Mountains, Forests, and Taiwan Literature

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Taiwan is a mountainous island surrounded by the ocean, and the theme of mountains and ocean has been intimately related to the development of Taiwan literature. Hence our selection for this issue, “Mountains, Forests, and Taiwan Literature,” is a logical choice to complement the theme of our previous issue, “Taiwan Literature and the Ocean” (Number 17).

First let us consider the topography and relief of Taiwan. Geographically, Taiwan is located at the juncture of the Philippine and Eurasian sea plates. For millions of years the two plates pushed and clashed to create the tall and erect landforms of the island we now call Taiwan. Taiwan is a high mountain island emerging from the sea. Its mountainous regions (above 1,000 meters) extend over two thirds of the entire island, distributed primarily in the central and eastern portions of the island. The major mountain ranges extend from north to south, and comprise the Central, Snow, Jade, Ali, and Coastal mountain ranges. The eastern coastal mountains, with high and steep precipices, look imposing and magnificent, and must be the view that appeared so lofty and precipitous, green and luxuriant, to the sixteenth-century Portuguese sailors seeing it from the ocean, who exclaimed: “Ilha Formosa”

In Taiwan there are more than two hundred mountains with an elevation above 3,000 meters, among which the five highest
and best-known peaks are: Mt. Morrison (the main peak of Mt. Jade), the main peak of Mt. Snow, Mt. Hsiukuluan (a peak in the central range), Mt. Nanhu (in the northern portion of the central range), and Mt. Peitawu (in the southern part of the central range). However, the most famous mountain in Taiwan must be Mt. Ali, which is only 2,274 meters above sea level, much lower than the other high peaks. With the unique sky-scrapping 3,000-year-old divine cypress tree, the seasonally changing primeval forests, the unsurpassed splendor of the sunrise in a sea of clouds, as well as the forest industry railway ascending along the meandering mountain slope, Mt. Ali became one of the “Eight Scenes of Taiwan” during the period of Japanese rule and has been a must-see scenic spot for tourists. The divine tree is a spiritual symbol of Mt. Ali, discovered by a Japanese forestry technician in 1906; it was struck by a thunderbolt twice, in 1953 and 1956, and finally collapsed in 1997. According to an estimate made during the Japanese occupation period, red cypress trees on Mt. Ali exceed three hundred thousand and quite a few are more than two thousand years old.

The peaks of Mt. Jade (Yushan) stand erect in the central mountain range as the imposing and majestic roof of Taiwan. The height of its main peak is 3,952 meters, the highest in Northeast Asia. It is covered with snow in winter with the cleanness and clarity of jade, which gives it its name. Its height exceeds all the mountains in Japan (Mt. Fuji is 3,776 meters above sea level), therefore it is also called Shinkōzan [New High Mountain] by the Japanese. Similar to the respect accorded by the Japanese to Mt. Fuji as the “secret mountain” and the country's national symbol, in the recent nativist discourse of Taiwan, praise of Mt. Jade has also taken on a symbolic implication of national identity. The summit of the main peak of Mt. Jade provides a panorama of the famous surrounding mountains, and its imposing loftiness is an honorable challenge for all mountaineers to scale. As described in a classical poem by the poet Yu T’ang (style name Lien-fang) of Chulo (today’s Chiayi):

After roaming the Five Peaks, I don't look at mountains;  
But do not take this to mean that I look down on Taiwan.
Chulo has its own New High Mountain; Much as people look up at it, it is not easy to climb.

From the poem one can imagine the majesty of New High Mountain (or Mt. Jade), which is no ordinary mountain. Its grandeur and height, “not easy to climb,” are comparable to the Five Peaks in China and must be the reason the Japanese deified it and consider it a “spiritual mountain” beyond the “Eight Scenes of Taiwan.”

Let us also consider the relation between aboriginal peoples and mountains in Taiwan. According to archaeological and anthropological studies, aboriginal peoples have lived in Taiwan for 12,000–15,000 years, coming from at least two different places: Southern China and Austronesia (the Philippines and Indonesia). The former settled in the central and northern parts of Taiwan, the latter primarily in the south and on the east coast.

The aboriginal peoples in Taiwan are divided according to their geographic distribution into gaoshan yuanzhumin (highlanders) and pingdi yuanzhumin (flatlanders). The highlanders, who have also been called gaoshan zu (high mountain people) and shengfan (crude natives), live in the high mountain areas, and consist of nine major tribes: Atayal, Saisiat, Bunun, Tsou, Paiwan, Lukai, Puyuma, Ami, and Yami or Darwu. The flatlanders are scattered all over the plains and, having long been sinicized, are also called pingpu (plains people) or shufan (mature natives). These include the Ketagalan in Taipei and Kavalan in Yilan, and are comprised of at least eight tribes altogether. According to statistics, at the time the Dutch occupied Taiwan (seventeenth century), the population of the Pingpu was about 200,000, but after about four hundred years of sinicization, the Pingpu ceased to exist except in name. The Taiwanese who may have a blood relationship to the Pingpu are estimated to be several millions.

According to the 2000 census, the total aboriginal population in Taiwan is 402,452, with 188,784 flatlanders counting for 47 percent and 213,668 highlanders counting for 53 percent. Among the nine major tribes, the Ami is the largest group (approximately 140,000 scattered mainly in Hualien and Taitung Counties, in the flatlands of East Longitudinal Valley). The next
two largest are the Atayal (85,000) and Paiwan (66,000), followed by the Bunun (41,000), the Lukai (11,000), the Puyuma (10,000), the Tsou (6,000), the Saisiat (5,000), and the Darwu (4,000). The Thao people, living around Sun Moon Lake, were listed among the officially recognized aboriginal peoples in 2001, with a population of less than 300; they are considered the smallest minority in Taiwan.

In terms of tribal distribution, the Ami, Puyuma, Lukai, and Darwu are considered flatlanders. The Ami Tribe mainly lives at sea level in Hualien and Taitung Counties; the Puyuma Tribe in Puyuma Township and Taitung County; the Lukai Tribe in Puyuma Township, Taitung County, Wutai Township, Pingtung County, and Maolin Township, Kaohsiung County; and the Darwu Tribe on Orchid Isle, 49 nautical miles east of Taitung County.

On the other hand, the Atayal, Paiwan, Bunun, Tsou, and Saisiat are considered highlanders. The Atayal Tribe lives on both sides of the northern Central Mountain Range and the mountain areas of Hualien and Yilan Counties; the Paiwan Tribe, with Mt. Tawu as its ancestral origin, is distributed over the southern part of the Central Mountain Range and in the south of the East Coast Mountain Range, mainly in the mountain villages of Pingtung and Taitung Counties; the Bunun Tribe is a typical highland group dispersed mainly in the southeastern part of the Central Mountain Range, above 1,000 meters in Nantou, Hualien, Taitung, and Kaohsiung Counties; the Tsou Tribe lives in the nearby regions of Mt. Ali; and the Saisiat Tribe inhabits the mountainous juncture between Hsinchu and Miaoli Counties.

It is worth mentioning that Taitung is a place where the Han Chinese and aboriginal cultures merge, as in Taitung County alone there are six aboriginal tribes (Ami, Paiwan, Lukai, Darwu, Puyuma, and Bunun), comprising 68 percent of the total aboriginal population in Taiwan and 30 percent of the population of Taitung County itself. Taitung is situated in a relatively remote area; it has been disadvantaged in its economic development, and politically and culturally has remained laggard for a long time. However, since the 1987 lifting of martial law, freedom of speech has spurred all kinds of multiethnic discourses to promote local cultures and expressions. Thus in recent years, the voices of Houshan wenxue
[East Coast Mountain Literature] and Taitung wenxue [Taitung Literature] have appeared, emphasizing local ethnic traits and special literary features so as to break away from the literary mainstream in an attempt to establish a local cultural subjectivity.

After the Ami, Atayal, and Paiwan, the Bunun Tribe is the fourth largest ethnic group in Taiwan. Most of their compact communities are scattered in the mountainous regions at an elevation between 1,000 and 1,500 meters; as typical highlanders they are called “Protectors of the Central Mountain Range.” The traditional life of the Bunun includes daogeng huoru (slash-and-burn) agriculture in the mountain fields. They often hunt the native fauna on the high mountain ridges and they also supplement their diet by gathering the native flora. Hunting boars and deer is more than just a way of life for the Bunun; it is a way to establish the value of an individual to obtain social recognition, and a necessary ritual for men to celebrate their coming-of-age. Many ethical and moral principles are derived from the taboos and regulations of hunting, which is the root of their culture. The man who is most successful in the hunt is considered wiser and more skillful than others and becomes a community hero. The quest for this kind of prestige is conducive to making the Bunun skilled, instinctive hunters. Traditional Bunun men are known to be the best hunters among the aboriginal peoples in Taiwan, and their superb hunting techniques have earned the admiration of the Paiwan, who call them “sungau” (hunters with magic).

As the second largest group of aborigines in Taiwan, the Atayal dwell among many towering mountains, such as Mt. Chatien, Mt. Chihsia, Mt. Hehuan, Mt. Tapachien, and Mt. Chilai. Like the Bunun, they also live by slash-and-burn cultivation, hunting, and gathering. Among the nine major tribes, only the Atayal and Saisiat have the traditional practice of facial tattooing as a rite of passage. In the past, before being tattooed Atayal men were required to hunt heads to demonstrate their bravery and martial spirit, as well as their value to the community. The tattoo, symbolizing manhood and the honor of being a successful head-hunter, abounded in cultural implications. With this brave and fierce character, Atayal men were involved in many anti-Japanese uprisings during the Japanese rule of Taiwan, especially the most violent
Wushe Incident of 1930. An Atayal man would never marry a woman without tattoos. In the case of a woman, the tattoo signals her coming-of-age and accomplishment in weaving skills, prerequisite for marriage. The Paiwan also had a head-hunting ceremony as did the Tsou and Saisiat. In general, it can be said that hunting is an important cultural feature of the mountain aborigines.

For thousands of years, the cultural development of the aboriginal peoples in Taiwan has reflected the geographic characteristics of the island—ocean and mountains. The entire aboriginal population (400,000) accounts for only 1.74 percent of the total population of Taiwan (23 million). Since the overwhelming majority of the population consists of Han Chinese—either Fulao, Hakka, or mainlanders—and the long-standing traditional culture and lifestyle of the Han majority is divorced from mountains, forests, and the ocean, it is primarily the literary works of the aborigines that contribute to Taiwan literature the distinctive subjects of “mountain and ocean world.”

Aptly named “mountain men,” the aborigines live in a close relationship with the mountains and forests. Thus, in this issue most of the selections focus on aboriginal authors: Topas Tamapima (Tien Ya-ko), Hulsuma Vava, and Salizan Takisvilainan are Bunun; Walis Norgan is Atayal; Yaronglong Sakinu is Paiwan; Pa’labang (Sun Ta-ch’uan) and Tung Shu-ming are Puyuma; and It Ta-os (Ken A-sheng) is Saisiat. However we also have a few Chinese authors: Chiang Hsun, Ch’en Lieh, Chi Chun-ch’ieh, Ch’iao Lin, and Wu Chun-hsien.

“Sunset Cicadas” by Topas describes the spiritual journey of a Bunun who changed his ethnic registration to “flatlander” forty years earlier and now wants to restore his mountain aboriginal status. Will the sunset cicada disturbed from its tree eventually find a “life garden” to spend the remainder of its life peacefully?—a metaphoric situation faced by aborigines today. Perhaps owing to his professional medical work, Topas’ warm and humanistic writings show a great concern for the lives of the weak and the common people. He is much concerned with the decline of the traditional lifestyle and culture of the aboriginal peoples, the appalling devastation of their cultures in general, and the threat to all ethnic minorities. His criticism, with a tone of humor, often betrays helpless sarcasm. His “Zuihou de lieren” [The Last Hunter] is an aboriginal
literature classic and, as a reference for the reader, it has been published in *Taiwan Literature: English Translation Series*, Number 3, which featured “Aboriginal Literature in Taiwan” (June 1998).

From his essay, “The Mountains and My Father,” we know Sakinu is a Paiwan. His father was a hunter who embodies the spirit of the Paiwan hunting culture, namely, the emotional responses toward the mountains and the life wisdom and collective experiences passed down by his tribal ancestors. What his father transmitted to him was not only hunting knowledge, but also the tribal myths, oral legends, and ways of life.

Tung Shu-ming’s mother is a Puyuma, and her father came to Taiwan from Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China. Academically, she holds an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Chinese literature, and in her personal pursuit of life, she has supplemented her strong Chinese cultural consciousness with an echo of the aboriginal tradition inherited from her mother’s side. In her search for meaning in life, she wrote, “Often, a sapling that imagines itself a fish,” a slippery fish, and also a fighting fish “swimming and unmoving.” In the end, whether she is a fish or a tree, it will eventually be determined by her assimilated identity.

Husluma Vava’s early works focus on the orally transmitted myths and interpretations of the Bunun ritual ceremonies, and gradually draw upon and utilize the Bunun cultural life as his subject matter to express the spiritual world of the tribe. His “Hu! Bunun” describes the birth, growth, and life of a “Bunun man,” and how, through a hunting ceremony, a man follows the ancestors’ footsteps and becomes a warrior of the mountain forests in the land blessed by the deities, and then experiences the life-and-death cycle of returning to the “ancestral spirits’ eternal dwelling.” His description of intimacy with nature, informed by an intuitive religious sentiment and life philosophy, portrays the rich flavor of Bunun culture.

As a Saiisiat who is also a writer, It Ta-os is a rarity. Reflection upon the mountains, forests, and nature is a common theme in his writings, which are characterized by humor and wit. In his “A Pilgrimage to the Mountains,” a story of opening a road, lumbering, plundering, and resistance, he expresses how the aborigines in the forest are touched by “every tree that has a soul.” The tacit
understanding the aborigines have with the mountains stems from their belief that “the mountains are alive, managed by a deity, and the falling earth and rocks are his tears.” In protest of the destruction of the environment, their concern is, “If the road is open, where is Puweng, the mountain god, going to live? Where will the animals live? Where do I go to hunt? . . .” Finally, with the understanding of the language of stones and mountain forests, and realizing that “plans to build the road lack a comprehensive understanding, not of how to do it, but of the vast and profound world in the forest, one that is difficult for humans to discern. That world needs beliefs,” the developer decides to abandon the attempt to open a road and pledges a “mountain pilgrimage” on his next visit to the mountain.

“Catch the Whisper in the Wind” by Pa’labang is written as a preface to *Yindian zhi ge*, the Chinese edition of *Indian Song*. It expresses concern for the worldwide plight of aboriginal peoples in the postcolonial age, especially the life and reality of the American Indians, like “cactus plants standing one by one in the middle of a barren desert, laboriously seeking to recapture the remaining glory of their own people. Their humble murmurs now and again swirl through the dry, harsh breeze.” It certainly strikes a sympathetic chord with the present situation of the aborigines in Taiwan.

Regarding the essays, we have selected Chiang Hsun and Ch’en Lieh, both Chinese writers. Chiang’s “Mountain Pledge” describes the author’s karmic connection to the mountains in Taiwan, including his life experiences, insightful observations, aesthetic contemplation, cultural reflections, and religious enlightenment, all worth careful reading. Ch’en’s “All About Patungkuan” is an excerpt from his travel notes, selected from his book *Youngyuan de shan* [Eternal Mountains], which dwells on the natural environment of Yushan National Park, a product of a 1990 project commissioned by the office of Yushan Park. Patungkuan (Patung Pass) is the oldest extant east-west path across Taiwan, the only ancient route in Taiwan officially recognized as a first-class historic site. It was built in 1875, crossing a distance of 152 kilometers across the Central Mountain Range, by the Manchu government to consolidate its rule of the eastern regions. In 1929 during the Japanese rule, a mountain ridge cross path was built to merge with the
ancient Patungkuan, to better control the restive Bunun. As most of the pass has been buried in wild grasses, only traces of it remain. The author uses simple language to describe the beauty of the environment, the scenic spots, and, from geographical, historical, ecological, and cultural perspectives, he describes various aspects of Patungkuan. With its detailed description, genuine sentiment, and with emotion and scenery fused, it provides the model of a high school textbook essay.

We have selected the poetry of five poets: Walis Norgan, Salizan, Tung-Shuming, Wu Chun-hsien, and Ch‘iao Lin. In addition to exhibiting the general aboriginal poetic characteristics, Wu Chun-hsien and Ch‘iao Lin are Han Chinese reflecting their concerns about the forest and aboriginal culture in their poetry. Wu's life has strong ties to the forest, as his academic training and degrees, from undergraduate to Ph.D. and even his Higher Civil Service Examination certificate, are all forestry-oriented. He has devoted his entire life to the promotion of forestry culture, defense of the forestry industry, and the improved image of forestry workers; even the volume of his collected poems bears the title Senlin zhi ge [Songs of the Forest]. Ch‘iao Lin is one of the earliest poets to demonstrate a special concern for aboriginal ecology. His Bunong shiji [Bunun Poems] includes poems written in 1970 when he was stationed at Taitung in the Bunun villages for the construction of the southern section of the East-West Cross-Island Highway. The poems were first published in the 38th issue of Li poetry magazine (August 1970), and two poems are selected from his book published in 2000.

Finally, like many other places in the world, Taiwan is facing the devastation of the natural environment, as well as the calling and lamentation of the mountains and ocean, echoing the hearts of writers concerned with ecology. The relationship between man and the mountains and forests confronts a serious challenge as the aborigines have become sunset minorities with the destiny of their cultures lingering at dusk. Accordingly, we have included the research paper, “From The Last Hunter to Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Taiwan Indigenous People’s Mountain and Forest Literature and Ecological Discourse” by Professor Chi Chun-chieh of the Graduate Institute of Ethnic Relations and Culture, National
Dong Hwa University, which was delivered at the International Conference on Taiwan Literature and English Translations held at the University of California at Santa Barbara in September 2005.

Most of the articles for this issue are selected from Taiwan yuan-zhu minzu Hanyu wenxue xuanji [Anthology of Chinese-Language Writings of Indigenous People from Taiwan, seven volumes, 2003], edited by Sun Ta-ch’uan. Despite their busy schedules, Professors Xu Junya, Hsu Chao-hua, and Chiang Pao-ch’ai have kindly recommended articles to enrich the contents of this issue, and their effort and deliberation are very much appreciated. This journal was launched in 1996, and with this issue it will enter its tenth year. All the translators’ unremitting support and cooperation are indispensable for the journal’s growth and, with their continued support, we look forward to the anniversary of a decade of devotion.