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*Tradition and modernity: the debate on Modernism
and Taiwan's new poetry in the 1950s*

Despite being geographically on the edge of the Empire, Taiwan participated in the cultural life of the continent until its cession as a colony to Japan in 1895. Already in the Qing period (1644-1912), numerous poetry societies were established, in which only the Chinese continental cultural elite stationed on the island initially participated, but which eventually also saw the participation of native writers. Taiwan writers and scholars gave paramount importance to the preservation of the classical Chinese poetic tradition, which would also be cultivated during the colonial regime thanks to the prestige that classical Chinese poetry had always enjoyed in Japan. These literary societies played an important role in defending Chinese culture and written language when the Japanese supplanted it at the institutional level (schools, newspapers, magazines and publishers) during their period of domination, while in everyday communication the island's spoken languages continued to be used (Heylen, 2012)¹.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Taiwan has been exposed to different and contrasting cultural influences: from the Romanticism of the Chinese Crescentists² to the Modernism of the 1930s, represented by the poets Dai Wangshu (1905-1950) and Li Jinfa (1900-1976), both influenced by Symbolism; the new Japanese modernist poetry that appeared in the colonial period with Yano Hōjin (1893-1988), and Surrealism, Dadaism, Cubism and American Imagism (Sung *et al.*, 2014: 225).

Modern poetry appeared in Taiwan in the 1920s, at the same time as the movement for the adoption of the vernacular, following the

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¹ In the text and bibliography I have used the romanization used in Taiwan only for Taiwanese proper names. In all other cases names are given in Pinyin. Pinyin romanization has been used in the bibliography.

² A poetic group formed in Beijing in 1924, that founded the review *Crescent Moon* (*Xinyue*) in 1927 in Shanghai.

example of the literary and linguistic reform projects that were then being fostered in mainland China. Some writers also tried to adopt the local dialect, the Taiwanese vernacular or Hokkien, as a vehicle for literary renewal³. In this first phase, new ideas emerged above all in written poetry, producing the first free verse experiments in vernacular Chinese. In the 1930s, Yang Chih-chang (1908-1994) and the poets of the *Le Moulin Society*, which he founded in 1933, introduced surrealist theories in Taiwan. Yang had recently returned from a study sojourn in Japan, where he had come into contact with the new modernist currents and the first translations of works by the Surrealists, meeting such personalities as Kitasono Katsue (1902-1978), author of the first Japanese Surrealist Manifesto of 1927, and the modernist Nishiwara Junzaburo (1894-1982). Yang Chih-chang argued that the new poetry had to dispose of and supplant the norms that governed common word and syntax usage, as they hindered the free flow of thought and limited the full expression of emotions, thoughts and intuitions. It was necessary to break the boundaries of traditional aesthetic conventions and come up with new images not inspired solely by nature, but quarried from the depths of dreams and the unconscious (Chang, 2006). Up to the outbreak of the conflict with China, Japan's cultural policy in Taiwan experienced periods of openness, during which Western as well as Japanese ideas, currents and literary works arrived on the island through Japanese translations and mediation, even before they spread to mainland China.

In 1942, a group of local poets, educated in Japanese schools in Taiwan or as foreign students in Japan, formed the *Silver Bell Society*, active until 1949. The group's magazine, *Green Grass*, in addition to publishing modern poems and haiku in Japanese, introduced the Taiwanese to the works of modern Japanese, Chinese, and foreign authors (Baudelaire, Valéry, Tolstoy, Lu Xun, Lin Yutang) and the currents of Symbolism, Surrealism and Neorealism. However, the appearance in the first half of the twentieth century of the first instances of poetry experimentation in the vernacular did not shake off the dominance of classical poetry, perceived as more familiar and Chinese. The aesthetic and formal reforms proposed by the new poetry were still considered too obscure and foreign (Chieh, 2013).

The end of the Sino-Japanese conflict (1937-1945) triggered an exodus from the mainland to Taiwan of about two million people, mostly

³ Hokkien, in its variants, is spoken in the southern Chinese region of Fujian, in Taiwan and in Southeast Asia. On the status of Hokkien within the Sinitic language family see Chappell & Li (2016).

army officers and officials of the Kuomintang Nationalist Party (KMT), followed by intellectuals and scholars of anti-communist and liberal orientation. The KMT government first implemented a programme of decolonization and sinicization of the island. The use of the Japanese language was banned in 1946, together with that of the southern Chinese dialects (Hokkien and Hakka) spoken on the island⁴, and the standard language spoken in mainland China, so-called Mandarin Chinese, now an instrument of propaganda and affirmation of cultural identity, was adopted as the official language. They distanced themselves from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), interrupting all forms of relationship and communication, and prohibiting the circulation of works of modern twentieth-century Chinese literature, considered pro-Communist.

The post-war political and cultural climate was certainly not peaceful. Taiwanese people generally perceived the KMT's severe cultural directives as a form of social and political control. Mainland officials held prominent positions in government institutions, and there was a clear distinction between Chinese mainlanders and Taiwanese islanders, *de facto* considered as second-class citizens. Corruption and misrule aroused strong resentment, fuelling protest movements that culminated in popular uprisings on 28th February 1947, which were brutally repressed. In 1949 martial law was imposed, and remained in force until 1987, the long years of the so-called White Terror.

The KMT, obsessed with the idea of the 'corrosive' power of literature, adopted an openly anti-Communist and anti-Soviet cultural policy, promoting with official awards and generous prizes the production of propaganda literature, even within the armed forces, and establishing the Government Association for Art and Literature. This same outlook also led the KMT to promote the study of classical Chinese culture and the production of classical Chinese poetry written in the traditional style, now banned in Communist China. However, the transfer of power from the Japanese to the KMT produced a profound cultural fracture, which mainly affected the generations born and raised in the period of Japanese domination. As a result of the prohibition against using the Japanese language and the imposition of standard Chinese as the official language, Taiwanese writers found themselves in a dramatic and singular situation, that is to say, a double uprooting, a loss of and search for identity. Most had been educated in Japanese schools and spoke and

⁴ Hakka, in its variants, is spoken in the Chinese regions of Guangdong, Fujian, Guangxi, Jiangxi and in Taiwan. Hakka communities are present in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

wrote in Japanese, while written Chinese was known only in Japanese pronunciation, and few were able to write and speak standard Chinese correctly because of the great differences from the Southern Chinese dialects widespread on the island.

The government's strict ban on early twentieth-century Chinese literature and the Japanese colonial literary tradition of those years also prevented any knowledge of and comparison with what had been produced by the modernists in mainland China. The plight of that generation of Taiwanese writers has been dubbed 'translingualism', since many of them, despite being Han Chinese, had to learn written and spoken Mandarin from scratch. Some stopped writing altogether, while others continued to do so in classical Chinese, or in Japanese by publishing in Japan. It was also because of these linguistic obstacles that the cultural milieu of the early 1950s came to be dominated by immigrant writers from China.

The continental poets were especially active in this new situation, even participating in cultural activities promoted by the government and receiving awards that enabled them to carve out an independent space in the narrow cultural environment of the time, form groups and start up new magazines that promoted cultural debate (Lombardi, 2022).

1. *Modernism, Chi Hsien's 'horizontal transplant' and the refusal of traditional poetry*

One of the most charismatic poets of continental origin was undoubtedly Chi Hsien (1913-2013). In Shanghai, he collaborated with the modernists of the magazine *Les Contemporaines* and published in various poetry magazines, including the monthly *New Poetry*⁵. When he moved to Taiwan in 1948, Chi Hsien started to write essays and articles to promote a modernist poetic revolution. In 1951, along with two mainland poets Chung Ting-wen (1914-2012) and Ch'in Tzu-hao (1912-1963), he founded *Modern Poetry Weekly*, the first poetry magazine in Taiwan, and a year later the magazine *Poetic Intent*, both of which ceased publication in 1953. In the same year, he founded the magazine *Modern Poetry (Xiandaishi)*, which was published until 1964. The magazine, completely self-managed by Chi Hsien, was the main platform of

⁵ The monthly was founded in 1936 by Dai Wangshu, Chi Hsien and Hsu Chi (1914-1996).

the modernist movement, and a hundred poets of different backgrounds contributed to it. In February 1953, he published an artistic manifesto, launching a new literary revolution that intended to supplant the Eight Tenets (also known as the Eight Don'ts) proposed by Hu Shih (1891-1962) in 1917 (Manfredi & Lupke, 2019: 235-236). The new poetry was supposed to abandon the traditional prosodic forms and use free verse, be completely immersed in the present-day reality and forget the past, since only thus would it be able to represent modernity and gain value over time (Ming, 2018: 643-648).

We are convinced that literature belongs to its own era. Only the works that belong to their time acquire eternal value. [...] Above all, we want this modern spirit to be exalted and expressed, in order that modern poetry have quality and not be classical poetry far from present day society, and we want it even less to be foreign classical poetry! [...] We want modern works. In terms of technique, our poetry continues to be stale, backward and very naive [...]. Only by looking at the international poetic scene, by studying and learning the new expressive modalities, can we modernize what we call modern poetry. This is the mission of our magazine⁶. (Ting, 2007: 219)

Chi Hsien felt that modern poetry was still in an embryonic phase and that it was necessary to distance oneself from both the classical Chinese tradition and the precepts of the May 4th Movement intellectuals, since the poetry of that period, though written in vernacular, still followed rules and models of the classical tradition. The renewal was possible only by drawing inspiration from international contemporary poetry.

The official birth of the modernist movement was announced at a meeting in 1956, which was followed by the publication of the *Tenets of the Modernist Movement*. The six points that appeared in the February 1956 issue of the quarterly *Xiandaiishi* were the following:

1. We are a group of modernists who promote the spirit and the positive and foundational elements of all the new poetic schools since Baudelaire;
2. We believe that the new poetry should be a horizontal transplant and not a vertical inheritance. This is a guideline, a fundamental starting point in theory and practice;

⁶ Taken from the Manifesto published in February 1953 in the magazine *Xiandaiishi*.

3. [We intend] to explore the new continents of poetry, new virgin lands, express new contents and create new forms, and discover new tools and techniques;
4. We emphasize the rational character [of poetry];
5. We pursue the purity of poetry;
6. We are patriots. Anti-Communists. We advocate freedom and democracy. (Ting, 2012: 16-17)

It was a programmatic declaration that reiterated the need to draw inspiration from modern currents throughout the world, from Baudelaire's symbolism on, and to employ new writing techniques and expressive methods. Chi Hsien spoke in this regard of 'horizontal transplant' (Sung *et al.*, 2014: 163-164), which, unlike 'vertical inheritance', involved an effort of study and assimilation, and not a simple grafting, of modern and contemporary foreign currents. In the new cultural environment, outside influences would undergo a new evolution and give life to something completely different (Au, 2008: 145-148).

In his essays published in the following years, Chi Hsien further clarified his positions, specifying that for him the models to reject were both the traditional poetic forms of the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) eras and the turn-of-the-century Chinese romanticism of Xu Zhimo (1897-1931) and Wen Yiduo (1899-1946) (Hsu, 2011), which had established the new regulated verse (Sung *et al.*, 2014: 168-169), poetry with an equal number of characters per line and the same number of lines per stanza, now associated with romantic poetry and hackneyed lyricism. Like the Chinese modernists of the thirties, Chi Hsien supported the use of the vernacular and the creation of a new repertoire of images and forms that gave voice to a new lyrical sensibility, less immediate and understandable, since it was not codified by tradition, but deeper and more allusive (Chi, 1954a). In a 1954 editorial of *Xiandaishi*, significantly entitled *Putting emotions in the refrigerator!* (Chi, 1954b), Chi Hsien reiterated his anti-romantic positions, recommending that sentimental outpourings and political passions be kept at a minimum, allowing them to subside, and treating one's emotions with detachment. He exhorted poets to adopt a greater «objectivity» for they should be like «engineers» striving to create a perfect poetic structure in content and form (Chi, 1957). The study of the most significant aspects of Western Modernism offered by American Symbolism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Imagism, and of their oriental counterparts, represented by Dai Wangshu's works as well as by the New Sensibility School in mainland China and the New Perceptions in Japan, led to the birth of a new poetry in Taiwan.

The manifesto of February 1953 had a strong impact on the cultural milieu of the time, raising heated debates on the identity and specificity of modern poetry, its links with traditional and modern Chinese culture on the one hand and local culture on the other hand, and with reality in general. Chi Hsien's unconditional rejection of the classical Chinese and Western traditions and his vision of 'horizontal transplant' were harshly criticized, as they were considered an intolerable form of denial of Chinese cultural roots (Chi, 1959). Readers and writers, accustomed as they were to the traditional forms and styles, did not generally welcome the expressive novelties of this new poetry. It was criticized for its obscurity, vagueness and formalism, considered decadent, nihilist and, above all, a sterile imitation of Western literary currents and movements. However, it was paradoxically its very alleged 'obscurity' and 'vagueness' that allowed modern poets to evade censorship, find new paths and express their ideas more freely and with more potent allusiveness.

We can find a significant example of the use of new symbols and elements in the new poetry in Chi Hsien's well-known poem *7 and 6* (1943), in which the author portrays himself with irony and humor, offering an almost caricatured image of himself by way of two objects that always accompanied him and with which he is often portrayed: his pipe and his cane. The cane and the pipe are two unusual and 'exotic' elements, which portray him as a dandy, a flaneur strolling through the city, quite a different character from both the tormented romantic poet, immersed in wild and stormy nature and the classical literate working in the solitude of his study. The modern poet is portrayed as an eccentric character in conflict with the dominant social values. The numbers appearing in the text are used as images, 7 representing the walking cane and 6 the pipe. The sum of the two is 13, an unlucky number, a symbol of the difficulties and the contempt the artist has to face in his search for new ways of expression. With his words, the poet causes scandal (tragedy) but, at the same time, he draws on himself the attention of the public, like an actor whose entry on stage must be greeted with applause.

In *Medals* (1962) Chi Hsien measures himself against two beloved poets, Li Bai (699-762) and Rilke, the former represented by the moon and the latter by the rose that recurs in his famous lyric poems. The poet compares himself to a tiny screw, a small but useful 'spare part', compared to writers who have nothing to say. The texts of *7 and 6* and of *Medals* are reproduced in the Appendix, accompanied by my translation⁷.

⁷ An English version of *7 and 6* can also be found in Yeh & Malmqvist (2001: 77).

In the 1960s, despite the violent opposition and ostracism inflicted by official criticism and censorship, modernism found increasing space and consensus, to the point of establishing itself as the dominant literary current of the period. Among the modernists were continental poets already active in China in previous years, such as Ya Hsien (1932), Yu Kuang-chung (1928-2017), Lo Fu (1928-2018) and poets who had begun to publish in Taiwan, such as Chang Mo (1931). They were joined by local poets, including Lin Heng-t'ai (1924-2023), who until then had written only in Japanese, and later also young newcomers such as Yang Mu (1940-2020) and Pai Chiu (1937). Within the group, diversified positions and visions continued to emerge, which contributed to enriching the debate around the new poetry. Among the controversies raised by the publication of the *Modernist Manifesto*, in addition to the much-discussed issue of 'horizontal transplant', which continued to be debated throughout the 1960s and was further intensified in the following decade, the key points were the specificity of Taiwan's poetry as distinct from the West, and the interpretation of modernity (Cheng, 2019).

2. *Lin Heng-t'ai, Futurism and the Theory of signs (Fuhaolun)*

In those years, as a consequence of the encounter with foreign modern poetry and the first attempts at experimental writing, the attention of poets turned to analyzing more in depth technical and formal problems of composition, searching for answers and solutions. We have mentioned the proposals for abandoning the new regulated verse and adopting free verse, and for using Chinese vernacular. But in postwar Taiwan, all of this took on a different meaning and value from what was simultaneously going on in mainland China. We have already mentioned that many local poets, who grew up under Japanese domination, did not speak standard Chinese but the Sinitic Hokkien or Hakka languages and, until then, had written exclusively in Japanese. Hence for them using the Chinese vernacular as a literary medium represented a double challenge since, in addition to being a programmatic anti-traditionalist choice, it was an unknown medium that they had to learn from scratch how to use. This linguistic and cultural uprooting undoubtedly favoured a deepening reflection on the constituent elements and materials of language, which above all manifested itself in a renewed sensitivity to the ideographic nature of the Chinese writing system, and to

the potential for allusiveness offered by an almost iconic, pre-logical use of ideograms. As a result, the visual impact of the text seems to prevail over the 'sense' or even in some cases seems to do without sense altogether. This would lead to the appearance of an interesting line of poetic experimentation, linked to similar developments in other parts of the world (Europe, Japan and Latin America with the De Campos brothers), namely the first Taiwanese visual-concrete poetry, written by the poets of the so-called aphasic generation, among them Lin Heng-tai and Chan Ping (1921-2004).

Lin Heng-t'ai (1924), originally a member of the coterie of young Taiwanese poets who adhered to the modernist movement and to Chi Hsien's precepts, later became one of the leading figures of the *Bamboo Hat Society* and played an important role in the debate of the 1960s (Lupke & Moran, 2021: 80-86). He developed his own idea of Modernism inspired by the early twentieth-century avant-garde currents and in particular by Italian Futurism, which he approached through the Japanese poet Kanbara Tai (1898-1997), a popularizer of Marinetti's Futurism (Zanotti, 2012), on which he wrote a critical text, and author of post-cubist poems, as he himself defined them.

Lin Heng-t'ai participated in the debates of the time when, coming of age, he was studying and learning the 'new' Chinese language (Lin, 1957). His thoughts on the new poetry and the need to explore new expressive techniques started from the reflection and analysis of the building blocks of the language, the words that not only express thought but continuously shape and transform it. He observed language and words in their concreteness and materiality, paying special attention to the figurative nature of every single linguistic sign and developing what he would later define as the *Theory of signs (fuhaolun)* (Lin, 1993). In 1957 he stated that «Chinese characters are symbols and have the same value and function in the poetry of the mathematical signs in algebra» (Ting, 2012: 32), that they lend themselves better than alphabetic signs to constructing figures and images, and that their typographical arrangement and spatial distribution complete and amplify the pure verbal meaning of the text. He also affirmed that Chinese writing is by nature symbolist, and poetry which uses Chinese characters «could surely produce more effective results than similar experiments with alphabetic writing, such as Apollinaire's Calligrams [...], because in Chinese writing the images are contained in every character, so that it can be said that it is by nature a Cubist script», and concluded that «[...] modernism is therefore Chinese [...]» (Ting, 2008: 43-44).

The Wheel

Turns.
Turns.
Turns.
Turns.

Fast,
fast,
fa
aast.

It,
it,
it,
it,

SHhh!
SHhh!
SHhh! SHhh!
SHhh! SHhh!
SHhh!
SHhh!

(1955)

3. *Ch'in Tzu-hao and the Chinese poetic tradition*

The strongest reaction to Chi Hsien's idea of 'horizontal transplant' came from Ch'in Tzu-hao, a mainland poet who would play an important role as a mentor for many young local poets (Ch'en, 2012: 87-99). Like other modernist poets, Ch'in knew foreign languages (Japanese and French) and accompanied his teaching with literary translation which, in those years, played a central role in introducing and familiarizing foreign literary works. In 1954 he founded, along with Chung Ting-wen and Yu Kuang-chung, the *Blue Star Society* of writers whose theoretical posi-

tions were in open contrast with those of Chi Hsien.

Ch'in Tzu-hao took part in the debate on Modernism, arguing that the new poetry must have as its reference point the great Chinese classical tradition, but at the same time cannot ignore the currents of modern poetry that had developed in the first decades of the twentieth century: «External influences are only a part of the vital lymph which, assimilated and metabolized, will turn into new blood. The new poetry needs external stimuli, not a mechanical transplant or graft, but a transmutation» (Ting, 2012: 33). Tradition had to be reinterpreted and revitalized, and in this process, the contribution of modern Western currents could not be overlooked; the 'horizontal transplant' proposed by Chi Hsien should refer, in his opinion, to the old forms and stylistic features of poetry and not to the legacy of classical and modern Chinese culture (Ch'en, 2012: 81).

In response to Chi Hsien's Manifesto, Ch'in Tzu-hao presented his own six-point proposal, in which he stated that poetry was not a refined erudite pastime but a search for truth and beauty that required absolute commitment and devotion, profound knowledge and technical mastery of the use of language, combined with the willingness to experiment with new forms; all elements necessary for creating a personal style impossible to achieve through the simple imitation of traditional or modern models, whether Chinese or foreign (Ch'in, 1957). To mechanically decant the forms and techniques of romantic lyrics into poetry in Chinese, to parody the expressive violence of cubism or the mysterious allusiveness of the surrealists was futile (Ch'en, 2012: 93), since poets could find their way into modernity only by immersing themselves in the reality of their own personal human experience (Sung *et al.*, 2014: 184).

For Ch'in Tzu-hao, Taiwanese modernism was a hybrid phenomenon that combined heterogeneous influences, the result of a process of local elaboration and development of new ideas. Furthermore, unlike Chinese modernism of the 1930s, which had been more attentive to analysis and formal research, to expressive technique and verse musicality, Taiwanese modernism showed peculiar local elements, such as an increasing interest in narrating the island's complex reality and the life of its people that, in the course of time, helped to develop an identity consciousness that later became the focal point of interest of cultural and literary currents like Nativism (Hsiao, 1982; Bai, 2013).

The theses of the *Blue Star* group were later elaborated by Ya Hsien, Lo Fu and Chang Mo, the most influential voices of the poetry magazine *Epoch*, founded in 1954. Influenced mainly by French surrealism, they advocated a form of transnational modernism, which combined expres-

sive research and social commitment, the essence of classical Chinese poetry and of surrealism.

4. *Conclusion*

Modernist poetry continued to develop in the 1950s and 1960s, despite government censorship and opposition from conservatives. The government policy of supporting the classical tradition and anti-communist literature, the prestige enjoyed by classical poetry, the spread of popular poetry, the memory of the recent Japanese colonial past and the sudden return to the use of the Chinese language were all obstacles and challenges that the new poetry had to face, in addition to the sense of uprooting and profound uncertainty posed by the problem of national identity, a theme that ever since has regularly surfaced as a constant in Taiwanese cultural life.

The 'radical' modernism proposed by Chi Hsien, with its uncompromising rejection of the pre-twentieth century literary tradition, both Western and Chinese, was a courageous attempt at a renewal opening to influences and contributions from all over the world. The new poetry would later develop along different paths. Alongside cultured poetry, interwoven with references to the Chinese and Western traditions, a popular, songlike, 'comprehensible' poetry would continue to develop which, disregarding the themes and forms of modernist experimentation, returned to draw from an updated version of the classical repertoire of images and stylistic features. To a lesser extent, along the path opened by Lin Hengt'ai, also the trend of concrete visual poetry experiments enjoyed some currency.

Appendix

七與六

拿著手杖7

咬著煙鬥6

數字7是具備了手杖的形態的。

數字6是具備了煙鬥的形態的。

於是我來了。

手杖7 + 煙鬥6 = 13之我

一個詩人。一個天才。

一個天才中之天才。

一個最最不幸的數字！

唔，一個悲劇。

悲劇悲劇我來了。

於是你們鼓掌，你們喝采。

7 and 6

7 is the cane

6 is the pipe between his teeth

7 has the form of a cane.

6 has the form of a pipe.

So here I am.

Cane 7 + pipe 6 = 13 that is me

a poet. A genius.

A genius among geniuses.

The most unfortunate number there could be!

Ah, what a tragedy!

It's a tragedy, a tragedy.

So clap your hands and acclaim me.

(1943)

勳章

月亮是李白的勳章。
玫瑰是Rilke的勳章。

我的同時代人，
有掛著女人的三角褲或乳罩的；
也有掛著虛無主義之類的。

而我，沒得什麼可掛得了。

我就掛它一枚。
 並不漂亮，
 並不美麗，
 而且一點也不香艷，
 一點也不堂皇的
小小的螺絲釘吧。

因為我是一個零件，
 我是一個零件小小的。

Medals

The moon is Li Bai's medal.

The rose is Rilke's medal.

Those of my generation,
hang women's panties or bras;
others hang nihilistic garments.

I, on the other hand, have nothing to hang on.

I'll hang one up
neither beautiful
nor pretty
not even glamorous
or magnificent
tiny screw.

Because I'm a spare part,
a very small spare part.

(1962)

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