



Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies

Schweiger, Irmay. 百年降生 1900-2000 台灣文學故事 edited by 李時雍. Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies, vol. 3 (2022): 321-326.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/jeacs.2022.3.schweiger>

BOOK REVIEW

百年降生 1900-2000 台灣文學故事

[100 Years of Taiwan Literature: 1900-2000]

Edited by 李時雍 Lee Suyon

台北市：聯經出版公司 [Taipei: Linking Publishing],
2018

ISBN: 9789570851649

Irmay SCHWEIGER
Stockholm University, Sweden
irmay.schweiger@su.se

Keywords: Taiwan literary history, millennials, narrative nonfiction

關鍵詞： 台灣文學史, 千禧世代, 非虛構寫作

The Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies (JEACS) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the EACS, www.chinesestudies.eu. ISSN: 2709-9946

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

When martial law was lifted in 1987 the China-centric monopoly of definition that had prevailed on the island for four decades was replaced by a localist imperative for “Taiwanese identity”. The transition from authoritarian state violence to liberal democracy was accompanied by fierce debates on memory and identity politics generating a new Taiwan-centric cultural hegemony. State-sponsored cultural policy played a crucial role in triggering and accelerating the process of identity formation. (Chang 2009, 47) When cultural and political sectors joined forces to construct a common sense of historical continuity and a distinctive uniqueness of Taiwanese traditional culture, educational reform became a resounding game changer. Not least the enactment of academic freedom and autonomy in higher education allowed Taiwanese literature studies to become an academic discipline allowing for “a search for subjectivity, identities, and a reconnection for Taiwanese students with their homeland.” (Hsieh 2020, 331-332) Public institutions like the National Museum of Taiwan Literature (*Guoli Taiwan wenxueguan* 國立台灣文學館) or academic organizations like the Association for Taiwan Literature (*Taiwan wenxue xuehui* 台灣文學學會) are nowadays trailblazers for the promotion and institutionalisation of a literary tradition and conception of Taiwan literature in teaching and research, translation and creative writing, and inter-Asian and international collaboration.

Against this background *百年降生 1900-2000 台灣文學故事. 100 Years of Taiwan Literature: 1900-2000* is a unique testimony of the first “post-reform” generation. (Le Pessant 2011) Starting in 2015, editor Lee Suyon gathered a dozen “literary friends” (*wenyou* 文友) to contribute to his weekly column in *The Merit Times* (*Renjian fubao* 人間福報) with brief “stories” about “Taiwan literature” of the “20th century” (preface). Despite their various provenances and careers, academic specialisation and writing experience, they share a similar generational and educational background. All the contributors were born in the 1980s, graduated from a Taiwan literature studies programme, and are at present pursuing either an academic or a freelance career. The collection consists of 101 chronologically organised stories, addressing specific writers, literary movements, genres, events, societies, periodicals, and other literary phenomena, mapping the formation of Taiwan literature in the 20th century. In 2018 Lianjing publishing house launched the collection with illustrations by the artist Zhu Ya 朱疋.

In his preface, Lee refers to three points of reference, which frame his undertaking and suggest a certain reading. First, *My Century*, a collection of 100 vignettes of 20th century German history by Nobel laureate Günter Grass (1925-2015), who had been introduced to the Taiwanese public as a moral authority on “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” (coping with the past) through an exhibition at the National Museum of Taiwan Literature in 2012. Second, nativist writer (鄉土作家 *xiangtu zuojia*) Huang Chunming’s 黃春明 (1939-) essay “Use Your Feet to Read Geography” (*yong jiao du dili* 用腳讀地理), in which he dwells on Swiss psychoanalyst C. G. Jung’s (1875-1961) concept of identity formation. Third, the spectacular return of the presumed dead Taiwanese aborigine Suniuo from the Indonesian jungle in 1975, thirty years after Japan’s surrender, embodying collective amnesia and historical void as well as indigenous peoples’ multiple victimisation.

Blurring history and fiction, fact and fabrication, *100 Years* belongs to the genre of narrative nonfiction, whose playful crossover has become increasingly popular as it promises informative entertainment and entertaining information at the same time. The 101 individual “stories” (*gushi* 故事) – one chapter for

each year from 1900 to 2000 – are neither interconnected nor does a coherent story evolve in the course of the book. The year dates are no more than an organising principle and a stimulus to the twelve contributors' imagination. The book is a challenging read and requires a certain knowledge of Taiwan's literary field, as most stories dwell on the field's interstices and blank gaps rather than its commonplaces. Accordingly, they qualify as perfect points of departure to undertake historical expeditions into undiscovered, lesser known, and forgotten areas of literary life.

Despite their broad variety in style, topic, and authorial perspective, certain core assumptions and implicit statements are at the heart of the volume and persist through these texts.

First, it is generally assumed that the era of Japanese colonial rule (1895-1945) constitutes the period most consequential for the formation of Taiwan's complex identity and literary field; moreover, it was the KMT's authoritarian rule that brought literary development to a brutal halt and caused a historical disruption. Although the heritage of Japanese-language writing was largely absent on bookshelves and in literary discourse until the 1990s – not least since Taiwan's reliance on US political power placed Anglo-American literature at the top of the literary hierarchy – nevertheless, most contemporary literary movements and concepts can be traced back to the colonial period.

For instance, in chapter 1960 the untimely death of Zhong Lihe 鍾理和 (1915-1960), the author of *Songs of the Bamboo Hat Hill* (*Lishan nongchang* 笠山農場), is turned into a metaphorical narrative of the forgotten legacy of early local modernism. Just like nativism, which had been advocated in the early 1930s and resurfaced in the native soil debate of 1977-1978, modernism had its early local predecessors (chs. 1919, 1930). Back in chapter 1922 we encounter Xie Chunmu's 謝沐春 (1902-1969) Japanese-language novella "Where is she going?" (*Kanojo wa doko e* 她要往何處去), originally published in 1922 in *Taiwan Youth*. Compared to Lu Xun's "Nora", whose destiny remains unknown, Xie Chunmu's heroine is heading for Japan to study, after breaking off her unhappy engagement. Together with a few other contemporaneous vernacular writings, this story ushered in the new vernacular Taiwan literature. The "forgotten" legacy also implies realism and reportage literature, whose contemporary trend was set in motion by Gao Xinjiang's 高信疆 (1944-2009) column "The Edge of Reality" (*Xianshi de bianyuan* 現實的邊緣) in 1975, while socialist writer and peasant activist Yang Kui 楊逵 (1906-1985) had already put forward his theoretical piece "Raising Reportage Literature" (*Muji baogao wenxue* 募集報告文學) as early as 1937 (ch. 1975). But it was not only colonial literature that was buried in oblivion. Literature from mainland China was of course banned and censored also. In 1987 Shen Congwen's *Selected Works* (*Shen Congwen xuanji* 沈從文選集) was the first mainland collection to obtain approval for publication on the island (ch. 1987).

Second, it is common ground that Taiwan's complicated national, ethnic, and cultural identity as well as its literary tradition is a multi-layered texture woven by the 20th century's inter-Asian entanglements, interconnections, and encounters. Therefore, the eminent role of mixed-heritage writers, artists, painters, and sinologists in forming the literary culture of Taiwan is highlighted throughout the volume. With their multilingual competence paired with transnational and interdisciplinary collaborations across borders, the contributors to *100 Years* are perfectly equipped to explore Taiwanese and Japanese archives.

1928, for instance, marks the year when not only double heritage writer Huang Lingzhi 黃靈芝 (1928-2016) was born, but the first ever *Anthology of Taiwanese haiku* (*Taiwan paijūji* 台灣俳句集) was published. Huang, who insisted on using Japanese as his creative language even while it was banned, making publication impossible, put the transcultural genre of Taiwanese haiku back on the map of world literature as late as 2004 when he received the *Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Award* and, two years later, the *Order of the Rising Sun* (chs. 1928, 1970). Colonial Korean writer Chang Hyōk-chu 張赫宙 (1905-1997) provides another example. He had received the second prize of the Japanese magazine *Kaizō* (改造) for his novel *The Way of Hungry Ghosts* (*Gakidō* 餓鬼道) in 1932, thereby raising hopes for a whole generation of colonial literary youths to advance into the literary centre (ch. 1912). Chapter 1905 introduces us to the *wansheng* 灣生 (Japanese born in Taiwan during colonial period) painter of Taiwanese folk culture Tateishi Tetsuomi 立石 鐵臣 (1905-1980), whose works remained unexplored until recently but became instructive in the (re)discovery of the traditional arts and customs of the island. Chapter 1924 pokes fun at translanguaging writers who had been deprived of their language through the lens of Lin Hengtai 林亨泰 (1924-). The poet, whose oeuvre extends over the entire history of modern vernacular poetry on the island (Balcom 1995), self-mockingly speaks of “a fortunate century of bad language”, as the destruction of syntax and elimination of adverbs and punctuation formed the perfect premise for futurism and modernism (ch. 1924). Indigenous culture hardly appeared in the literary field before the 1980s. Chapter 1971 recollects the publication of *Traces of Dreams from a Foreign Land* (*Yuwai menghen* 域外夢痕), the first Chinese-language novel written by Chen Yingxiong 陳英雄 (aka Kowan Talall, 1941-), a member of the indigenous Paiwan tribe. In 1989 Syaman Rapongan 夏曼藍波案 (1957-) returned to his ancestral land on Orchid Island (*Lanyu* 蘭嶼) to reconnect with his tribal Tao culture and compose his oceanic writings (ch. 1989).

Third, the majority of the stories bring to mind that Taiwan’s literary field is full of forgotten and unknown heroes, repressed memories, and well-guarded secrets that need to be remembered and made part of the collective memory.

In chapter 1915 we are reminded of the Tapani incident (*jiobanian shijian* 噍吧哖事件) actually one of the biggest armed uprisings by Taiwanese, which according to Japanese sources saw “the execution of 800 people”, but appeared in writing only as late as 1977, when author Li Qiao 李喬 (1934-), known for his historical interests, took up this atrocity in one of his historical novels (ch. 1915). Another work yet to see the light of the day again is the romantic novel *Heart Lock* (*xinsuo* 心鎖), which was banned in 1963 by the Ministry of the Interior for corrupting social morale. Its author, Guo Lianghui 郭良蕙 (1926-2013), was expelled from both the China Youths’ and China Women’s Associations (ch. 1963). Chapter 1985 gives a face to the general under-representation of female authors in literary histories, by presenting editor, writer, poet, and playwright Zeng Shumei 曾淑美 (1962-), who started her career in 1985 by volunteering for the investigative journal *Renjian* 人間, steered by literary icon Chen Yingzhen 陳映真 (1937-2016). In chapter 1988 we are prompted to reread politically inconvenient and incorruptible prison writer Shi Mingzheng 施明正 (1935-1988). His short story collection *Love and Death on the Island* (*daoshang ai yu si* 島上愛與死), in which he recreated his gaol trauma by using schizophrenic language and blending

politics and sexuality, was banned in 1984. In a twist of fate he died in a hungerstrike just one year after martial law was lifted (ch. 1988).

Fourth, the belief that history gains meaning only when related to the present has ardent advocates in many chapters.

The story of the publication in 1974 of Chen Ruoxi's 陳若曦 (1938-) "Mayor Yin" (*Yin xianzhang* 尹縣長), chronicling a merciless murder by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, is a case in point. As an epitome of the struggling soul it seamlessly transcends time and space, pointing to the people who protested against land grabbing during the indigenous Ketagalan Boulevard Protest (*Kaidagelan dadao kangyi* 凱達格蘭大道抗議) of 2017 (ch. 1974). Elsewhere, today's flourishing of sinophone Malaysian literature in Taiwan (*Mahua wenxue* 馬華文學) is placed in the context of the Cold War era's cultural diplomacy, which was of course a double-edged sword. While in the long run the American connection opened up new spaces and possibilities for the Taiwan literary field, it was only with the end of the Cold War that other Asian literatures came into the spotlight (ch. 1991).

To conclude, *100 Years* is a thorny reading pleasure. What gives it its appeal as a collection of unorganised, kaleidoscopic narratives makes at the same time its thorniness. There is no happy ending. Not in the classical sense. In 1900 modern chimneys arise from the dark ground and stretch into the bright sky of the colony (ch. 1). When, a century later, Taiwanese literature is eventually "born" (*jiangsheng* 降生) Taiwan is devastated by an earthquake, whose deadly blow also hits the literary field (ch. 1999). As the turn of the millenium draws nearer, doomsday scenarios increase (chs. 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998). A consumer-oriented and multimedia-driven world seems to imperil literature's future; the grand narratives have come to an end; Taiwan literature can no longer be framed in theory-laden concepts and compact histories (ch. 2000).

Literary histories have been organised as national histories in order to stabilise national identity; as social histories of literature including economic, social, and political backgrounds; as generic histories with a focus on genres; as canon formation, presupposing a hierarchical system of aesthetic norms; as echo-chambers of hegemonic cultural discourses; as "disciplining institutions", pigeonholing Taiwan literature as either colonial, national, cultural, or regional. *100 Years* has none of these ambitions. Rather it side-steps these stabilising discourses and celebrates the ambiguity of "Taiwan literature" as "Island literature" (*daoyu wenxue* 島嶼文學). A generational testimonial of individual literary experiences imaginatively explored and fictionally reconstructed, *100 Years* no longer serves as an "echo-chamber" of dominant political and cultural ideologies but is more of a resonant space, which allows the reader actually to relate to the historical events, figures, and texts and to encounter a real "other" that speaks in its own voice.

Bibliography

- Balcom, John. 1995. "Modern Master, Native Son." *Taiwan Today*, December 01, 1995. Accessed November 12, 2022. <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=20,29,35,45&post=25119>
- Chang, Bi-yu. 2009. "The Cultural Turn and Taiwanese Identity in the 1990s." In *Cultural Discourse in Taiwan*, edited by Chin-Chuan Cheng, I-Chung Wang, and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, 30-51. Kaohsiung: Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the College of Liberal Arts.
- Hsieh, Hsin-Chin Evelyn. 2020. "Connecting the Local and the Global: The Association for Taiwan Literature." *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* no. 3: 331-341.
- Huang Chunming 黃春明. 1999. "Use Your Feet to Read Geography" (用腳讀地理 *Yongjiao du dili*). *United Daily supplement* (聯合副刊 *Lianhe fubao*) March 18, 1999. Accessed November 12, 2022. <https://blog.xuite.net/happybigfishs/twblog/157051050>
- Grass, Günter. 1999. *Mein Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Steidel-Verlag.
- Le Pessant, Tanguy. 2011. "Generational Change and Ethnicity among 1980s-born Taiwanese." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* no. 40, 1: 133-157.