



BOOK REVIEW

Taiwan Literature in the 21st Century: A Critical Reader

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As its title suggests, *Taiwan Literature in the 21st Century: A Critical Reader* aims to present a picture of Taiwan literature in the 21st century. This is a timely and much-needed endeavour. With the noted exception of the environmental literature writer Wu Ming-yi 吳明益, most writers who emerged on the Taiwanese literary scene after 2000 have received little critical attention outside Taiwan. While *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History* (2007), co-edited by David Wang and Carlos Rojas, provides a useful survey in English of modern Taiwan literature from 1945 to the early 2000s, it mainly introduces us to works produced in the latter half of the twentieth-century. Published in 2007, it does not say much about Taiwanese literary works after 2000. Comprising sixteen chapters, each devoted to a single writer, *Taiwan Literature in the 21st Century* introduces the readers to the vibrant landscape of Taiwan literature in the first decade of the 21st century. What is the state of the field of Taiwan literature in the new century? Are writers of older generations turning a new page in their writing careers or continuing to explore similar themes? How do younger-generation writers relate themselves to their predecessors and to literary production elsewhere? Are there new trends and themes? Are literary critics employing new conceptual schemes to understand Taiwan literature and connect it to broader literary studies? These are some of the important issues tackled by the contributors and editors in *Taiwan Literature in the 21st Century*.

In addition to innovative interpretations of individual writers' works, this edited volume suggests new framings that help establish connections with literary communities beyond the Taiwanese, Chinese, or Sinophone spheres. The chapters are grouped into five thematic categories: "Reconstructing History and Politics", "Genres, Forms, and Ideas", "Reflections on Gender and Sexuality", "Ethnicities and Races", and "Taiwan Literature in the Age of Globalization". Each category has three or four chapters, examining the works of both senior and award-winning younger-generation Taiwanese writers who have garnered critical attention in Taiwanese literary circles. It is noteworthy that the category "Taiwan Literature in the Age of Globalization" includes studies of the Taiwanese-American writer Shawna Yang Ryan (b. 1976) and Japan-based Li Kotomi 李琴峰 (b. 1989), in addition to the Berlin-based Kevin Chen 陳思宏 (b. 1976). Yang and Li are not based in Taiwan. Their works were originally published in English and Japanese respectively, before being translated into Chinese and drawing the attention of Taiwanese readers.

Thus, the structure of *Taiwan Literature in the 21st Century* prompts questions about the geographical boundaries of Taiwan literature and the implications of critics' attempts to define what constitutes Taiwan literature. These are also the questions raised by Carlos Rojas in his introduction to *Writing Taiwan* (2007). Rojas remarks that the inclusion of writers such as Yang Chichang 楊熾昌 (1908–1994), Li Yongping 李永平 (1947–2017), and Liu Daren 劉大任 (b. 1939) in *Writing Taiwan* underscores the variety of Taiwan literature. The Taiwanese colonial writer Yang wrote in Japanese. Li was a Chinese-Malaysian writer who spent most of his life in Taiwan. Liu migrated to the US, but wrote in Chinese. Each writer represents a different aspect of translocality in Taiwan literature. Similarly, the editors of *Taiwan Literature in the 21st Century* highlight the concept of "translocal", which is evident in the book's structural design with its inclusion of "Taiwan Literature in the Age of Globalization" as

one of the five categories in the book. How does the structural design of the book reflect the editors' definition of "Taiwan literature"? The structural design is an interesting research topic in and of itself.

The opening category, "The Reconstruction of History and Politics", emphasises the intertwining of historical memory and politics in Taiwanese literature. This theme has been a prominent topic in Taiwanese literature since the end of martial law in 1987. The category features three writers: Li Ang 李昂 (b. 1952), a senior writer, and two younger writers born around 1970, Lai Xiangyin 賴香吟 (b. 1969) and Gan Yao-min 甘耀明 (b. 1972). Ming-ju Fan's study of Lai's *The Translator* 翻譯者 (2017), a collection of short stories, focuses on how the writer tackles the thorny issue of the ethical demand to search for historical truth and the impossibility of accomplishing this task. In Fan's view, Lai's approach reflects a self-awareness of the limitations of the writer's role in reconstructing history through fiction. Bert Scruggs's analysis of Gan's *Killing Ghosts* 殺鬼 (2007) shows how the writer draws upon different literary and cultural heritages to create a fantastical vision of Taiwan. Instead of the historiographical question that Fan highlights in her chapter on Lai, Scruggs is concerned with how Gan seeks to incorporate fantastical elements and pop culture references to create his distinct historical vision of Taiwan.

Compared to Lai and Gan, Li Ang started her writing career much earlier. Yenna Wu's study of Li Ang's "Beef Noodle Soup 牛肉麵", a short story in *An Erotic Feast for Lovebirds* 鴛鴦春膳 (2007), shows how this seasoned writer continues her critical reflections on Taiwan's colonial past, historical trauma, resistance to repression, cultural hybridity, and nationhood in the new century. These are certainly elements that have marked Li Ang's works since the publication of *The Lost Garden* 迷園 (1991). Wu shows how the writer revives the historical memory of political prisoners. In addition to the interplay of historical memory and politics that characterises Li Ang's post-colonial stage starting from the publication of *The Lost Garden* to *An Erotic Feast for Lovebirds*, several recurring motifs in Li Ang's works are also found in the story: food, folk beliefs, hunger, and violence. Gender politics is the only motif missing.

The three studies in this opening category highlight the important roles of historical memory and politics in contemporary Taiwanese literature. We find in these three writers' works the same "memory imperative" that Irmay Schweiger discusses in her study of Shawna Yang Ryan's *Green Island*, which is included in the category "Taiwan Literature in the Age of Globalization". Schweiger uses the concept of "postmemory" from memory studies to illustrate how Ryan's novel embodies an intergenerational attempt to reclaim historical memory that is connected to the ethical demand to build a better future. Her approach shows how the discussion on the role of memory in Taiwanese literary studies can be related to ongoing debates in memory studies and the interests of international communities in other fields.

The second category, "Genres, Forms, and Ideas", includes three studies that focus on writers known for their experimental art. Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang's in-depth analysis of Wang Wen-xing's 王文興 (b. 1939) latest work *Clipping Wings: A Chronicle* 剪翼史 (2016) places Wang's aesthetic visions in the genealogy of global modernism. Highlighting how they contrast with the aesthetic orientations

of Taiwan's Millennial and Gen-Z writers, Chang perceptively identifies a paradigmatic shift as younger-generation writers challenge genre hierarchies under the impact of the transnational flows of popular culture. In her study of Xia Yu, Michelle Yeh introduces readers to the innovative language and poetics of this cutting-edge poet. She also explores how the poet's formal experiments go beyond the page by playing ingeniously with the materiality of the book form. Both Chang's and Yeh's chapters confirm the continuing contribution of seasoned writers in the new century. Egoyan Zheng, a writer known for his futuristic science fiction, serves as an example of the formal experiments of new-generation writers. Wen-chi Li's analysis underscores two points: first, Zheng uses science fiction to create political allegories that address Taiwan's politics, historical pain, and ethnic conflicts; second, the writer's sci-fi writing transcends the boundaries between belles-lettres and popular fiction.

The category "Reflections upon Gender and Sexuality" comprises two studies of queer writers and a critical introduction to the indigenous woman writer Liglav Awu. Chen Xue (b. 1970) and Zhang Yixuan (b. 1973) are the two writers selected to showcase the accomplishment of Taiwanese queer literature. Carlos Rojas begins his study of Chen Xue by drawing attention to the significance of the passing of the same-sex marriage law in Taiwan in 2019, which he notes "marks a watershed moment for Taiwan's queer community." Thriving in such a congenial environment, queer literature holds a prominent place in Taiwan literature. While Rojas focuses on the theme of fractured families and missing fathers in Chen's works, Linshan Jiang highlights the theme of violence in intimate relationships and the role of traumatic memories in Zhang's works. These two chapters help us understand how Taiwanese writers explore queer topics in their works. In Liglav Awu's writing, gender rather than sexuality takes centre stage. Taiwan's indigenous literature has established a tradition of its own since the early 1980s (Balcom 2025, Chen and Chiu 2021), but it is largely dominated by indigenous male writers, and there are few indigenous women writers. Liglav Awu is among the few. Fanny Caron discusses how the indigenous woman writer was initially alienated from her ethnocultural identity and how she not only manages to find her way back but also connects her stories to those of oppressed indigenous peoples worldwide.

The category "On Ethnicities and Races" consists of four chapters that cover a wide range of topics. Chia-rong Wu examines the indigenous writer Syaman Rapongan (b. 1957). Using the notion of "Ocean Taiwan", Wu frames the writer's writing as a means of connecting Taiwan with global tribal communities through oceanic passages. Wu identifies in this indigenous writer's works a deconstructive critique of the Han-Chinese-dominated ideology in Taiwan. He also highlights the implications of the Pacific Ocean in the writer's works, showing how the notion suggests an imagined community beyond the constraints of geographical, racial, and national boundaries. Gwennael Gaffric, a translator and expert on Wu Ming-yi's (b. 1971) works, explores the significance of migrant figures in Wu's narratives centring on two types of catastrophe: war and environmental crisis. These crises generate migratory movements for both humans and non-humans. Gaffric points out that Wu's "archi-citizenship" can be conceived as a trans-species citizenship that transcends race, culture, and heritage in favor of building a common world.

Min-xu Zhan's study of Li Yongpin's (1947–2017) recent works departs from the dominant Sino-phone framework for analysis of this Chinese Malaysian writer's oeuvre. According to Zhan, Li's recent works exhibit a more sympathetic attitude toward Japan and Japanese culture, in contrast to the strong anti-Japanese sentiment found in his earlier works. Zhan interprets this shift as reflecting Li's adoption of multicultural values in Taiwan, where the legacy of Japanese colonialism has contributed to the formation of Taiwanese culture. The last chapter of the section "On Ethnicities and Races" is devoted to Huang Chong-kai's collection of short stories, *The Content of the Times* (2017). Nicholas Y. H. Wong examines Huang's critical reflection on the meaning of writing literary history in a world where humanity as a whole is under threat. He highlights Huang's interest in the relationship between literary forms and other media, examining how the writer demonstrates in this book an approach to Taiwan's literary history via films, song, movies, comic books, and language textbooks. This chapter can be read alongside Wen-chi Li's analysis of Egoyan Zheng in the section "Genres, Forms, and Ideas", as both writers share an interest in formal experimentation and a concern with Taiwanese political issues.

Obviously, the richness and complexity of the literary works discussed in these four chapters far transcend what the category title suggests. These works, and their studies, can be interpreted in terms of multi-ethnicities in Taiwan, as the editors of the volume suggest. However, they also point to a wide range of promising research topics, such as ocean literature, island studies, the legacy of Japanese colonialism, migration and environmental literature, literary production and media, to name only a few.

The final category, "Taiwan Literature in the Age of Globalization", features three essays on writers who are based outside Taiwan. Pei-yin Lin's chapter focuses on Kevin Chen's Summer Trilogy: *Ghost Town* (2019), *Florida Metamorphosis* (2020), and *The Good People Upstairs* (2022). Lin studies the dialectics of escape and return in Kevin Chen's works and highlights several important features in this emergent writer's writing, such as the intertwining of homophobia and political authoritarianism, the prevalence of dark elements, the use of "ghostly" narrative, and the importance of bodily desires as a possible route to freedom. With its exploration of sexuality, Chen's work could also be grouped under the category "Reflections upon Gender and Sexuality".

Unlike Chen, the other two writers in "Taiwan Literature in the Age of Globalization" did not take Taiwan as their major field of literary production when they launched their writing careers. Though born in Taiwan, Li Kotomi has migrated to Japan and won several prestigious awards there. Shawna Yang Ryan was born in the US and established herself as an Asian-American writer with her award-winning works *Water Ghosts* (2007) and *Green Island* (2016), which were written in English. Sophia Huei-Ling Chen's study of Li Kotomi presents Li as a lesbian writer who draws upon Japanese "yuri" tradition, Chinese literature, and Taiwanese queer writing to construct her narratives of cross-cultural queer love and transnational travelling. Chen reads Li's works in terms of "minor transnationalism" as proposed by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. Irmy Schweiger's study of the Taiwanese-American writer Shawna Yang Ryan identifies this writer first of all as a Taiwanese-American writer who deliberately distances herself from the prevalent paradigm of pan-ethnic "Chinese diaspora". Drawing

upon useful concepts from memory studies, Schweiger analyses how Ryan's *Green Island* engages with family history and the February 28th Event to create a "transpacific space" for negotiating Taiwanese-American identity.

Taiwan Literature in the 21st Century offers a useful overview of Taiwan's literary scene in the first decade of the new century. It helps identify key literary figures and important issues for the study of Taiwan literature after 2000. First of all is the issue of periodisation in writing a Taiwanese literary history. Notably, several studies of the works by young Taiwanese writers refer to the term "post-nativist literature" proposed by Ming-ju Fan in 2008. Further research on how this term can be used as a periodisation term in the context of Taiwan's literary history would shed light on the development of Taiwan literature in the first decade of the 21st century. Secondly, two prominent recurring themes run across many chapters: the interplay between historical memory and politics, and the exploration of sexuality and gender politics. As Scruggs's, Chang's, and Schweiger's approaches demonstrate, connecting these works to related studies of international communities helps broaden the scope of research and connect Taiwanese literary studies to the interests of international communities in diverse fields. As far as the structure of the book is concerned, it is important to bear in mind that while categorisation is useful for organising a large body of works, it is also subject to contingency. This issue of categorisation not only prompts critical examination of the conceptual frameworks we use for literary studies but also sparks intriguing questions about the definition of Taiwan literature. Finally, Sungsheng Yvonne Chang points out a shift in aesthetic paradigm as young writers try to break down literary hierarchies by incorporating elements of popular culture into their works. The implications of young Taiwanese writers' turn towards popular literature in the 21st century deserve attention.

In his insightful critical survey of English anthologies of Taiwan literature, John Balcom underscores the significance of anthologising Taiwan literature as a way to construct a distinct literary image of Taiwan (Balcom 2023, p. 126). Similarly, editing a collection of critical essays on Taiwan literature helps introduce international readers to the multilayered literary landscape of Taiwan with all its complexity and richness. Identifying important issues for the study of Taiwan literature and pointing to new directions for research, *Taiwan Literature in the 21st Century* offers a valuable contribution to the field and inspires readers to engage with issues that may not have been fully addressed in the volume.

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