Urban Literature and the Fin de Siècle
in Taiwan

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Fin de siècle in the West refers to a specific ethos of the last part of the nineteenth century, especially to its artistic climate of effete sophistication. A hundred years later, Taiwan is facing the end of another century, but the artistic climate and contemporary features depicted in Taiwan literature cannot, of course, be a refurbished or repeated version of the West in the last century; rather they reflect the specific social outlook of Taiwan.

Urban literature that appeared in the eighties, as well as new sensuous fiction and post-modern works that appeared in the nineties, all manifest to a considerable degree the “splendor of fin de siècle” with characteristics that recall, or even further carry on, aspects of the literature of the May Fourth writers in the early part of this century. The themes explored in this type of literature comprehend glory and decline in human life, and include such specifics as sensory experience, eroticism, aestheticism, decadence, feelings of aged beauties and fallen nobles, the moods of political decline, and the sentiment of the late Tang poets, and inevitably reveal the city life and social milieu of Taiwan at the end of the century. On the other hand, under the domination of machine civilization and computer high-tech, such works also expose the distortion and alienation of human nature in the modern society. The publication of this issue happens to be in the very last month of this century, and we purposely made “Urbanization and Fin de Siècle in Taiwan Literature” its theme, in order to show some sample writings with hopes of presenting a subject that merits the study
Literary works depicting city life are not limited to modern times, just as the city-states of ancient Greece and the capitals of the three earliest Chinese dynasties had early existed in human civilization. Indeed, as the Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 B.C.) said, “God gave us the country, the skill of man hath built the town.” (Incidentally, Varro’s dictum is carved on the lintel of a side door next to the arched gateway of the monumental edifice of the Court House in the city of Santa Barbara.) In the “Nineteen Old Poems” of the Han period, we see such a description of city life: “I yoke the chariot, urge the stubborn horses, and roam for pleasure to Wan and Luo. In the capital Luo, how crowded it is! Those who wear belts and caps go to visit each other. Long boulevards are intersected by narrow lanes, and there are many mansions of princes and marquises. The two Palaces face each other from afar, and the twin Gate Towers stand over a hundred feet tall. Men please themselves with extravagant feasts. Why should one feel pressed by grief?” In Cao Zhi’s (192-232) ballad Mingdu pian (On the Famous Capital), we see the luxury of city life at the time described: “The famous capital has many charming women; Luoyang brings up dainty young men. Each of their treasured swords is worth a thousand pieces of gold; their clothes are brilliant and modish . . .” After the New Literature appeared in this century, writers like Lu Xun (1881-1936), Lao She (1899-1966), and Shen Congwen (1902-1988) all produced quite a few works concerning life in the city, showing how urbanization gradually destroyed traditional Chinese villages as well as describing social conflicts caused by the invasion of urban civilization. Of equal note are the Shanghai writers of the thirties, who gave voice to the new women and new morality in the modern cosmopolitan society. Taiwan literature of the seventies described unprecedented urban phenomena caused by drastic changes in the cities due to the rapid growth of capitalism. Commercial buildings of international companies arose in great numbers and sex bars mushroomed in the most expensive sections of the city, which exhibited the vitality of growth and prosperity but at the same time changed many people’s life style and values, as well as their thinking and behavior. Thus abnormal, decadent, alienated, bewildered mentality and social phenomena became the dominant themes in the writings of the new generation writers who rose in the eighties, such as Huang Fan and Zhang Dachun.

Looking back on the treatment of the city as a theme in Taiwan literature in his article, “Dushi: wenxue bianqian de xin zuobiao” (The City: A New Coordinate of Literary Changes),
published in September 1989, Lin Yaode announced, “Since the early
period of the eighties, I have had a strong interest in the concept of
‘urban literature’ and its practice in writing. In 1989 when Huang Fan
and I proposed together the view that ‘urban literature’ had leaped to
the mainstream of Taiwan literature in the eighties, and would continue
in the nineties to carry on its ambitious grand undertaking, we had
already offered a set of reference coordinates for reviewing the course
of changes in literature in the last ten years.” Lin Yaode and Huang
Fan co-edited Xin shidai xiaoshuo daxi (Survey of Fiction of the New
Generation) published in 1989, and in the preface to the volume City,
the editors observe, “The publication in Taiwan in the eighties of these
collected stories permeated with the spell of the city fully attests the
establishment of urban fiction and the urban spirit in contemporary
literature. The city and man form interacting themes, interacting
projects, and interacting texts. The works of urban literature that have
appeared in the last ten years offer a criticism of nostalgia for the
pastoral, and also reveal an exploration in-depth of the alienated
generation.”

The concept “urban literature” enunciated again and again by
Lin Yaode in the eighties attempted a criticism of the rural society on
the one hand, and on the other explored the patterns and formation of
city life. “Urban literature” is not built on the concern of
“confrontation of city and country,” but rather assumes that the city is a
“labyrinth,” or a “spiritual whirlpool,” where modern people have
fallen. Literary work, be it fiction, poetry or essays, is nothing other
than a labyrinth created by the author. The labyrinth under the pen of
Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) of Argentina is a magic space where
literature and reality converge, but in Lin Yaode’s works the labyrinth
is human civilization itself and the archetype of a developed and
expanded modern city. The volume of his collected essays, Migong
lingjian (Components of the Labyrinth), is composed of “components
of life,” “components of apartment buildings,” “components of human
beings,” and “components of the earth,” from which we can see that all
the elements of modern life and the universe are “components.” In
other words, for modern people to live in a metropolis, as described in
a literary work, is like falling into a “labyrinth,” while the author is the
guide of the “labyrinth,” although “the guide conceals himself within
and becomes part of the ‘components.’ The ‘I’ that disappeared is an
escapee and an explorer at same time.”

As a writer of the post-modern period, Lin Yaode conceived
of the “city” and “space” differently from the way they had been
conceived in the past. The “city” was seen as a spiritual matter, not a
physical place, and “space” was considered as the base for human
activities. He observed, “The content of space must ‘have a relation’ to the social content; this relationship can be interpreted as metaphorical social content or political power, or taken to be an image of ideology or something else.” He considered the city itself as a text in post-modern discourse. The city itself does not appeal to alphabets or characters for writing, but uses all kinds of concret objects as writing units to reveal the modern human perception and mental structure. In other words, “Every space as an internal element of a building is no more than a text to be rewritten. It was merely a simple illusion that man has control of space; man and space become a text for each other and that is all.” (See article, “Kongjian jiantiebu—manyou wanjin Taiwan dushi xiaoshuo de jianzhu kongjian” (A Scrapbook of Space—Roaming the Architectural Space in Recent Urban Fiction of Taiwan).

Lin Yaode was the advocate, practitioner and critic of urban literature and its theory in Taiwan, having presented various original views of his own. His works, comprising fiction, poetry, essays, and criticism, together with his publishing enterprise, are highly imbued with his individuality and a pioneering and futuristic vision. He considered himself a “heretic” in creative writing and was content with his status as a “heretic.” A versatile and energetic talent, he rose a bright comet in the literary world of Taiwan in the eighties and passed away in January of 1996 at the age of thirty-four.

In comparison with Lin Yaode, the poet and critic Luo Men is equally, if not more so, obsessed with the exploration of “urban literature.” Since he published his “Dushi de ren” (People in the City) in 1957, he has been for four decades writing “dushi shi” (urban poetry), exploring themes having to do with the city, tracing the distortion and alienation of human nature in city life, and giving expression to his criticism and contemplation of the “cunzai de miwang” (bewilderment of being). Lin Yaode was the editor of Luo Men chuangzuo daxi (A Survey of Luo Men’s Creative Works) with “Dushi shi” (Urban Poetry) as the second volume. The thirty-nine highly distinctive poems collected here portray city life with its acceleration, materialization and animation as manifested in food and sex, variation of rhythms, the predicament of survival, the nightmare of civilization, and modern pathologies. He has been dubbed by critics as “the master of urban poetry in Taiwan” (Zhang Hanliang), “the spokesman for the domain of urban poetry” (Chen Huang), and “the thinker unceasingly building towers at the top of the tower of civilization” (Lin Yaode).

Since the nineties, creative writing in Taiwan has given prominence to displaying characteristics of “fin de siècle,” and among
the most noteworthy works in this line is Zhu Tianwen’s *Shijmo de huali* (Fin de Siècle Splendor), published in 1990. This book is composed of seven short stories depicting people from all walks of life in Taipei of the last ten years of this century, and its publication justifiably heralds the entry of Taiwan literature into the period of “fin de siècle.” Furthermore, since martial law was lifted in 1987, there have been almost no taboos or restrictions of any kind in political, social, and cultural respects, and with everybody itching to have a go, there appeared a group of so-called “xin renlei zuojia” (new human race writers), whose attitude toward life and literature, in contrast to the writers of earlier generations, who concerned themselves with the times and the country, leans toward the cynical and playful. They appeal to sensory perception, and spare no effort in portraying and exploring various “fin de siècle” symptoms of homosexual behavior and abnormal psychology. The so-called “xin ganguan xiaoshuo” (new sense organ fiction) explores human sensory feeling and lust and desire, portrays human instinctual impulses and emotional arousal, and even brazenly pictures queer and deviant eroticism. As suggested by the titles of their works, such as *Yiduan xixuegui liezhuan* (Biographies of Heretical Vampires) and *Enü shu* (Writings of Evil Women), the description focuses on “extraordinary and peculiar entanglements of passion” and egregious erotic violence. More often than not, the artistic and literary quality of such works is open to question and subject to the test of time.

The importance of urban literature and erotic literature in the development of Taiwan literature has attracted the special attention of local scholars in the form of two symposia. Symposium on Urbanization and Contemporary Taiwanese Literature took place in December 1994, and the proceedings, entitled *Dangdai Taiwan dushi wenxue lun*, were published in November 1995 by the Shibao Publishing Company. Symposium on Eroticism and Contemporary Taiwanese Literature was convened in January 1996, and the proceedings came out in March 1997, published by the same company. For readers interested in these subjects, these two volumes are useful references, in addition to the sample works translated and included in this issue.

In selecting works for translation, we still emphasize the artistic quality of literature, and the three stories together with the poems selected are all excellent examples of artistic expression. Of course, Zhu Tianwen’s short story, “Shijmo de huali” (Fin de Siècle Splendor), same as the title of the anthology in which it appears, fits the theme very well, but was excluded because it has been translated already (by Eva Hung, in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese*).
Professor Jenn-shann Jack Lin of the University of Alberta, Canada has recommended Zheng Qingwen’s recent short story “Sea Sleeve, Mustard Grass, and Butterfly Orchid” and Hao Yuxiang’s “Shriveled Night,” and Professor Xu Junya of National Taiwan Normal University has recommended Chen Yizhi’s article on women poets of the postwar generation in Taiwan. With their recommendations these scholars have greatly enriched the content of this issue and their assistance is much appreciated. “Shriveled Night” is a work of a high order, describing female desire in a candid and refined way, which is particularly disturbing and thrilling in the meticulous translation of Professor Goldblatt. What is particularly worth mentioning is that Mr. Zheng Qingwen’s collected stories in English, *Three-Legged Horse*, edited by Pang-yuan Chi and published by Columbia University Press, was the winner of the 1999 Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize for Fiction. We published in our first issue a short story by Mr. Zheng, under the translated title “The White Period,” and we are particularly honored to have another piece of his work included in this issue. Regarding translation, Professor Christopher Lupke of Bowdoin College, has not only lent us his hand but also introduced several young scholars to help with the enterprise, and we are very thankful.

In July of this year the Executive Yuan of the Republic of China in Taiwan officially adopted the Hanyu Pinyin system of transcription, which has been widely used in the world, and accordingly we will also use pinyin for transcribing Chinese terms except for some well-known proper names. In addition, with the assistance of Cathy Chiu, Head of the East Asian Collection of the UCSB Library, we have started from this issue to publish a bibliography of English translation of Taiwan literature as a reference supplement to Professor Peng Jingxi’s *Dangdai Taiwan wenxue zuopin Ying yiben suoyin* (Index to English Translations of Contemporary Taiwan Literature), which was published in September 1997. New items that appear after that publication will be recorded in each issue of this journal hereafter. Finally, we sincerely thank all the authors and translators for their cooperation and assistance, which have made possible the publication of this issue.