaks since the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. The emergence of environmental activism in the 1970s and the establishment of new nuclear power plants impacted how political allegiances were formed in Taiwan, with diverging speculations about the potential environmental impact of nuclear power plants.¹² In 1999, the Lungmen Power Plant in New Taipei City, the fourth nuclear power plant on the island, began its construction. It was also around this period that several devastating earthquakes brought people's attention to the issue of nuclear power production on this island. Chen Li's "Sonnets," written around the same time, has proven to be prescient. The 1998 Reili earthquake was a 6.2 on the Richter scale, the only one above 6 in the past three decades on the west coast of Taiwan, and caused 5 deaths, injured 27 people, and damaged more than 50 buildings. The next year, the September 21 Jiji earthquake took place at Richter scale 7.3 and was the second deadliest in the recorded history of Taiwan, killing almost 2,500 people and wounding more than 11,000 people. This devastating "921" earthquake prompted concerns from the public about the safety of nuclear power construction, and an anti-nuclear campaign was launched in 2000 to

¹⁰ More information in English is available at the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) website: www.eia.gov; www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/TWN.

¹¹ More information is available on the Energy Statistics Information System website provided by the Energy Administration in Taiwan: <https://www.esist.org.tw/Database/List?PageId=3>.

¹² Nuclear power plants are considered one of the most effective methods for power generation in the area. Philip F. Williams, for example, draws upon the ideas of eco-pragmatist Stewart Brand and argues that nuclear power remains a more environmentally viable option for electricity generation in East Asia, in comparison with other sources, such as fossil fuels, hydroelectric power, wind and solar power, and other renewable energies, listing its advantages as follows: "its proven health and safety record, its unmatched level of constant generating capacity, its relatively small footprint on the land, its low fuel costs and modest operating expenses, and its absence of carbon emissions and other air pollutants" (231).

deter the building of the Lungmen Power Plant. The construction of the fourth nuclear power plant has been suspended ever since, and a 2021 referendum again failed to reach the threshold for the work to be reactivated.

The island poems of Chen Li implicitly address the modernizing regime of the government, which is predicated upon various infrastructure-building projects. His geo-climatic narratives parallel governmental policies during the period in their attempt to speed up energy generation to fulfill the never-ending cycle of production and consumption. This felt need to reimagine the bursting, explosive power of natural energy could also be read in the context of the prevalent Western narrative about the modern pursuit of freedom and mobility based upon the fossil energy regime. Stephanie LeMenager comments on “the aesthetics of petromodernity” in twentieth-century North American literature and film, which “refers to a modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum” (60). As LeMenager notes, “petromodernity has enveloped the Euro-American imagination to the extent that ‘oil’ has become implicitly synonymous with the world, in a large, Heideggerian sense of the human enframing and revealing of earth, thus the world we know” (61). The dominance of this petromodernity is embedded in the history of the island’s industrial development, with the use of fossil fuels on the island to generate electricity in the 2020s creating a sliding scale across four decades.¹³ Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller thus point out how “[t]he conception of freedom that co-evolved with the fossil energy regime is today one of the greatest obstacles in overcoming” the challenge of moving onto a different energetic base (138).¹⁴ Chen Li’s island poems take on such a challenge by focusing on the geo-climatic energy released from ecological calamities for a new world-making potentiality to be imagined.

Chen Li’s Indigenous Imagination and Eco-Regeneration

Indeed, Chen Li’s island vision does not feed on technological development but emerges at the brink of its very dismantlement. While his energy imaginaries are predicated upon various degrees of eco-precariousness, he also repeatedly asserts the possibility of energy transmission and transformation by rethinking the vibration of matter through the island’s tectonic and climatic volatility. In particular, he incorporates various Indigenous elements to recreate his island vision. In “On the

¹³ More information is available on the Energy Statistics Information System website provided by the Energy Administration in Taiwan: <https://www.esist.org.tw/Database/List?PageId=3>.

¹⁴ See also Chakrabarty 208.

Island,” a conglomeration of legends from six Indigenous tribes (written in the same year as “Sonnets”), Chen Li reconsiders earthquakes through the lens of the Amis people, the largest Austronesian ethnic group in Taiwan. The poem is divided into ten sections and comprises various myths from the Amis, the Atayal, the Saisiyat, the Paiwan, the Bunun, and the Puyuma people in Taiwan. The theme of earthquakes comes up in the sixth section of the poem, in which the speaker evokes an Amis legend about the origin of earthquakes to reimagine a planetary future:

Because the bees buzz underground,
we have earthquakes. Yet earthquakes
can be sweet, if a bit of honey should
seep through the cracks of the
earth’s crust, through the cracks of the heart. (163)

The earthquake account of the Amis people demonstrates a unique cosmic vision that combines an Anthropocene allegory with geological reality. According to the Amis tale, “the people living on the ground cheated those living underground by exchanging hemp bags filled with bees for goods”; the underground people, upon the realization of their betrayal, shook the ground in angry retribution (Chen, *Edge* 164). While the earthquake, according to the tale, is a result of moral injustice—human mistreatment and exploitation of each other—the hemp bags of bees play a significant and yet often overlooked role in this seemingly naïve mythical explanation of geo-stratigraphic activities. The bees are captured, concentrated, bagged, and relocated as commodities to be exchanged for human self-interest. The human calculation and manipulation of natural resources comes before they exploit each other. Chen Li reworks this Amis legend by imagining the convulsion of the earth as the subterranean movement of these bagged bees, with their unsuppressed (and perhaps insuppressible) stratigraphic tremor reconceptualized into an organic moment of natural (re)production. Honey is generated through the labor of bees’ vibrating energy—their buzzing, pollinating, and gathering pollen. They straddle the organic and the inorganic, the human and the nonhuman, embodying an intermediate nonhuman agency that “seep(s) through the cracks of the earth’s crust” to mend “the cracks of the heart” and recreate hope to heal social conflicts as well as environmental disorder. The poem suggests a human-nonhuman realignment and the potentiality of a bio-geo-mythical conversion of earthly energies for social-ecological restoration.

The origin story of the Tao people, the only maritime ethnic group among the Austronesians in Taiwan, provides Chen Li with another, more radical oceanic cosmology to move beyond a landed imagination and anthropocentric thinking. In “On the Island - based on Yami myths” (2004), Chen Li utilizes the hydrogenic myth of the Tao people to rethink eco-precarity and island regeneration. The Tao people dwell on Orchid Island (Lanyu), a small island situated to the southeast of the island of Taiwan, and they are well-known for their maritime-centered culture, *tatala* boat-building artistry, and elaborate flying-fish practices.¹⁵ In the first part of the poem, the clashing, colliding movements of tsunamis converges with the creation of the Tao race:

The island is by the sea, and the sea by the island
Our island is a tiny, motionless ship

Tsunami turned the ship into a cradle
The waves dashed toward the mountaintop, splitting the giant rock
Out of the rock I popped
I am man, I am Tau
I am a man

Tsunami turned the ship into a cradle
The waves tumbled over reefs, splitting bamboo woods
Out of the bamboo I popped
I am man, I am Tau
I am a man (186)

Resonating with his previous poem “Rainstorms” that “Tear the shore open!” for “A great love” to be born (58-59), the poem returns to the ecological edge zone between the sea and the island, mythologizing and eroticizing the vibrating, shaking, and bursting energy produced by the intercourse between the human and the nonhuman, animate and inanimate objects alike. As the refrain shows, “Tsunami turned the ship [the island] into a cradle”, geo-climactic forces like tsunamis are both destructive and

¹⁵ The Tao cosmology is centered upon the ocean surrounding the island, forming a sharp contrast with Chinese mythology, which has a more land-based cosmic imagination (“Tao: Introduction to the Ethnic Group”). See also the introduction to the Yami people on the Council of Indigenous Peoples website: <https://www.cip.gov.tw/en/tribe/grid-list/6521E76602C72C42D0636733C6861689/info.html?cumid=D0636733C6861689>.

regenerative, with violent elemental forces “dash[ing] toward the mountaintop, splitting the giant rock” and “tumb[ling] over reefs, splitting bamboo woods” while giving birth to two “Tau” men (“Tau” means “man” in the Tao language). In the second half of the first part of the poem, the two “Tau” men, “having no women to love and / loved by no women,” make love with each other by entwining their “exceedingly long penises,” swinging and scratching each other’s knees, and “sleeping foot to foot,” until a man and a woman “burst” out of their knees (186).

By adopting the Tao tale, Chen Li reworks the geo-(homo)erotic, queer-sexual politics of Orchid Island into his own friction/eruption-based, desire-charged, island-ocean consciousness. Rather than confirming a heteronormative relationship, the poem naturalizes the physical intimacy between two Tao men (“Our knees touched comfortably, getting all the itchier with every touch”) as analogous to the collision between the tsunami and the island (186). As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson note, queer ecologies can be seen “as a form of eco-sexual *resistance*” against “ecologically implicated heteronormativity” (21). Chen Li’s adaptation of this non-heterosexual Tao origin myth in “On the Island - based on Yami myths” poses an eco-political assertion against a more Han-oriented island identity. The poem was written at a time when the Tao people began to voice their Indigenous tradition and identity, as well as their ancestral right to Orchid Island, more publicly in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1998, the Council of Indigenous Peoples renamed the Yami people, a name given by the Japanese anthropologist Torii Ryuzo during the Japanese occupation in 1897, into the “Tao” people under the urging of the island residents. Additionally, the Tao people finally terminated a contract with the Taiwan Power Company about the storage of nuclear waste in the 1980s, after their persistent protest (Lin).¹⁶ While Chen Li’s poem does not explicitly refer to environmental activism conducted by the Orchid Island residents, his borrowing of the Tao myth and reorientation of its focus on the littoral interface and the geo-climatic entanglement between the human and the nonhuman also suggests his intention to relocate the more “(main)land-ed,” human-centered Chinese cosmology to a more oceanic, Indigenous island consciousness.

In “Butterfly Air” (1996), Chen Li further moves from the hydrospheric to the atmospheric field, adopting the meteorological theory of the “butterfly effect” to account for invisible, untamable, and yet potentially regenerative aerial movements. The “butterfly effect” and the “ripple effect” in chaos theory were articulated by

¹⁶ According to the Nuclear Safety Commission in Taiwan, between 1982 and 1996, the Orchid Island Storage Site offered off-site interim storage for 97,672 drums of solidified radioactive waste.

meteorologist Edward Lorenz, climatologist Philip Merilees, and others in the 1960s and 1970s to describe how an initial condition like the flapping of a bird's or a butterfly's wings in one location might lead to the change of the course of weather elsewhere (Lorenz 1). While the butterfly effect was often used to explicate abnormal and seemingly unpredictable climatic phenomena, the Ping-Pong diplomacy alluded to in "A War Symphony" would later be used by scholars as an example of the "butterfly effect" generated by ordinary people "who could change the direction of foreign relations, just like the spontaneous actions of small butterflies that can generate unexpected climate changes" (Itoh 8).¹⁷ Written one year after "A War Symphony," Chen Li's "Butterfly Air" reworks the concept to seek alternative connections among peoples, nations, and hemispheres through insects (one recalls the buzzing bees and underground honey in his adaptation of the Amis tale in "On the Island"). In the poem, the speaker resorts to the hemispheric power of arthropods to "cause a / typhoon in your summer mid-day dream" (148). The addressee "you" is never identified but is presumably someone with whom the speaker used to be close and later lost touch:

So I am expecting the butterflies in the Southern Hemisphere to flutter
Their wings, which will cause a typhoon
in your summer midday's dream, so that the butterfly shadows secretly
issued by sorrow may
flap and pound the doors and windows of your heart. . . . (148)

An ephemeral phenomenon like the fluttering of butterfly wings, along with their "butterfly shadows," garners atmospheric momentum and causes typhoons across hemispheres, and yet the speaker goes further to suggest a metaphoric storm to be created in "your summer midday's dream." The speaker imagines that the subtle alternation of air pressure will bring both closer to their earlier, earthly memories, reawaking their ecological consciousness ("so that you can hear anew . . . the insects' chirping, the dogs' barking . . . so that you can hear anew the smell of sweat and the scent of mud" [149]). The quivering "butterfly air," however delicate and imperceptible, conjures a powerful south tropical imagination that goes beyond the island's postcolonial struggle and gestures toward an energy-aware decolonial approach:

¹⁷ For more on the Ping-Pong diplomacy of the 1970s as a butterfly effect, see Hong and Sun.

All I can do is to write a poem, a sad poem, to make the butterflies in
the
Southern Hemisphere fight for it,
fluttering their ten thousand wings and resulting in a typhoon in the
summer mid-day
dream of you,
who are behind metal walls of a tall building near the Tropic of Cancer.
(149)

While the “metal walls” and “tall building” confine modern *Anthropos* like the addressee “you,” the meteorological is intermingled with the sensuous, triggering one’s awareness of a deeper connection with the environment. The poem, while a “sad” one, is also a sphere-crossing, trans-species conversation that “make[s] the butterflies in the Southern Hemisphere fight for it.” For Chen Li, writing a poem like this can turn words into nectar for butterflies to feed upon. Through the micro-vibration of the butterfly wings, people and species can be reconnected, like “an unhinderable summer night’s dialogue at the deep bottom of a lake” (149).

Conclusion

From the 1970s to the 2000s, Chen Li’s island poems show multiple formalistic and thematic transitions, from a critique of human/technology-centrism and an embrace of planetary rebirth to a more multi-ethnic and trans-species rumination on the eco-precarity of the island and its regeneration through unorthodox energy imaginaries. While the poems discussed here, mostly written and published before the year 2000, are more often read in the Cold War context, their employment of apocalyptic allegories implicitly touches upon Anthropocene-related topics, such as sea-level rise, extreme weather conditions, and toxic waste disposal. By writing, working, and thinking with various disasters to account for the island’s geopolitical and geo-climatic complexity, these poems display a subtle gravitation toward the vibrating agency and materiality of the atmospheric, the hydronic, and the tectonic, and a reorientation on cognitive shift and epistemological change through the elemental, nonhuman catalysts of the planet. Chen Li’s island poems practice what Hubert Zapf calls “cultural ecology” in his underpinning of the intrinsic relation between “matter and mind,” among “creative matter,” “creative biosphere,” and “creative mind” (“Creative Matter” 51). As Zapf remarks on the regenerative power of literature, “Literary texts are sites of radical strangeness, alienation, and alterity . . .

and they are also simultaneously sites of reconnection, reintegration, and, at least potentially, of regeneration on psychic, social, and aesthetic levels” (*Literature* 12). Chen Li’s island poems encourage sustainable ecological thinking by consistently crossing the division between the natural and the cultural, the physical and the mental, seeking geo-poetic energy (or in Zapf’s language, creativity) to renew one’s perception of the world and rebuild a planet with vibrant geo-/bio-spheric mental creativity.

Chen Li’s island poetry further shows an investment in a heightened awareness of the human-nonhuman disjuncture and their profound enmeshment. Wars, earthquakes, rainstorms, and tsunamis manifest for Chen Li the “vibrating” energy of matter and nonhuman agency in its barest, elemental form, as well as its social, spiritual, and poetic implications. By foregrounding tectonic plate shifts and climatic changes in the earth system, the poet interweaves the planetary consciousness into his island-world vision. Posthumous existence in “A War Symphony,” cross-class and trans-scalar calamities in poems like “In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes,” “Rainstorms,” and “Sonnets,” multi-ethnic cosmologies in “On the Island” and “On the Island - based on Yami myths,” and trans-species perspectives in “Butterfly Air” invite readers to rethink the hyperobject-like temporal scales of the nonhuman world and their biospheric and stratigraphic energies. His island poems help reimagine nonhuman agencies across geo-historical as well as sociopolitical spectrums, exemplifying sites of ecological emergencies that can also mobilize stagnant human-nonhuman relations, produce new material-social interactions, and rebuild geo-poetic worlds “through the cracks of the heart” (163). His geo-climatic vibration, placed in the context of Cold War militarism, contains an implicit critique of the anthropogenic appropriation of energy resources, such as oil, minerals, wind, and water in the biosphere, conjuring elemental forms of energy reformation to rethink the regeneration of energy through alternative forms of stratigraphic, hydrospheric, and atmospheric explosion or eruption. Written amid various geopolitical crises, Chen Li’s island poems, while creating an island-earth counternarrative, offer exuberant new ways of thinking with and through the micro-currents of geo-climatic energy, indicating the emancipating potentiality of ecological consciousness beyond the Anthropocene model of resource extraction, energy production, and military expansionism.

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About the Author

Li-hsin Hsu is Professor of English at National Chengchi University, Taiwan. Her research interests include Emily Dickinson studies, Romanticism, Orientalism, ecocriticism, and modern Taiwan poetry. She has published in a number of international journals, such as the *Emily Dickinson Journal*, *Romanticism*, *Studies in American Fiction*, and *Concentric*. She has also contributed to a number of edited volumes, such as *Ephemeral Spectacles, Exhibition Spaces and Museums: 1750–1918* (Amsterdam UP, 2021) and *Romantic Environmental Sensibility: Nature, Class, Empire* (Edinburgh UP, 2022), on topics related to space and race.

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