



## FRONTIER TAIWAN: AN INTRODUCTION

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### PROLOGUE

An island is a paradox; it is simultaneously isolated and open, restricted and free, with the surrounding sea serving sometimes as a protective barrier, other times as a vital passage to other lands and cultures. Situated off the southeast coast of the Asian continent, with Japan and Korea to the north and the Philippines to the south, halfway between Shanghai and Hong Kong, Taiwan not only occupies an important strategic position in the western Pacific region but also is a nexus of diverse linguistic, economic, social, and cultural crosscurrents from Asia and other parts of the world. Over centuries of clashing and converging, these influences have shaped and continue to shape the society on the island. If its small size—only 13,885 square miles, half the size of Ireland but comparable to Switzerland or Holland—has historically been a cause of Taiwan's marginalization, this is compensated for by an openness and an ability to adapt to the new. During the past four centuries, Taiwan has evolved dramatically from a little-known island to an *entrepôt*, an outpost of the Chinese empire, a Japanese colony, and, today, a nation-state with 23 million people and one of the largest economies in the world. Taiwan not only has come to embody an internationally acclaimed economic miracle but also is rightly proud to be a hard-won, mature democracy.

scores contrasts as well as similarities among the various phases of Taiwanese history. The open ending intimates the uncertainty of the future, as Taiwan continues its quest for cultural identity.

The exposés and contemplations of repressed history in the early 1980s signaled the emergence of what Jiao Tong calls an “oppositional poetics” (*fandui shixue*) (Ye Zhenfu 1996:470). Political poetry represented an attempt to give voice to the disenfranchised and the oppressed, and it inspired a wide range of perspectives from the margins of the society that eventually went beyond politics in a narrow sense. These new voices addressed such topics as the plight of the aborigines, the devastation of the environment, the degraded living conditions of GMD veterans, child prostitution, and gender inequality. The tendency continued into the 1990s, encompassing an ever-broadening scope of concerns (e.g., discrimination against homosexuals). The change of the official name for the aborigines from “mountain people” (*shandiren*) to “indigenous residents” (*yuanzhumin*) in 1984 is an apt emblem of this collective consciousness. In his own way Mona Neng (1956– ) recalls what has been forgotten and retrieves what was lost:

From “raw barbarians” to “mountain compatriots”  
 Our name  
 Was gradually forgotten in a corner of the History of Taiwan  
 To stop wandering on our own land  
 We must first bring back our name, our dignity.  
 (translated by Michelle Yeh)

## FRONTIER TAIWAN

A decade of literary movements and political upheavals left indelible marks on modern poetry in the 1970s and '80s, and some of the impact extended into the 1990s. First, it set off a trend of neoclassical revival. Beginning with Yang Mu, Yu Guangzhong, and Luo Fu and continuing with Yang Ze (1954– ), Luo Zhicheng (1955– ), and Wen Ruian (1954– ), poets much more consciously looked to the classical tradition for subject matter, allusions, idiom, imagery, and even form (e.g., modern versions of the “quatrain”). But if neoclassicism took place mostly at the thematic or stylistic level, a more profound impact was evident in the changing conception of poetry. Concern for contemporary society was for a long time viewed as the proper domain of poetry, and realism as the appropriate vehicle for expressing such concern. As the identity of the island vis-à-vis China was pushed more and more to the center of Taiwan's political and cultural agenda, poetry was encouraged, perhaps even expected, to express “the Taiwan spirit.” Much work appeared in the 1980s and 1990s that either empathized with the Taiwanese people (see Liu Kexiang's “Young Rev-

olutionaries” [“Geming Qingnian”] and “Showa Grass” [“Zhaohe cao”]) or critiqued the Guomindang (see Huan Fu’s “Find an Honorific for Mosquitoes” [“Gei wenzi qu ge rongyu de mingzi ba”] and “Excuse My Rudeness” [“Shu wo maomei”]). Poetry written in Hokkien also began to thrive.

The poetry scene has changed dramatically since the 1950s. Whereas in that decade modern poets were engaged in defending New Poetry against classical verse and anticommunist discourse, neither poses a threat anymore. Whereas in the 1950s poets established the independence of poetry as a serious art form clearly dissociated from popular culture, since the 1980s they have sought to reintegrate poetry into society, either as social conscience as extolled by the nativist movement, or in alignment with the ever-growing consumer market. Neither path has taken modern poetry very far, however. Narrowly nativist or political poetry is often little more than angry venting or self-righteous declarations. Such direct comments on Taiwan’s social or political issues have neither made poetry more relevant to the masses than before nor been effective in bringing about changes in society.

In contrast to the separation of poetry from song emphasized in the 1950s and ’60s, beginning in the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s there was a movement to combine modern poetry with music, to turn modern poems into melodious songs. Although a fair number of poems have made a successful crossover, the practice has not helped expand the readership for modern poetry in general. After all, songs, especially popular songs, follow certain formulas to which most poetry cannot be made to conform. Without a firm grasp of the generic differences between modern poems and popular songs, poets rarely make good lyricists. A few exceptions are Xia Yu (1956– ), Lu Hanxiu (1958– ), and Chen Kehua (1961– ). Xia Yu’s case illustrates the point well. Although she is a highly successful lyricist of popular songs in Taiwan, so far she has not made any of her own poems into songs.

Other strategies for popularizing poetry since the 1970s are associated with the media-dominated Information Age. As early as 1975, the Grass Roots Poetry Society, founded by Luo Qing (1948– ), Zhang Xianghua (1939– ), and others, announced one of its four principles as follows: “We realize that popularization and professionalization of poetry are two sides of the same coin. The distinction depends on subject matter and artistic devices. We hope to see a balanced expression of both without leaning toward one or the other” (Xiang Yang 1984:59). Multimedia presentations of poetry, whose major advocates include Luo Qing and Du Shisan (1950– ), incorporate a broad spectrum of audiovisual forms, such as recordings, dance, mimes, drama, photography, and video. Despite various attempts to make modern poetry accessible or available to the public, it still appeals only to a select audience. Granted, a few poets have done well in the market, most notably Xi Murong (1943– ) in the 1980s (later in mainland China as well). The reason, I submit, is not because her poetry inherits “realism’s respect for the mundane world and its reflection of the hearts

of the masses” (Lin Qiyang 1999:86), but rather because of its familiar, traditionally flavored language, romantic subject matter, and comfortable sentimentality. Its commercial success proves ever more convincingly that there is a gaping gulf between modern poetry and popular culture.

Finally, from an economic point of view, poets in the 1950s struggling to keep journals alive by pawning personal possessions has become a legend in the affluent society of Taiwan in the 1980s and 1990s. A new generation of poets has grown up to be professors (Luo Qing, Jian Zhengzhen [1950– ], Bai Ling, Du Ye), doctors (Chen Kehua, Zhuang Yu’an [1959– ]), or editors and publishers (Chen Yizhi [1953– ], Yang Ze, Xiang Yang, Luo Zhicheng, Jiao Tong, Chu Anmin [1957– ], Liu Kexiang, Xu Huizhi [1966– ]).

As Taiwan became more urbanized—with 70 percent of the population living in urban areas, Taipei and Gaoxiong being the most populated cities—“homeland” has more and more come to mean the urban jungle, with all the ailments of late twentieth-century civilization: overpopulation, traffic congestion, air pollution and noise pollution, destruction of the ecosystem, threats of nuclear catastrophes, and so on. Many poets express their concern for the severed tie between humans and nature. Bai Ling’s “Spring’s Brief Visit to Taipei” (“Chuntian lai Taibei xiaozhu”) sees the disconnectedness as the result of rapid urbanization. Shang Qin’s “Rooster” (“Ji”) juxtaposes fast-food chickens and crowing roosters. Human ingenuity has invented numerous artificial means to replace nature that far exceed nature in efficiency, such as mass-produced meats and fluorescent lights. But the artificial way of life breaks the natural cycle of day and night, life and death, and in the end brings harm to the human imagination:

Under the artificial light  
there is neither dream  
nor dawn

(translated by Michelle Yeh)

In Chinese, the word for “imagination” (*xiangxiang*) is closely related to the word “elephant” (*xiang*). In Hong Hong’s (1964– ) “City Zoo” (“Chengshi dongwuyuan”), a giant elephant passes through the city, yet no one sees it as it

gently touches  
every single thing  
(unbeknownst to us),  
departs,  
but leaves  
its imprint on the walls;  
  
disappears,  
and we forget it.

Later, we find its carcass  
 atop the weather station  
 and realize it's been standing there all along,  
 waiting for its kind.

(translated by Mike O'Connor)

The elephant's effort to get the city folk to notice its existence fails. The death of the elephant symbolizes the death of the imagination, the spontaneous passion of human beings for beauty and life expressed through creativity. The theme of the animal fables that comprise the sequence is poignantly summed up in these lines: "a small wonder in life / disappears without trace."

Small wonders are indeed hard to come by in an age in which the media turn individuals into consumers who all have the same tastes and chase after the same fads. This is the object of satire in Chen Kehua's "On TV After Dinner" ("Zai wancan hou de dianshi shang," pages 445–447). Modern life has taken on a most elaborate, impressive form but has little individuality and substance. The motif of the "hollow man" finds poignant expressions in Lin Yu's (1956– ) "Name Cards" ("Mingpian," page 422) and Chen Kehua's "Bathroom" ("Yushi," page 445). In "Leaving Work" ("Xiaban"), Sun Weimin (1959– ) turns the routine of a white-collar urban commuter into a powerful analogy of the isolation and indifference of modern men and women:

The commuters, as is customary, sit in their own darkness, chests rising  
 and falling. Some take out portable cassette players to isolate themselves  
 from the gentle, grasslike swaying of the other passengers' heads

(translated by Mike O'Connor)

If for Ling Yu (1952– ) we are acrobats doing a balancing act between meaning and the void, for Xu Huizhi we are all fallen angels, too caught up in our desires to see the way to salvation. Erotic desire, in particular, epitomizes all desire; it is the source of happiness and sorrow, beauty and ugliness. The fact that religion, especially Buddhism, figures so prominently in the poetry of the 1990s reflects the flourishing of Buddhism and other religions in Taiwan in the past two decades and, more important, attests to the collective human quest for life's meaning at the turn of the millennium. Whether in the Buddha or Aung San Suu Kyi, Xu sees selfless idealism as perhaps the only path to emancipation and salvation.

Despite the significant transformation of the poetry scene and the broadening of the scope of poetry since the 1970s, there is an unbroken tradition in Taiwan in the poets' common concern for humanity and nature, desire for expression of individual creativity, and, above all, continuing explorations of the medium of poetry—language—whether symbolist, modernist, surrealist, realist, or postmodernist. It is through the interminable process of creation,

reaction, counterreaction, interaction, and transformation from the 1920s to the present that modern Chinese poetry in Taiwan has emerged as a unique presence in world literature. To deny that history is to deny the subjectivity of this poetry. Thus, contrary to the view that Taiwan's modern poetry did not have a subjectivity until the nativist movement in the 1970s and '80s, I see a vital tradition from the 1920s to the present, made stronger by its ever-renewed ability to indigenize the alien and nativize the foreign.

Self-identity is relational by definition; the need to define oneself arises when one becomes aware of an Other. The resumption of contact between Taiwan and China since 1986 has given many Taiwanese an opportunity to visit the mainland, some for the first time, others in an emotional return after nearly four decades. Regardless of their background or reason for visiting, they get to see "China" for themselves. Invariably, such contact brings a heightened awareness of the irreducible differences that separate Taiwan from mainland China linguistically, socially, politically, and culturally. Chen Yizhi's "Broken-down Family Tree" ("Polan de jiapu"), written in 1988, presents an occasion for such comparison:

beard pulled into loose strands, head wrapped in a scarf the  
 ancient way  
 feet splash-splattered with mud—he's my cousin  
 in thirty years he's never left the remote mountainside he calls  
 home  
 on this occasion, he accompanies me across the river to the  
 county township  
 muttering to himself as he taps the stem of his pipe:  
*there's no life in this place anymore*  
 when the steamboat turns  
 he coughs violently

*there's no life in this place*  
 the waist-thick banyan trees have been cut down  
 the pitch-black mountain forest is gone  
 the stone-paved road to the outside world has been dug up  
 yes, and after forty years there's still no electricity  
 the old people of the village are left with more and more  
 forgetting  
 having no memories to hold on to

in the winter of '49, his father was tossed into a nameless gully  
 in '53, his brother died east of the Yalu River  
 all three children born over the years  
 are illiterate

in the Famine Years, they gnawed on the bark of loquat trees,  
 nibbled on tupa vine  
 and when wolfing hunger howled in their bellies  
 they filled them with lumps of white earth  
 and so managed to survive

inside the Sweet Potato Restaurant down by the river  
 I order him finless eel and a plate of stir-fried pork kidneys  
 he shows me our broken-down family tree  
 and points to a line:

“From time immemorial, all things have been one with  
 Heaven . . .”

(translated by Simon Patton)

The syntax of the first two lines is uncommon in modern Chinese. The subject of the sentence is not revealed until we have come to the end of three long descriptive phrases. In the Chinese original, the first-person narrator's cousin is referred to as “that man.” Further, the first two lines use a language and images that are unfamiliar to Taiwan. Through these devices, the poem hints at the distance between the narrator and his long-separate cousin on the mainland. This psychological distancing continues in the account, in the next two stanzas, of the trials and tribulations of the family under the Communist regime, where he refers to other characters as belonging to the cousin but not to him (e.g., “his father” rather than “my uncle”). Although the narrator is sympathetic, he can only see the mainland from an outsider's point of view. He and his cousin belong to a “broken family tree” that has branched out in two different directions that grow farther and farther apart. The “China” of 1949 is not the “China” of 1999, and the “China” that left the mainland and came to Taiwan half a century ago has become an integral part of “Taiwan” today.

Cultural differences have been a major theme of much poetry in Taiwan since the 1980s, as the issue of Taiwan's identity has been at the forefront of political and cultural discussions. One immediately noticeable difference between Taiwan and China is language. While mainland China uses simplified Chinese characters, Taiwan has preserved the traditional written language. In terms of the spoken language, the Mandarin Chinese brought over by the Nationalist government in 1945 and the mix of various dialects on a small island over half a century have produced a language distinct from that on the mainland in idiom, formal and colloquial expressions, intonation, and, above all, pronunciation. The standard pronunciation on the mainland, based on Beijingers and referred to as “the common language” (*Putonghua*), requires much tongue curling, whereas in Taiwan, where southern dialects dominate, tongue curling is used much less and sometimes simply abandoned. The difference is somewhat comparable to that between “r” and “l” in American English. This signifi-



cant linguistic difference is the subject of Chen Li's 1995 poem "Movement of No Tongue-Curling" ("Bu juanshe yundong").

The poem begins with three analogies: tongue curling is mentioned in the same breath with wearing a bow tie, putting on airs, and standing on ceremony. There are four tongue-curling sounds in Mandarin; trying to make them is likened to wearing jewelry that makes one uncomfortable. In other words, to curl the tongue is pretentious and unnatural. Further, in Chinese slang, "that word" (*na hua er*) is a euphemism for the phallus, but the poem equates it with tongue-curling sounds and says: "This word, that word / One can do without it" (Chen Li 1995:116). The poem gets more humorous as it introduces a tongue-twister in classical Chinese, which consists of forty-eight characters and whose meaning depends on a clear distinction between tongue-curling and non-tongue-curling near-homonyms. This is followed by a "Taiwanese" reading, which disregards this distinction and pronounces all the words without tongue curling. The poem concludes by defending the Taiwanese linguistic practice:

. . . A good  
Tongue-twister is like a good epic  
There can only be one

No constipation  
No turgidity  
No denying history  
No rejecting non-tongue-curling

For example, I am a long-time *lesident* of Taiwan  
For example, the Three People's *Plinciples* is the way to unify  
China

(translated by Michelle Yeh)

When Taiwanese people come into contact with those who speak Putonghua, especially those in North China, their style of pronunciation gives away their identity and sometimes makes them objects of mockery. Chen recognizes the difference and even admits that there can only be one "good tongue-twister." In other words, when you don't curl your tongue, you ruin the classic tongue-twister. Yet he also rightly attributes the situation to historical factors. To expect Taiwanese people to speak the same way as those who speak Putonghua is to "deny history." Besides, he finds it pretentious and even sickening when a Taiwanese tries to imitate what sounds to him like exaggerated tongue curling.

The subtle gender identities in the poem are also significant. Chen equates Taiwan with the female, who does not have "that word"—the phallus *and* tongue curling—and China with the boastful male. The political overtones are

clear. Chen rejects the stronger China as the norm and believes that Taiwan, though weaker, does not need to conform or aspire to that norm. Hence, the poet wants to start a “movement” to not curl the tongue.

How does a small island assert cultural distinction from a continent? This theme runs throughout Chen’s 1995 book of poetry, *The Edge of the Island* (*Daoyu bianyuan*). The title itself suggests that the poet consciously assumes a marginal position as he reflects on the past, present, and future of Taiwan. As he says in the afterword: “Since 1988 when I resumed creative writing, there has been a clear trajectory of a quest for the history of the land under my feet” (Chen Li 1995:204). At a personal level, Chen is literally on the periphery; Hualian, a medium-sized city on the east coast where the poet was born and has lived most of his life, is peripheral vis-à-vis Taipei, the political, economic, and cultural center of the island. At a more general level, he is also contemplating the peripheral position of Taiwan vis-à-vis mainland China. Besides “The Movement of No Tongue-Curling,” a powerful example is “A Lesson in Ventriloquy” (“Fuyuke”).

腹語課

惡勿物務誤悟鵠塢驚務噁岫蘊甌瘡迳坵  
 軌杞婺驚堊沕迳選塗矢物阮軌焙焮焮坵  
 (我是溫柔的……)  
 坵杞焮焮焙焮阮阮矢塗選沕沕堊驚婺坵  
 坵坵迳瘡甌蘊岫噁務驚塢鵠悟誤務物勿惡  
 (我是溫柔的……)

惡餓俄鄂厄遇鏢扼鱸蘊餒薛蛭搗圖軫貌  
 顎呃愕噩輒阮鵠堊鵠堊鵠鵠鵠鵠鵠鵠  
 萼訶啞岨搯詔闕頰揭頰闕詔搯詔詔詔詔  
 鵠坵岨岨鐘樞矢硤硤硤硤硤硤硤硤硤  
 貌軫圖搗蛭薛餒蘊鱸扼鏢過厄鄂俄餓  
 而且善良……)

The rich semantic variation of the original poem cannot possibly be reproduced in English. Only a partial representation of the visual and phonetic structure of the poem is given here:

UuUUUuUUUuUUuUUUuU  
 UUUuUUUuUUUuUUUuU  
 (*I am gentle . . .*)  
 UuUuuUUuUUUUuUUu  
 UuUUUuUUuUUuUUuU  
 (*I am gentle . . .*)

OOoOoOOOOOOOOoOoOO  
 OOoOoOOOOoOOoOoOOo  
 OoOOoOOoOOoOOOOOoO  
 oOOoOoOOoOOOOoOoOO  
 OoOoOOOOOoOoOOoOOO  
 (*and kind . . .*)

At first reading, the poem may seem no more than a language game, perhaps inspired and made possible by Chinese computer software (which allows one to punch in a romanization and get a long list of homonymous characters in varying tones). Lines 1–2 put together thirty-six different characters in “u” sound in the fourth tone, which are then mirror-imaged in lines 4–5. The long catalog of characters is broken up only by the inserted parenthesized line in a different typeface: “*I am gentle . . .*” In the second stanza, there are forty-four characters in “o” sound in the fourth tone. Echoing the first stanza, the two columns of characters here (almost) form a mirror image of each other. The parenthesized line 12 completes the sentence, which begins in fragments in lines 3 and 6: “*I am gentle . . . I am gentle . . . and kind . . .*”

What are we to make of this? First, we note the sharp contrast in typography. Lines 1–2, 4–5, and 7–11 each form a rectangular block, with a small corner of the third rectangle cut off by a single parenthesis in line 11. In terms of size, these rectangles take up much more space and look much larger and heavier than the parenthesized lines, which are less than a third of the rectangles. Second, the rectangles and the parenthesized lines have different typefaces. Also in terms of form, there is perfect symmetry between lines 1–2 and lines 4–5, but less than perfect symmetry between lines 7–8–9 and 9–10–11. Symmetry is conspicuously absent in the parenthesized lines; in fact the poet uses several devices to avoid formal symmetry in these fragments, including an odd rather than even number of lines and the repetition of “*I am gentle . . .*” twice in contrast to only one “*and kind,*” thus creating a 2–1 asymmetry in the complete sentence (lines 3, 6, 12). All the line numbers of the sentence are also multiples of three, another odd number. Finally, there are the asymmetrical punctuation marks and the odd position of the parenthesis at the end of line 11.

In addition to form, there is a most dramatic contrast in sound. Whereas “u” and “o” are both fourth tone, reading thirty-six u’s and forty-four o’s in a row

creates a hard, monotonous, unnatural sound effect. (Can we imagine the poem at a poetry reading?) In contrast to the long strings of heavy sounds, the short sentence consisting of a few simple, mono- or bisyllabic words, with an undulating cadence (due to a fair distribution of all four tones), sounds much lighter, softer, more melodious and pleasing.

Further, in terms of syntax, the thirty-six u's and forty-four o's do not form a phrase or unified image, much less a meaningful sentence. In fact, most of these characters are obscure or archaic words hardly ever used in daily speech or even in modern writing. Grouped together in this particular typographical arrangement, they create an extreme effect of defamiliarization: a Chinese reader may recognize all the words but think they look strange on the page. In contrast, although the words in the parentheses are small in number, they form a complete sentence, with the subject "I," the copula "am," and the predicate "gentle and kind." Despite its minimalist syntactic structure, this is a perfect sentence.

Finally, we note the semantic structure of the poem. The first word of both stanzas is the same character with two different pronunciations ("u" and "o") and meanings ("u" means "to loathe or dislike" and "o" means "evil"). Both words have negative connotations. Again, the contrast between them and the words in parentheses—"gentle" and "kind"—is obvious.

Why is the poem called "A Lesson in Ventriloquy"? Taken literally, the poem illustrates the difficulty for someone who is a novice in the art of ventriloquy and can only utter a single, unintelligible sound at a time. As if stuttering, he means to say "I am gentle . . ."—"I" pronounced as "wo" in Chinese—but only manages to utter "wu." If we understand the poem metaphorically, as the art of speaking without opening the mouth, ventriloquy connotes a discrepancy between appearance and reality, between outer form and inner substance, between "what you see" and "what you hear." Discrepancy clearly exists between the "u" and "o" blocks and the parenthesized fragments in the poem. The blocks have an unpleasing, strange appearance, but the sentence reveals what lies in the heart, which is gentleness and kindness. If this interpretation is valid, then the poem reiterates the universal theme of an ugly person with a kind heart. More specifically, the poem echoes a hit song in Taiwan from the early 1990s, sung by Zhao Chuan and called "I Am Ugly But I Am Gentle" ("Wo hen chou keshi wo hen wenrou"). This may not be a coincidence; the song lyrics were written by a fellow Taiwanese poet, Xia Yu, whose work Chen Li is surely familiar with.

I argue, however, that the poem has yet another meaning. In ventriloquy, one manages to make a sound without opening the mouth. In other words, the contrast between the "u" and "o" blocks and the slim parenthesized sentence implies a lopsided relationship, with the former dominant and the latter being dominated. The poem is an imaginative embodiment of the nativist poetics

that Chen has been developing in his recent work. The heavy, harsh, monotonous strings of “u” and “o” sounds, with their exact, hence rigid, symmetry and their dominant presence on the page, are associated with mainland China, whose hegemony seems so overpowering but also so alien to a much smaller, weaker Taiwan. Positioned on the periphery and under disadvantaged circumstances, Taiwan nevertheless refuses to be silent and learns to have a voice of its own. The parenthesis in line 5 of stanza 2 fulfills two important functions: it interrupts the catalog of “o” sounds, thus putting an end to the perfect symmetry begun in the first stanza, and it completes the short sentence, also begun in the first stanza. Hinging on a single parenthesis, the intervention of the voice affirms a modest yet irrefutable presence against an overpowering monolith.

Along with “The Movement of No Tongue-Curling,” “A Lesson in Ventriloquy” epitomizes a positive nativist poetics that envisions an open, diverse, and cosmopolitan Taiwan—in short, a cultural and artistic frontier. As an island, Taiwan is fully aware of its marginal position vis-à-vis the mainland. At the same time, however, the poet proudly affirms Taiwan’s dignity as a self-sufficient world—complete, beautiful, and perfect in its own way. In contrast to the jarring u and o noises, Taiwan is music to his ear. A perfect union of form and content, “A Lesson in Ventriloquy” attests to the ultimate concern of the poet with poetic art rather than with message, political or otherwise. The bold experiment in form and language evident in Chen’s recent work suggests that “periphery” has yet another meaning that goes beyond the personal and the political. On the cover of *The Edge of the Island*, we see a map of Taiwan filled in with words: the title of the book and the words “nativism + the world” (*bentu yu shijie*) and “nativism + the avant garde” (*bentu yu qianwei*), are not only repeated many times but also highlighted in different colors. Together, these phrases represent the poet’s creative ideal, which is to combine nativism with a cosmopolitan, multicultural vision on the one hand and with the avant garde on the other. “Avant garde” refers to both the philosophical underpinnings and the artistic intention of the poems.

The poet’s avant-gardism is in sharp contrast to some forms of nativism in Taiwan, which tend to pitch the native and local against the international and cosmopolitan, or, in more recent years, the “native Taiwanese” or *Taiwanren*—Chinese people living in Taiwan prior to 1945—against the “mainlander” or *Waishengren*—newer mainland émigrés who came to the island between 1945 and 1949. Instead, Chen emphasizes multiplicity over singularity, mutual respect and acceptance rather than privileging one subethnic group over another. The ethnic, linguistic, and cultural roots of Taiwan include at least the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Japanese, Han Chinese, and the indigenous. “The Song of the Island—For the Children of Taiwan” (“Daoyu zhi ge—gei Taiwan de haizi”) begins with these lines:

The name of the island is Taiwan  
 Taiwan is a palette  
 Tongues of different shapes  
 let out sounds of different colors  
 and mix them into a colorful, beautiful island  
 (translated by Michelle Yeh)

The poem ends with a list of twenty Chinese dialects and the languages of the indigenous tribes. For the poet, Taiwan has not one but many mother tongues.

Cataloguing is a device also used in “Flying Over the Island” (“Daoyu feixing”), in which the names of all ninety-five mountains of Taiwan are juxtaposed. Some of the names are Chinese in origin, but many more are aboriginal. Personified as former classmates at primary school, the mountains gather for a class reunion and are getting ready for a group photo:

I hear them calling me together  
 “Keke’erbao, come down quick  
 You are late!”  
 Those standing, sitting, squatting there  
 Whose names I almost can’t remember

They are all there, together  
 In the frame  
 Like a miniature map  
 (translated by Michelle Yeh)

The poet’s own words best sum up the notion of multiple cultural roots:

Taiwan is an island full of vitality, a combination of different ethnic groups and different cultural elements—more than the so-called ‘four major ethnic groups’—indigenous, Hokkien, Hakka, and mainlander. As early as the seventeenth century, Taiwan was a global stage. The Spanish came, the Portuguese passed through, the Dutch colonized it, the Japanese ruled it . . . together they have formed the uniqueness of Taiwan: a vitality born of continuous blending and tolerance. Naturally there are some pains or conflicts, but in the final analysis it is magnificently moving.

(Chen Li 1995:205)

These words aptly characterize modern Chinese poetry in Taiwan, which represents a synthesis of heterogeneous forces and contending visions: aborigi-

nal and Han Chinese, Chinese and Japanese, traditional and modern, local and global, “mainlander” and “Taiwanese,” Taiwanese and Chinese. Out of this historical and ongoing process has emerged the distinct identity of Taiwanese poetry.

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