Women’s Literature in Taiwan (II)

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In the foreword of the last issue, “Women’s Literature in Taiwan (I),” we surveyed the origin and the trend of feminism in the cultural traditions of both East and West, the impressive achievements of women writers in Taiwan, and the critical study of feminism in literature in general. We hope the works translated have reflected the thoughts and views from women’s perspectives. Due to the fact that works by women writers and studies of them amount to a large number, we have decided to continue in this issue a second part of works under the same rubric.

Regarding critique, we selected Professor Chang Hsiao-hung’s postscript to her book Zilian nüren [Narcissistic Women] as voices for “women’s bodies” invoking women’s interpretations of their own bodies, either in feminine writing, critiques of consciousness, subversion of gender identification, or in praise of the mystery and sacredness of women’s bodies. To let the once muted female bodies sing as they please reveals a fascinating feature of women’s literature in Taiwan today.

For fiction, Chu T’ien-hsin’s “Tale of the Kangaroo Clan” describes the life experience of young mothers and their thoughts and feelings with a humorous touch, being witty and serious at the same time, such that one cannot help smiling after reading it. Chi Chi’s “Vultures Circle Indifferently,” by means of the plot of “borrowing a woman’s body to have a child,” presents the story of an unmarried mother and describes how a girl was deceived and awakened, and how she made her choice and managed to remain strong to survive and raise her fatherless boy. In addition, we would like to particularly recommend Lü Hsiu-lien’s “The Chastity Arch” and Huang Chüan’s “Mute Marriage.” Ms. Annette Hsiu-lien Lü is the Vice President of the Republic of China in Taiwan. She not only was the major figure who advocated the new feminism and opened up the modern women’s movement in Taiwan in the seventies, but also engaged herself in writing fiction, which portrays ideal characters of new women and interprets the connotations of the new feminism that she advocated. To put it in a nutshell, she maintains that women should positively pursue self-awakening and self-perfection. Through “self-awakening and self-respect they proceed to temper themselves and achieve self-reliance, and they learn to take the initiative and act independently, not only to affect their economic condition but also to develop their intellect and capability,” so that each can become “a woman who is proud of being a woman, able to give full play to her own interests and ambitions, to moderately maintain her selfhood, to be responsible and fulfill her part in life, to have an independent personality and to maintain a harmonious and sincere relationship between the sexes.” (See her book Xin nüxing zhuyi [The New Feminism], 1986.) In 1979, she was arrested and imprisoned for participating in the demonstration for political and human rights of the Kaohsiung Incident, and in jail continued to write, producing a novelette and short stories, namely Zhe sange nüren [These Three Women], “Zhenjie paifang” [The Chastity Arch], and “Xiaozhen yuhui” [Sunset on a Small Town]. Thematically, her works mostly criticize feudalistic ideas and interpret humanism, social concerns, and the relationship between men and women. As a writer she received considerable attention from the literary world of the time and helped push forward the development of a new feminist literature in Taiwan.

Huang Chüan has been quietly writing for more than forty years while many of her contemporaries have received loud acclaim. She published her first short story in 1961, and her early works focus on the life experiences and inner feelings of Taiwanese women from the Japanese occupation period to the postwar years, including the “Mute Marriage” selected in this issue, which transcends the gap of languages and times. She moved with her family to the United States in 1968 and began to take the new life in the new continental as her subject, describing the life experiences of Taiwanese in the United States. Nevertheless, she has often been neglected in critiques and studies of Chinese writers who emigrated from Taiwan to the United States. Huang Chüan’s self-identification can be traced from Chinese in the early period, through Oriental or Asian, to Taiwanese consciousness in recent years. As far as the four decades of her writing career and her prolific productivity are concerned, she is a pioneer of Taiwanese American literature, and the most representative of
Taiwanese American writers. The fact that Huang Chüan zuopin ji (Collected Works of Huang Chüan), twelve volumes, has recently been published by Avant-Garde Publishers is sufficient to indicate her lifelong outstanding achievement as a writer.

As to prose, three pieces were selected from Bashiqinian sanwen xuan [Selected Essays of 1998] edited by Chien Chen, which focus on the theme of “the road for women is a road of suffering.” Chou Fen-ling’s “Your Body” uses crystal and floral symbolism to describe the four life stages of women’s bodies from youth to old age, almost like a microcosmic history of women’s life. Yang Sol’s “Road of Suffering” presents a realistic record of the destiny of suffering in life as a woman. Hao Yü-hsiang’s “The Afternoon Call” uses the technique of fiction to delineate women’s subtle and secret inner worlds. These three essays differ in orientation, but each presents a voice from women’s bodies in exploration of the essence and profound mystery of female life.

For poetry, three pieces were selected from the special issue, “Women’s Lakes: Female Literature and Culture in Taiwan (II),” Chung-wai wen-hsüeh [Chinese-Foreign Literature Monthly], No. 313, and one piece from Liang’an nüxing shige sanshi jia [Thirty Women Poets from Both Sides of the Straits]. In addition, Professor Li Yüanchen’s article, “For Whom Are the Poems Written?—On Female Identity in Poems by Women in Taiwan,” has quoted many poems, which can also be appreciated. Professor Mei Chia-ling’s article, “Gender Discourse and the Development of Postwar Fiction in Taiwan,” is an introduction to her edited book, Xingbie lunshu yu Taiwan xiaoshuo [Gender Discourse and Taiwan Fiction], which includes twelve articles. Gender consciousness in fiction often betrays the external changes of literary works and their times, society, and tradition, and can reveal the adjustment and development of the writers and their works in the greater environment of realities. From the angles of biological sex, social gender, and sexual orientation, Professor Mei’s article explores the three dimensions of the fiction developed in Taiwan: “gender construction and its deconstruction under male views of the family and nation”; “remolding women and the historical imagination of family, nation, and homeland”; and “the confrontation between individual sexual desire and the discourse on family and nation.” By so doing she provides the reader an outline and logical thought for the development of fiction in Taiwan after the war.

As for translation, we welcome Professors Yenna Wu and Ming-yan Lai to the contingent of translators who make this journal possible, and to the old hands we express our heartfelt thankfulness for their continuing support and contributions. We hope that through the selected articles in this issue on “Women’s Literature in Taiwan,” the reader will be able to listen to the “voices issued from women’s bodies” and have a better understanding and appreciation of the spiritual world and “the sky of their own” presented by the independent and individual minds of the new women in Taiwan.