Women’s Literature in Taiwan (I)

Kuo-ch’ing Tu

In the contemporary literature of Taiwan, women writers count for a considerable weight. Their talents bestride the literary stage for all to see, and their achievements are striking and respectable. This issue, surveying the broad field of works and studies of women writers in Taiwan, will inevitably refer to the narrower subject of feminism, but will not be limited to views and critiques from the feminist perspective. Owing to the considerable amount of creative works and research materials the subject of women’s literature in Taiwan will be treated in two issues.

The trend of feminism originated from the phenomenon of unequal social position between men and women in the cultural tradition of both East and West, which resulted in women being treated as inferior to men. In the 18th century, when the Enlightenment emerged in Europe and brought about the modern ideas of humanism, liberty and equality, women started to demand the same liberty, equality, and rights as men. In the mid-19th century, issues surrounding feminism added to the tumult of social changes, with ideas being exchanged across Europe and North America. Feminists asserted that in all domains of human life, whether education, employment, or politics, women and men should be given equal opportunities and rights. They demanded the improvement of women’s social position, including suffrage and the support of maternal rights. In the 20th century, the influence of feminism spread from Europe and America to the rest of the world, and even today in some areas is just unfolding.

In the United States, the right of women to vote was not universally instituted until 1920, when the nineteenth amendment of the Constitution was passed. The Constitution of the Republic of China was framed in 1947, and stipulated equal rights for men and women under law. In 1949 when the People’s Republic of China was established, equal rights for women were acknowledged by law. Nevertheless, as part of general agitation for the improvement of society, the women’s movement in Taiwan emerged in the seventies, advocated by the current ROC Vice President Hsiu-lien Annette Lu and carried on by Professor Lee Yuan-chen in the eighties. In 1982 Lee Yuan-chen joined up with a group of women concerned with equal rights to launch the Funü xinzhi [Awakening Women], a magazine seeking to reinforce the self-consciousness of women and striving for women’s legal rights. Moreover, in 1987 she established the Women Awakening Foundation as the first private women’s organization. Since the mid-eighties, organizations concerned with gender issues have emerged one after another. In 1985 a Women’s Studies Institute was added to the Population Studies Center at National Taiwan University. The Center was renamed as the Population and Gender Studies Center in 1999, and is still the only academic institute of its kind in Taiwan. Studies of literature from feminist perspectives started to appear in magazines and journals in 1986. Special issues with a focus on Western feminism and literary and cultural studies were published by Chung-Wai wenxue [Chinese and Foreign Literature], including “Feminist Literature” in March 1986, “Women and Literature” in March 1990, “Women’s Sky: Women’s Literature and Culture in Taiwan” in July 1997, “Women’s Literature/Arts and Cultural Discourse” in March 1999. Dangdai [Con-Temporary] published a special issue on Feminism in September 1986, and Lianhe wenxue [Unitas Literary Monthly] published a special issue on Women and Literature in March 1986. Many universities have set up curricula, lectures, and research units on women’s literature and feminist theories. At last, in 1994 there appeared a specialty store, Fembooks, dedicated to publication of women’s studies, sponsoring various cultural activities, and serving as a channel for exchange among women concerning their experience with the opposite sex.

There have been women writers in all cultural traditions. Sappho (b. 612 B.C.) of Greece perhaps was the earliest women poet. In the earliest known anthologies of China and Japan, Manyōshū [The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves] (8th century) and Shijing [The Book of Songs] (cir. 12th-7th centuries B.C.), there were voices of women poets. The Heian period (794-1192) in Japan was a time when women writers predominated. At that time men were educated in the Chinese literary tradition and preferred to write in classical Chinese with a masculine style while women used the feminine kana (the Japanese syllabary) to integrate with life in writing diaries and stories, among which the masterpiece Genji monogatari [The Tale of Genji] by
Murasaki Shikibu, who died between 1014 and 1026, is unparalleled in the world. In the Chinese literary tradition, from Han, through the Six Dynasties, to Tang and Song, there were a few women poets whose works were handed down; Yu Xuanji (844-868) and Xue Tao (?-832) of the Tang Dynasty, as well as Li Qingzhao (1084-1151?) of South Song have occupied a certain position in the history of literature. In the New Literature developed after the May Fourth Movement (1919), Bing Xin (1900-99), Ding Ling (1904-86), Lu Yin (1898-1934), Ling Shuhua (b. 1904), and Xiao Hong (1911-42), as well as in contemporary China, Chen Rong (b. 1936) and Wang Anyi (b. 1954) are all prominent women writers with a distinct style. In the history of Taiwan literature, there were only a few women writers during Japanese rule, among whom Yeh T’ao (1905-70) and Yang Ch’ien-ho (b. 1921) are outstanding.

In the fifties women writers who emigrated from the mainland to Taiwan were not few in number; for example, P’an Jen-mu, Su Hsüeh-lin, Hsieh Ping-lin, Lin Hai-yin, Hsu Chung-p’ei, Kuo Liang-hui, T’ung Chen, Chang Hsiu-ya, Chang Shu-han, Fang Lu, Yan Yu-mei, Liu Fang, Ai Wen, Meng Yao, all well-known in the literary world. In the sixties, under the banner of the magazine Xiandai wenxue [Modern Literature], major women writers were Ch’en Jo-hsi, Ou-yang Tsu, joined by overseas writers Nieh Hua-ling, Yu Li-hua, and Ts’un-g Su. Their literary activities extended to the seventies. In the eighties there emerged a group of young women writers, such as Li Ang, Shih Shu-ch’ing, Hsiao Sa, Hsiao Li-hung, Yuan Ch’iung-ch’iung, Liao Hui-ying, Chu T’ien-wen, Chu T’ien-lesin, Su Wei-chen, Chiang Hsiao-yun, Cheng Pao-chuan, Wu Tan-ju, Chung Hsiao-ying, Chu Hsiu-chuan, all of whom are well established writers. Most of their works deal with the dilemma of women confronting marriage, family, and the traditional society and thus became the texts for feminist discourse after the eighties. After 1987 when martial law was lifted, and during the nineties, women’s writings were attacked by Professor Li Cheng-hui, a defender of realism, as having degenerated into a housewives’ literature and stories of the boudoir; and yet Li Ang’s works at the same time introduced current issues immediately after martial law was removed, such as national identity, ideology, and collective memories, and pushed forward women’s writings to a new milestone in history.

After martial law was abolished, freedom of speech and different ideologies were allowed in the society, and political topics and sexual subjects ceased to be taboos, but on the contrary became fashionable. In the nineties Taiwan entered its postmodern period; all the different views were aired, and all the creative talents competed in novelty and attraction, demonstrating the splendor of fin-de-siècle. In the past women writers tended to write about love and affairs between men and women while men writers were inclined to deal with historical and political subjects. However, since the nineties women’s writings and feminist discourse have been in the ascendant, the women writers who deal with subverted sex identity and describe desires between persons of the same sex have pride of place. In the stories of such women writers, issues of sex identity and political identity often crisscrossed and overlapped as a common mode of expression found in postcolonial literature and feminist discourse, i.e. a conflict between two opposites, such as colonization vs. independence, patriarchy vs. women’s rights, the strong vs. the weak, subjectivity vs. obedience, violence vs. resistance/submission.

The writer who most saliently violated the taboos of politics and sex and stirred up a sensation in the literary world was Li Ang. In the early eighties, she shook literary circles with the unconventional subject matter in her novel Sha fu [The Butcher’s Wife] (1983). Her Miyuan [Labyrinth], published in 1991, not only deals with social concerns and human desires but also alludes to the issue of national identity of Taiwan in search of independence as a country, and thus the two allegories, desire and nationalism, are intertwined with the ambition to create an epic of Taiwan’s history. As far as national identity and political subjects are concerned, Li Ang represents the position of Minnan Taiwanese women in a striking contrast with the mentality toward social reality presented by Chu T’ien-wen and Chu T’ien-lesin, who speak for the second generation of the mainland Chinese.

During the nineties, three important literary conferences took place: on contemporary women’s literature in 1992, on eroticism in contemporary Taiwan literature in 1996, and on Taiwan literature after martial law was lifted in 1999. Insofar as the titles of papers presented at those conferences reveal the trend of the literary world and the focus of scholarly research, the papers on women’s literature and the sexes betray a taste for anomaly and for deviation from conventional research interests: titles such as Gender / Rights / Colonialism: the Castrated Men in Regional Literature” (Chiu Kuei-fen); “The Mutual Ecstasy of Lace and Whips—The Flowing of Desire of Lesbians as Seen in Contemporary Taiwanese Fiction” (Hung Ling); “From Half-naked to Completely Nude: Representation of Sexual Desire by Women Poets of the Postwar Generation in Taiwan” (Ch’en I-chih); “Voices from the Margin: Homosexual Fiction in Taiwan Since Martial Law was Lifted” (Liu Liang-ya); “Phoenix, Crocodile, Vampire—An Essay on Several Homosexual Images in Taiwan
Literature” (Chen Sihe); “The Fin de Siècle Women’s Desire Empire / Labyrinth / Ruins” (Hao Yū-hsiang).

Literary criticism based on feminism by scholars in academia started with the introduction to Western theories and schools in the field, and moved forward to examine and reflect upon women’s literature itself and its development in Taiwan. The articles selected in this issue, both creative works and studies, focus on women’s literature itself. We hope to glean from the corpus of contemporary women’s writings some excellent works that are based on life experience in the society and characterized by the distinct features of women in Taiwan, as well as studies that attend to historical development and expound the characteristics of women’s literature in Taiwan. Owing to the considerable volume of works and research material concerning women’s writings, the contents of this issue have increased proportionately, yet can only display a part of the whole. We regret the omission of much interesting work due to the limitation of space.

For this special issue on women’s literature, we purposely include two stories by men writers, Yeh Shih-t’ao and Cheng Ching-wen, to show their deep insight into women’s life experience and character. We have previously translated three stories by Cheng Ching-wen (Nos. 5, 6, 10). Yeh Shih-t’ao is known more as a critic than a writer, although his creative works in fiction are in fact indisputably outstanding. These two selections were particularly recommended by Professor Jann-shann Lin as a discerning critic. Su Wei-chen’s “Be with Him for a While” and Chu T’ien-hsin’s “Of Butterflies in the Spring Wind” are the acclaimed works of well-known writers. Yang Ch’ien-ho’s “The Season When Flowers Bloom,” in Japanese, was published in 1942 in Taiwān bungaku [Taiwan Literature] during the war. Yeh Shih-t’ao in his Taiwan wenxue shigang [An Outline History of Taiwan Literature] criticized it as “decadent and escaping reality.” However, it has transcended the war and met the trial of time with its lasting literary merit. It has been selected as one of the rare extant writings by women writers of Taiwan during Japanese rule, and is translated from the original Japanese. Regarding poems, notwithstanding the many anthologies of women poets and critical studies published, limited by space, we have included only poems close to the theme by two senior women poets, Ch’en Hsiu-hsi and Tu-P’an Fang-ko. As to studies, Professor Fan Ming-ju of Tamkang University and Professor Chiu Kuei-fen of National Chung Hsing University are experts in the field, and their articles provide us with exploration in depth and real knowledge of women’s literature of the fifties and the present time.

Concerning translations, Professors Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin are our de facto contracted translators for many issues in the past, safeguarding the translation quality of this journal. Thanks to Professor Jann-shann Lin’s enthusiastic recommendation, we have several new translators who joined the team to make the lineup stronger. Professor Chiang Pao-ch’ai has offered her assistance in selection and research materials, and deserves our special thanks. Since 1996, this journal has now published eleven issues; for convenience’ sake, the publication dates from now on will be in January and July. We would like to express our appreciation of the cooperation and endeavor of all the authors and translators, as well as the continued support and assistance of the Council for Cultural Affairs and the College of Letters and Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara.