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NO.2 2015

THE BEST OF WORLD POETRY

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FIFTY YEARS OF
MODERN POETRY
IN TRANSLATION

I WISH...

**CHILDREN'S FOCUS:
CHEN LI ♦ MARINA
BORODITSKAYA ♦
MICHAEL ROSEN ♦
JULIAN TUWIM ♦
TOON TELLEGEN**



CHEN LI

Translated by Elaine Wong

What would your ideal island be like? Taiwanese poet Chen Li shows us his ideal island in 'Song of the Island', written for the children of Taiwan. Their home is a subtropical island located off the southeastern coast of China. Taiwanese children would tell you another name of their home – Formosa, and the legend that in the mid-sixteenth century, Portuguese sailors passed by the island and called it *ilha formosa* ('beautiful island'). Of course, the Portuguese sailors did not know what the natives called the island. Different native tribes, each speaking its own language, lived on the island before large groups of Chinese people began to move there in the seventeenth century. Today, Taiwan is home to about 540,000 aborigines of over twenty tribes, making up 2.3% of the total population.

Have you ever learned words from friends who speak a different language? How would you describe the sounds of those words? In the poem, Chen Li, who is of Chinese descent, shares with us words he has learned from his friends of the tribes Yami (also known as Tao, 達悟族 in Chinese), Amis (阿美族) and Bunun (布農族). In Chinese, the word for 'spoken language,' 話, and that for 'picture,' 畫, have the exact same sound: huà (in a falling tone). So 'beautiful language' (美麗的話 měilì dehuà) and 'beautiful painting' (美麗的畫 měilì dehuà) are one and the same! Towards the end, the poem paints a picture of Taiwan with the names of different languages, both aboriginal and Chinese. Perhaps the effect would be similar to the Bunun's multi-part song *pasibutbut*. We hope you will enjoy the mix of language sounds and the picture of the island you create for yourself.

Song of the Island

For the Children of Taiwan

Taiwan is the name of the island.
It is also a palette:
tongues of different shapes
roll out voices of different hues and
blend to become the colourful Formosa.

In red Yami language you paint:
Orchid Island, on the sea,
fishing, building boats, planting *calla*.
Cinedkeran –
a carved canoe that seats ten people.
Mikariag –
a song for inaugurating a workhouse.
You see women on the beach
fling their hair like waves.
They dance and sing
the fabulous *valacingi a ganam*.

In blue Amis language I paint:
capay, 'earring',
tatamus, 'ring',
'fruit of bread tree', *facidol*.
When we work, we sing;
when we party, we sing,
day into night, we hold hands
and dance at the Harvest Festival.
Your tear is our *lusa*.

Lipahak singing
makes us *widang* –
widang means ‘friend’,
lipahak is ‘happy’.

In yellow Bunun language he paints:
buan, ‘moon’,
vali, ‘sun’,
kiing, *sui*, *maza* and *n-gula* –
strung together are ‘gold’, ‘silver’, ‘bronze’ and ‘iron’.
Hamisan is ‘winter’,
minhamisan is ‘autumn’,
talabal is ‘summer’, and
mintalabal, ‘spring’.
You hear them sing *pasibutbut* over there,
praying for another big millet crop.
The full, harmonious chorus is like a waterfall
and a rainbow –
hanivalval – hanging in the sky.

Beautiful sounds, beautiful island,
beautiful colours, beautiful picture.
Let us loosen our knotted tongues
and let any syllables become
an easel, a bowl’s colourful paints,

speaking in Minnan, Hakka,
in the dialects of Shandong, Shanxi, and Hebei,
in Atayal, Puyuma,
Rukai, Tsou, Thao, Saisiyat, Paiwan,
Papora, Hoanya, Babuza,

Bazeh, Taokas, Siraya,
Kavalan, Ketagalan...

Beautiful sounds, beautiful island,
beautiful Taiwan, beautiful languages.