



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Isle Full of Noises: Modern Chinese Poetry from Taiwan* by Dominic Cheung: *Essays on Contemporary Chinese Poetry* by Julia Lin

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Source: *Modern Chinese Literature*, Spring, 1989, Vol. 5, No. 1, SPECIAL ISSUE ON PRC LITERATURE OF THE EIGHTIES (Spring, 1989), pp. 149-156

Published by: Foreign Language Publications

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41490658>

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The Isle Full of Noises: Modern Chinese Poetry from Taiwan. Ed. and trans. by Dominic Cheung. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. 275 pp. + xii. \$27.50 (cloth).

Essays on Contemporary Chinese Poetry. By Julia Lin. Athens, Ohio and London: Ohio University Press, 1985. 195 pp. + xv. \$28.50 (cloth).

It has been nearly forty years since the retreat of the Nationalist government to Taiwan, and in the course of those four decades poets on the island have been gradually building a literary community that is as rich in output as it is diverse in poetry societies and journals devoted to the publication of their poems. In spite of this growth, there have been few books on either the analysis or the anthologizing of modern poetry from Taiwan. Ch'i Pang-yüan's *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, with one volume dedicated to poetry, Angela Palandri's *Modern Verse from Taiwan*, and a handful of others are useful introductions for the Western reader, but it has been nearly fifteen years since an anthology such as these has been published. Moreover, there has never been a monograph in English that focuses on the analysis of Chinese poetry from Taiwan. For this reason, the two books under review, very different in purpose and style, are welcome additions to the material in English on Chinese poetry.

Modern Chinese poetry has long been criticized as unable to compare to the elegance of classical Chinese poetry. The evolution of the modern genre from the stanzaic and even-rhymed poems of Hu Shih and Hsü Chih-mo to the free verse poems of Cheng Ch'ou-yü (pen name of Cheng Wen-t'ao), Ya Hsien (pen name of Wang Ch'ing-ling), Lo Men (pen name of Han Jen-ts'un) and others has been long and painful. But I think what these two books together establish is that modern Chinese poetry can be every bit as accomplished as its contemporary prose counterparts. There are certainly a large number of poets who have been active in Taiwan over the decades: Professor Lin spends a chapter on each of nine poets; Dr. Cheung (himself a poet who has used the pen names Ao Ao and more recently Chang Ts'o) includes the poems of thirty-two writers in his anthology. Whereas Cheung has included poems by each of the writers that Lin covers in her book, there is not much overlap in the poems themselves. The real problem remains this: is all this effort to create a poetic idiom from vernacular Chinese worth it? Can modern verse hope to compete with its illustrious elder, the classical tradition?

Seldom has a situation been set up so well for Harold Bloom's notion of an anxiety of influence. Remarkably, though, the Taiwan poets, as Lin and Cheung are both adept at demonstrating, have risen to the occasion. Modern literature in general and poetry in particular have developed uneasily under the shadow of the classical tradition. One major reason poetry has been able to succeed rests in the evolution of its structure. Except for a few "genius" poets such as Wang Kuo-wei, writing in classical

forms with modern subjects has seemed at best anachronistic and at worst ludicrous. Chinese poets have therefore advocated adoption of Western poetic technique. How and what Chinese poets should adopt was a question that did not generate much consensus. The first half century saw the proliferation of verse that for the most part transplanted rigid Western verse forms. Of course there were always Lu Hsün and a few other exceptions to the rule. Still, a comparison of the body of pre-1949 poetry from the mainland with that of post-1949 Taiwan poetry will show a marked contrast: the latter has generally abandoned uniform length of lines and standard rhyme schemes in favor of free verse. This shift to uneven lines, along with attempts to create poetic rhythms by means of such techniques as repetition, internal rhymes, alliteration, and assonance has been proved by the wealth and variety of products to be far more amenable to the Chinese language than more traditional Western verse forms. Chinese poetry has found a new and rewarding idiom in free verse.

With respect to the development of Taiwan poetry, Dominic Cheung's introduction comes closest to describing how the literary scene evolved, enumerating the major journals and poetry societies, and elucidating the debates that have dominated attention in recent decades. He is correct to a certain extent that recent Chinese poetry in Taiwan has a long indigenous tradition that harks back to occupation writers such as Chang Wo-chün, Wu Yung-fu, and others. Nevertheless, the 1950s is best characterized as a literary scene dominated by mainland Chinese recently relocated to Taiwan. These poets, led early on by the elder poet Chi Hsien (pen name of Lu Yü), advocated the adoption of literary modernism by Chinese poets. As Cheung has shown in his introduction, the manifesto that was eventually drawn up in 1956 advanced a "horizontal transplant" of Western Modernists, including all new (Western) schools of poetry since Baudelaire; "pure poetry"; patriotism; anti-communism; freedom; and democracy. Chi Hsien's own poetry can at times be quite subtle, even pastoral. More often than not, however, Chi writes patriotic ballads that can reach bathetic extremes. His vision, however, and his verve in establishing a poetic community in control of its own journals, publications, and destiny cannot be underestimated, and Cheung's decision to devote a large space to him in his introduction while omitting his poetry from inclusion in the anthology was deft and diplomatic. Besides, most of Chi Hsien's well-known poems can be found translated in other anthologies.

Poetry societies that rose to challenge the Modernists, such as the Blue Star Poetry Society and the Epoch Poetry Society, did more to solidify the 1950s as a time of literary ferment rather than detract from what the former school had begun to establish. Cheung summarizes the situation in the following paragraph:

All in all, these poetry societies should be regarded as a group rather than as separate entities, though their respective beliefs and styles differ. Individual poets too should be thought of more as belonging to the development of modern poetry as a whole in Taiwan, rather than as merely the affiliates of differing societies with their various tenets and proclamations. Lo Men, for example, was a member of and actively involved in all three societies. Also, such major poets of the Epoch group as Shang Ch'in, Hsin Yü, Yang Ling-yeh, and others were once active Modernists. Even the *Li* (Bamboo hat) poetry society, founded in 1964 with a cast of local Taiwanese poets, had representatives who had once been Modernists. It is evident that separating poets according to their involvement in various societies provides an inaccurate picture of the development of contemporary Chinese poetry in Taiwan. (13)

It is a tribute to the breadth of modern Chinese poetry that of the first three poets in Cheung's volume, given extra space because they are "senior poets" whose careers span more than three decades, only one, Yü Kuang-chung, is included among the nine poets whom Julia Lin discusses. Indeed, by now we can safely say that if Chi Hsien's poetic doctrine has not been adhered to religiously, at least his vision of an autonomous literary community in Taiwan has been realized. The other poets whom Lin concentrates on are Cheng Ch'ou-yü, Chi Hsien, Ya Hsien, Lo Men, Yung-tzu (pen name of Wang Jung-chih), Chou Meng-tieh (pen name of Chou Ch'i-shu), Yip Wai-lim, and Wu Sheng. Not only is Lin's book different from Cheung's in content and purpose, Lin also prefers close textual reading to historical interpretation. Thus, a combined reading of Cheung's historical introduction with the individual appreciations of Lin's study will give the reader a more objective view of the poetry. Her analysis of Cheng Ch'ou-yü is a case in point. Moving from poem to poem she builds an argument for Cheng as a "modern" poet strongly informed by his native tradition. Instead of exploring historical relationships between poets—with whom did they gather in associations, in what journals did they predominantly publish—she prefers making comparisons of various writers' techniques. She compares Cheng with the Chinese poet Hsü Chih-mo of the 1920s and 1930s:

Both Hsü and Cheng are essentially lyric poets whose works are the unmistakable product of a refined ancient culture. The special strength of both poets lies in their use of the language; both have mastered well the vernacular as a lyrical medium. Like their native lyric masters, both show a keen awareness of the acoustic effects of the language and, like them, they are constantly striving to enhance the meaning of words through sound. Their lyrical pieces are rich in verbal patterns that acquire not only suggestive force but musical effects as well. Hsü's lyricism, however, is almost always contained within a more formalized structure of the stanzaic patterns—mostly borrowed or modified from

Western models—while that of Cheng is enclosed in a freer and more flexible construction that is basically free verse. (4)

Lin also creates a rhythm of her own by establishing an even-handed critique of each poet. She attempts to be as fair as possible by revealing both strengths and weaknesses of each poet, although she could have gone further into analysis of structure and technique. Too often she does not substantiate comments, such as her reference to Cheng's poem "Errors" that "this lyric abounds in harmonious vowels (both mute and open), rhythmic parallels, repetition of key sounds of words—verbal plays that Cheng customarily employs to obtain an echoing effect that further enhances the haunting musicality of the lines" (4-5). Why not demonstrate this by transliterating the lines? In fact, this poem is a masterful combination not only of sounds and images, but of pathos and irony as well. The crux of the poem hinges on the reversal of expectation brought about in the last two lines. The poem seems to develop the tone of a returning speaker addressing his (presumably a male speaker since the author is male) feelings to his lover. That the two are not identified adds tension to the poem. The last two lines, however, reveal that the speaker is just a passerby, not the one who is returning. This deflation of expectation is thrust upon the one who is indeed waiting, a feeling that is encapsulated in one of the most famous oxymorons in modern Chinese poetry: "a beautiful error." The error has been concretized in both image and sound not by describing the reaction of the person waiting, but instead by describing what she sees and hears: "the clickety-clack of my horse's hooves" *wo ta-ta-ti ma-t'i sheng*.

In many places in the book, Lin attempts to describe the poets' aesthetic sensibilities with respect to Modernism. For Cheng she has the following to say:

Ultimately, Cheng's sensibility is traditional; his form, however, is a conscious aspiration toward a freer colloquial structure, a trait which reveals his affinities with other contemporary poets. More significantly, it is in these structural similarities that his "modernity" and contribution to modern Chinese poetry reside. One of his most notable marks of "modernity" is his exploratory use of the language. (5)

In an analysis of Chi Hsien's "The Death of Aphrodite" Lin calls the poem ". . . easily one of the best pieces dealing with abstract ideas and the one that best carries out his modernist principles" (24). Ya Hsien is described as a "Modernist" whose sensibility synthesizes west and east. She describes Lo Men as a poet who combines the Western Modernism of T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land" and penitential poems flavored with a Buddhist sense of timelessness. As a poet who cultivates marginality, Yip Wai-lim is looked upon as one who likewise owes much to the Modernist tradition—espe-

cially to Ezra Pound. Perhaps Wu Sheng, a Hsiang-t'u writer and native Taiwanese, whose themes are rural life and the working class, is the only poet in the book who does not invite a discussion of Modernism. Thus, if one did not know that Professor Lin is already the author of a book entitled *Modern Chinese Poetry*, one might wonder why she chose the title *Essays on Contemporary Chinese Poetry*. More to the point, Lin's references here and there to aspects of Modernism raise more questions than they settle. The problem of what Modernism is in the first place, not to mention how different poets conceive of it differently, is never adequately addressed. Lin assumes a basic understanding of the notion that is unstated and therefore problematic. How have Modernist notions been incorporated into the Chinese tradition, and how have they been transformed into Chinese notions? Is there a continuum on which writers can be placed so that we can determine which poets enjoy closer affinity to Western Modernism and which ones are more traditionally Chinese? The issue is further problematized when one ponders latent similarities between Modernists and Chinese poets writing in Taiwan such as a feeling of exile or diaspora, a concern with restructuring aesthetic meaning in the aftermath of a major war, and a desire to reinvest literary art with the value and stature that pre-modern forms held. We must also keep in mind that exile was a common theme in classical poetry and that the need to seek a new social order after the An Lu-shan Rebellion, for example, was a common concern of late T'ang poets. Perhaps the appropriation of Modernism was a catalyst whereby poets could reawaken a sense of aesthetic value deeply rooted in the Chinese language. As Lin has observed of Yip Wai-lim:

Yip must be credited for making the younger poets become more aware of the importance of selecting the precise words, of seeking the maximum verbal suggestiveness and aural effects as an essential process of the poetic art; in short, a more exacting craftsmanship. In this sense, Yip is very much a poet of the Modernist movement whose one supreme endeavor is the "recovery of the word's original power." It is this cultivation of language that constitutes Yip's major strength and his contribution to contemporary Chinese poetry. (132)

This is an astute observation, but Lin's thesis could be enhanced by a discussion of how Chinese poets have negotiated the intervening cultural space between Western Modernism and "contemporary Chinese poetry." Is Chinese Modernism a constellation of various resisting elements that are drawn together even as they repel one another? If so, what is the configuration for each of these poets as they experiment with tradition and modernity, domestic traditions and foreign traditions, formal structures and free verse?

The appearance of epiphanies, for instance, in the poetry of Ya Hsien could hold one key to the question of how Chinese poets view themselves

in the Modernist movement. In her discussion of this poet, Lin's strength again resides in making incisive critical remarks based on close textual readings. Her observation that Ya Hsien has "a gift for conveying a complex state of mind filled with emotions too ineffable and elusive to put into words" is evident in many of this poet's works. Lin includes in her discussion the poem "That Woman":

With the streets of Florence swinging behind her
She saunters forward like a portrait
If I should bestow on her a kiss
The paint of Raphael would certainly stick
On my strange whiskers

Unfortunately, the last line, *i-hsiang-ti tzu-shang-ti* 异乡的髭上的 does not come across well in English, but "alien whiskers" might be closer to the thrust of this bizarre image. It jars the reader into a realization that the modern Chinese poet's predicament is an odd one, perhaps even a comical mixture of disparate aesthetic principles that often leaves its writers questioning the ability to forge meaning and coherence. Could this woman be Ya Hsien's modern muse, a muse that does as much to remind him that he's an exile as it does to provide him with inspiration?

Lin has done well avoiding simple contrasts, though she could go further in making clear the cultural interplay between Modernism and Chinese poetry. She has also compared the contemporary poets with their mainland precursors of the 1930s and 1940s. For the most part, however, these comparisons are made only in passing—they are not systematic enough. Likenesses between poets such as Cheng Ch'ou-yü and Hsü Chih-mo or Ya Hsien and Ho Ch'i-fang are certainly present. But the question is more one of how the latter poets have made the choice to draw inspiration from the pioneer vernacular poets. Discussing Yung-tzu's poem "Verna Lisa," for example, Prof. Lin has this to say:

The gentle tone, the epigrammatic quality as well as the use of apostrophe recall the popular short lyrics of another well-known Chinese woman poet, Ping Hsin, of the twenties and thirties. Ping Hsin and her mentor, the celebrated Indian lyric poet Tagore, are two early favorites of Yung-tzu. One discerns a certain poetic and spiritual affinity between them. (81-82)

To ascertain exactly what that spiritual affinity is one would have to venture outside Lin's text. The reader isn't given enough information to judge whether a comparison is plausible. One avenue that Lin could explore is possible interviews or articles by and about the poet that link her to Ping Hsin. Also, comparisons such as these may seem apt for one well schooled in twentieth-century Chinese poetry, but for the general reader elaboration

on how the earlier poets fit into the discussion of the contemporary poets would be helpful. Lin remarks that “with Yip [Wai-lim] I feel the influence of Eliot and of Symbolist poets like Mallarmé and Verlaine in the West and Pien Chih-lin and Tai Wang-shu of the thirties and forties may be at work here” (118). It is precisely remarks such as these that need to be amplified, fleshed out so as to prove wrong the reductive old saw that contemporary Chinese poets are mere shadows of their Western counterparts who ape a set of techniques having no basis in the Chinese tradition. Yip Wai-lim’s cultivation of marginality, as in his poem “Fugue,” has a long heritage in Chinese poetry dating to the “frontier poetry” of T’ang poets such as Ts’ên Shen and Kao Shih. Since he has not jettisoned the Chinese tradition, the key to elucidating Yip’s often difficult early verse rests in showing how he has reinterpreted this tradition in a new historical moment, one not only conscious of its ancient past, but of the immediate past of poets writing on the mainland during the Republican Period. The same should be done for Yü Kuang-chung, of whom the “rhapsodic intensity, the cumulative drive, the elevated tone, the intermingling of the literary and colloquial, the social and political implications” all “remind” Lin of Kuo Mo-jo (159).

This reluctance to develop the connection between contemporary Taiwan poets and earlier mainland writers is a problem for Cheung as well. He makes a case for continuity of the *Taiwan* literary scene before and after 1949 but doesn’t elaborate much on the passing remark that Chi Hsien (whom some have called the “High Priest of Modern Chinese Poetry”) had a literary past in Shanghai during the 1940s. Explaining this sort of connection should be well within the range of both these scholars, since they’ve each distinguished themselves by writing a monograph on poets of the Republican Period.

I hasten to add that the above criticism is made possible only because both Lin and Cheung have written highly provocative books, books that I hope will generate much discussion in scholarly communities interested in Chinese literature. I enjoyed countless poems that were either included in Cheung’s anthology or were discussed in Lin’s critical work. Cheung’s choice of “Let the Wind Recite” by Yang Mu (pen name of Wang Ching-hsien, who previously wrote under the name Yeh Shan) to begin his book—a haunting, lovely poem that even in English lilts with internal rhymes and resonant descriptions of wind and water—demonstrates the critical ear of a seasoned taste. Similarly, Lin’s choice to begin her book with a chapter on Cheng Ch’ou-yü, one of my favorite Chinese poets, was a better choice than if she had begun with Chi Hsien. Her prose is simple and elegant, a model for students of composition. Cheung’s inclusion of Chan Ch’e, Hsiang Yang, Liu K’o-hsiang, and other young poets in the anthology, as well as his discussion of more recent poetry associations, such as Grass Roots and The Sunlight Ensemble Poetry Society, shows the literary scene is growing as the years progress. Moreover, his translations,

though the division of lines strays too far from the original for my liking, exhibit the refinement and ingenuity of someone who is conversant not only in two cultures but in two separate poetic traditions as well.

In spite of a few typographical errors in both books, all too common in recent university press publications, the omission of Chinese poem titles from Lin's book, and the omission of dates for the poems in Cheung's book, these two additions to the expanding shelf of books on Modern Chinese literature are exciting works—and they form a synecdoche for the thriving literary world in Taiwan that deserves further exploration.

Christopher Lupke