Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang and the Windmill Poetry Society

Kuo-ch’ing Tu

Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang (1908-1994) was a poet, essayist, and journalist during the period under Japanese rule. He founded the Windmill Poetry Society in the 1930s advocating Surrealism, and was considered a pathfinder of the aesthetic school of poetry at the time, and yet it was not until the end of 1970s that he was “unearthed” and his historical position was reevaluated. This issue of the journal focuses on Yang Chih-ch’ang, introducing his poems in English translation and reviewing his activities with the Windmill Poetry Society, to better understand and evaluate his importance in the development of modern poetry in Taiwan.

Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang was born in Tainan the son of a locally renowned scholar of the Chinese classics. His most widely recognized pen name was Shui Yin-p’ing. After graduating from high school at the age of twenty-three, he went to Kyūshū with the intention of enrolling in Saga High School to study French, but failed. Instead he went to Tokyo and met the Proletarian writer Iwatō Yukio (1902-1989) and Ryūtanji Yū (1901-1992) of the the Neo-Sensualist School, who procured his admission to the Daitō Culture Institute, where he majored in Japanese literature. He started to publish his poems in the poetry magazines Kōbe shijin [Kobe Poets], Shigaku [Poetics], and Shiino ki [Shiia Chestnut]. While he was in Japan, he published two volumes of collected poems, Nettaiyo [Tropical Fish] (1931) and Juran [Magnolia] (1932), as well as one collection of short stories Bōekifu [Tradewind] (1932), none of which are extant. He returned to Taiwan in 1932 because of his father’s illness. In 1933 he worked as an editor of the literary supplement to Tainan shinpō [Tainan News] and made acquaintance with the young Taiwanese Li Chang-jui (pen name Li Yeh-ch’ang), Lin Yung-hsiu (pen name Lin Hsiu-erh), and Chang Liang-tien (pen name Ch’iü Ying-erh), and the Japanese Toda Fusako, Kishi Reiko, and Shimamoto Teppei. The six of them with Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang organized the literary group, Windmill Poetry Society, and in October of 1933, published the magazine Le Moulin [Windmill]. In December 1935, Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang took a job with the Tainan nichinichi shinpō [Taiwan Daily News] as a reporter. Since then he worked for newspapers for many years, and continued to publish his works in newspapers and periodicals in Taiwan and Japan.

In 1939, Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang joined the Taiwanese Poets’ Association organized by Nishikawa Mitsuru, which was reorganized as the Association of Taiwanese Literary Artists in 1941, publishing the organ Bungei Taiwan [Literary Art Taiwan]. In 1945 he was transferred to the military affairs bureau of Taiwan News and dispatched to the Philippines as a correspondent. In August Japan surrendered unconditionally. With the breakout of the February 28th Incident in 1947, Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang was arrested on a charge of “gathering information for the Communists” and was sentenced to two years in prison. After six months he was released and started to work as the head of the Tainan branch of Gonglunbao [Public Views Press]. In 1952 Li Chang-jui, a member of the Windmill Society, was executed in the course of the White Terror, and
Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang resigned his position in the *Public Views Press* and stopped writing.

In June 1953 he participated in the founding of the Tainan Rotary Club, for which he edited the club’s periodical *Chikan* [Fort Providentia], and became a member of the Tainan City Literature Committee. He continued to publish in Chinese and Japanese in a special column called *Beichuang suotan* [North Window Ramble] in *Chikan* with essays and comments on broad subjects concerning international current affairs, Oriental historical stories, Japanese ancient literature, and archaeology. In October 1979 he published a collection of poems in Japanese, *Moeru hō* [Burning Cheeks] and in November 1985 a collection of critiques, also in Japanese, *Kami no uo/Shimi* [Silverfish]. In June 1994, *Shui Yinping zuopinji* [The Collected Works of Shui Yin-p’ing] was published by the Tainan City Culture Center. In September he died of a gastric cancer.

Regarding the historical fact that Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang established the Windmill Poetry Society in the early 1930s, it would be helpful if we had a proper understanding of the background of this movement, the poetic circles of the time, and the characteristics of his works and poetic views. Let us look into the issue from these three perspectives.

First of all, from the above biographical sketch we know that Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang sojourned in Japan for only about two years (1930-31). In 1931, when Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang entered Daitō Culture Institute to study Japanese literature, most of European literary thought and contemporary radical works had already been introduced into Japan. Generally speaking, Japanese “Kindai-shi” (Early Modern Poetry) starting with *Shintai shishō* [An Anthology of New Style Poetry] (1882) of the Meiji period, gradually matured through the Taishō period, and turned into “Gendai-shi” (Modern Poetry) in the early Shōwa period. Hagiwara Sakutarō’s epoch-making collection of poems, *Tsuki ni hoeru* [Baying at the Moon] was published in 1917, and turned the creative direction from symbols of “ideas,” elucidation of “meanings,” and rhythm of “recitation” to the expression of “feeling” and “spirit” directly in writing as the method of conveying the meaning of human existence, thus initiating an entirely new poetic style. For about ten years thereafter, under the impact of European and American trends of thought, Kanbara Tai’s declaration of the avant-garde arts movement (1920), Hirato Renkichi’s “Nihon mirai-ha seigen undō” [The Declaration and Movement of Japan’s Futurism] (1921), Takahashi Shinkichi’s “Dadaisuto Shinkichi no shi” [The Poetry of Dadaist Shinkichi] (1923), as well as Hagiwara Kyōjirō’s collection in pursuit of reform of poetic form, *Shikei senkoku* [Death Sentence] (1925) came out one after another along with the avant-garde movement.

Generally speaking, the introduction of avant-garde arts, including the radical art movements that occurred in various countries in Western Europe after the First World War, such as Futurism in Italy, Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism in France, and Expressionism in Germany, was an attempt at a radical reform to break down the existing art form and order. The avant-garde arts opposed the rationalism of the nineteenth century and leaned toward the irrational creative exploration of abstract art. In Japan, moving from the destructive tendency of Dadaism toward Surrealism, avant-garde arts developed from the negation of reality to the dismantlement of the
personality; that is, they created a “surrealistic” world derived from awareness of the Freudian subconscious, while in literature, Symbolist theory based on deep psychology thereby gained momentum to develop. Thus around the end of the Taishō period (1912-1926), the destructive thinking and expression of the Dadaists, Futurists, and Expressionists, which reflected the spiritual crisis in Western Europe after the war, tapered off and there appeared two opposite camps in the literary world: On the one hand, were the Neo-Sensualist literature developed by Yokomitsu Riichi and Kawabata Yasunari and the Surrealist poetry advocated by Nishiwaki Junzaburō, and on the other hand was Marxist radical political literature reflecting the Russian revolution. The Surrealist and Neo-Sensualist schools were influenced by the avant-garde arts movement in an attempt to carry out a reform of artistic expression, while Realism and Proletarian literature also sided with the league of avant-garde artists, with the aim of combining literature and social revolution.

The destructive anarchism displayed by Dadaism and other newly rising poetic schools, together with and the rise of the Proletarian movement expressing Marxist social class ideology, made the free-form poetry from the late Taishō onward dull and flat in style, in which concepts took precedence in the creative process and aesthetic taste was lacking. In opposition to this, there was a group of poets in pursuit of artistic quality, which they held as the ultimate value with Nishiwaki Junzaburō, Takiguchi Shūzō, Ueda Toshio, Kitazono Katsue, and Haruyama Yukio as the pathfinders, who advocated the new spirit (esprit nouveau) and pure poetic spirit (poesie) and established the magazine Shi to shiron [Poetry and Poetics] in 1928. The character of modern poetry in Japan, so to speak, has been shaped through this Modernist movement. The chief editor was Haruyama Yukio, and the main driving force came from the critical articles written by Nishiwaki Junzaburō under the pen name “J.N.” The journal published in a series of three issues (Nos. 3 to 5) a Japanese translation of André Breton’s “Manifeste du Surréalisme” by Kitagawa Fuyuhiko. As a result, the journal was taken to be advocating the Surrealist movement, although, in fact, its contributors and poets varied in style, demonstrating various experimental creative approaches. In short, from the late 1920s through the 1930s, the introduction and translations of contemporary European literature published in Poetry and Poetics, which focused on the characteristics and situation of Modernism, infused a new trend and vitality into the Japanese poetic circles of the time.

Nishiwaki Junzaburō (1894-1982) returned from Oxford University to Japan in 1925 to accept a teaching position in the literature department at his alma mater Keiō University. Among his students were Ueda Toshio, Takiguchi Shūzō, Satō Saku, and Ueda Tamotsu; and with Nishiwaki as the center, they published poems and poetic theories in Mita bungaku [Mita Literature] of Keiō University, promoting new literary trends from abroad such as Dadaism, Surrealism, and Imagism to launch a new literary movement. With the publication of Fukuiku taru kafu yo [O Fragrant Stoker] under Nishiwaki’s direction in 1927, the published anthology became the historical signpost of the Surrealist movement in Japan. The activities and critical articles published in Poetry and Poetics made Nishiwaki the soul of the new poetic spirit movement in Japan. His critical activity resulted in two books, Chōgenjitsu shugi shiron [Surrealism Poetics] and Shurerarisumu bungakuron [The Literature of Surrealism] published in 1929 and 1930 respectively. From the situation that developed in the poetic circles of Japan, we notice that in 1930 when Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang arrived in
Japan these two books by Nishiwaki had come out, and their impact on the young man is not difficult to imagine: Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang’s poems and poetic views were directly influenced by Nishiwaki.

Now, let us look into the literary world of Taiwan at that time. As a colony, Taiwan would, of course, come under the direct influence of trends in the literary circles of Japan. Thus the abovementioned introduction of European avant-garde art also occurred in Taiwan, as well as a literary world divided into two opposite directions: either that of artistic aestheticism or that of social revolution. On the one hand, the Windmill society was established in 1933 to promote Surrealism and also in 1933 the Taiwan Geijutsu Kenkyūkai (Society for the Study of Taiwanese Arts), influenced by the Neo-Sensualist School, was established in Tokyo and launched the publication of Forumosa (Formosa) intended to elevate Taiwan’s literature and art. On the other hand, there was the opposition of the “Saline Zone Literature” (Enbun Chitai Bungaku), leaning toward Realism with a strong color of the Left and an emphasis on the relation between society and literature, which caused the New Literature Movement to merge with the Socialist trend in Taiwan after 1927. The New Taiwan Literature, which began with Lai Ho, had developed over the years with Realism as its mainstream. In a milieu where Realism held sway, the Windmill poets rose in “revolt against popular thinking” and set a “style that displayed originality of conception,” they attempted “breaking through the flat and prosaic surface” and an “infusion of a new literary style,” and they pursued “poetic purity” and a “new poetic spirit,” etc., only to end up with what Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang described in his recollection in 1985 as failure, “a painful encounter of being encircled and suppressed by a society in general that did not understand, and the journal ceased publication with the fourth issue.”

According to Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang, the name “Windmill” was adopted for the journal and the poetry society for three reasons: 1) in reference to the famous French theater Le Moulin, 2) in reference to the windmills that dot the landscape of the saline areas like Chiku and Peimen in Tainan; 3) in allusion to the need of fresh air to foster a new atmosphere in the poetic circles of Taiwan. Regarding the Windmill Society and Surrealism as well as Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang’s poems and poetic views, we would like to emphasize two points: First, Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang’s works and poetic views are very much influenced by Nishikawa Junzaburō; and second, the poetic views expressed by the poets of the Windmill Society can hardly be classified as Surrealism per se. As it happened, Nishiwaki was the subject of my M.A. thesis when I was studying in Japan, and it seems to me that many terms and concepts used in Yang’s works were often used by Nishiwaki, such as “intellectualism,” “esprit nouveau,” “surrealism,” “transcendental naturalism,” “harmony,” “purity,” “ennui,” “melancholy,” “phantom,” “natives,” etc. Even the cover of the third issue of the journal Le Moulin edited by Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang (March 1934) imitated that of Nishiwaki’s collection of poems Ambarvalia in red color, which was published a year earlier in 1933. Of course, one cannot deny that Yang has his own unique characteristics and style, and a comparative study of their similarities and differences merits further exploration. Their similarity, for example, can be seen in the following two poems: “The Natives’ Lips” by Yang and “Weather” in the “Girishateki jojōshi” [Greecian Lyrics] series included in Ambarvalia by Nishiwaki:
The Natives’ Lips

Dawn breaks amid the drinking songs
From the clink of earthenware and the natives’ lips
Poetry flowers
On this most Bohemian morning…

—At Hungtou Isle

Weather

Morning like “an upturned gem”
Someone whispers with someone at the door
It is the nativity of a god

As to the question whether the “Surrealism” advocated by the poets of the Windmill Society was authentic and appropriate to the name, we understand that “Surrealism” was first introduced from France to Japan and then indirectly imported from Japan to the literary world of Taiwan. As a stalwart advocate of Surrealism in the 1930s in Japan, Nishiwaki did not entirely accept the European trends after WWI, such as the impact of a collapsed civilization, anxiety of the human mind, doubt of the Rationalism of the nineteenth century, and disillusionment with the social reality, etc., and claimed to be a “transcendental naturalist” (Chōshizen shugi sha). He thought of “poetry” as an “artistic spirit,” “purely a world of imagination,” “existing in a new relation,” and the so-called “new” he referred to the relation with nature or reality. Therefore he stressed intellectual manipulation in the creative process, displaying the poet’s imagination, combining what are separated in nature and separating what are combined in nature, in order to discover “a new relation,” that is, “the world of poetry.” Thus his ideas distinctively differ from what Breton asserted in terms of “une activité inconsciente,” “l’écriture automatique,” “le sommeil hypnotique,” “les récits de rêves,” and “le hasard objectif.” In addition, all the newly rising trends and schools that happened in European countries with all kinds of radical and revolutionary views of the world, the arts, and the techniques of artistic expression, were labeled together as “the avant-garde arts movement” in general, and French Surrealism was only one of the schools among them. Therefore, what Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang advocated was not purely the Surrealism declared by Breton in 1924, which was also the case of the Modernist school declared by Chi Hsien in 1966 in Taiwan, who at times claimed for themselves: “We are a group of Modernists who have culled and carried forward the essence and elements of all the newly risen schools of poetry since Baudelaire.” Generally speaking, the basic viewpoint of the Modernist school in the creative process was that they opposed romanticism and lyricism, advocated intellectualism, and learned from the techniques of avant-garde artistic expression in all the newly risen schools. If that is the case, twenty-three years, or almost a quarter of a century, elapsed between two times when Western “essence and elements of the newly risen schools” were introduced in the poetry circles of Taiwan, first by Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang and then by Chi Hsien.

As regards the “new spirit” in poetic creation, namely, the poetic quality Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang intended to create in his works, such as “revolting against the tradition,”
“resisting the popular and the common,” “unique thinking,” “breaking fresh ground,” “obscurity and ambiguity,” as well as themes of “mysticism, death, and sadness,” the Chinese poet who can be placed on a par with Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang in this respect was the Symbolist Li Jinfa (1900-1976). Li was directly influenced by French Symbolist poets while he was studying in Europe, and his first collection of poems Wei’yu [Light Rain] was published in 1925, five to six years earlier than Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang, whose first two collections, Tropical Fish and Magnolia were published in 1931 and 1932 respectively. However, Yang’s two collections have been lost, and Li published three volumes of poems in three years and then discontinued writing, never attempting to organize a poetry society to advocate the Symbolist movement.

As for the influence of Symbolism on the Windmill poets, that too had to have come through Japanese; the situation that Japanese Symbolist poets gathered to publish a poetry journal in order to establish the spirit of modern lyricism happened mainly with the publication of Shiji [Four Seasons] in 1934 and after. By then Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang had already returned to Taiwan. The Windmill poets whose lyric styles were apparently influenced by the Four Seasons were Lin Hsiu-erh and others, rather than Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang. Furthermore, comparatively speaking, the flagship of the Modernist school in China, Xian dai [Les Contemporaines], edited by Shi Zhicun, was first published in Shanghai in May, 1932, more than one year earlier than Le Moulin. The Xin shi [New Poetry] Monthly, launched by Dai Wangshu and Bian Zhi lin of the Modernist and Cresent schools, appeared four years later in October, 1936. However, because there was no direct contact between Taiwan and the Mainland, no influence on either side was possible. What could have influenced Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang must be traced back to poetic circles in Japan with Poetry and Poetics published in September, 1928, or even earlier, with the introduction of European avant-garde artistic trends. In short, Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang’s position as a pathfinder in the history of Taiwan literature, or even in the history of modern Chinese poetry in the twentieth century, simply cannot be denied.

As far as Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang’s works are concerned, Shui Yinping zuopin ji [Collected Works of Shui Yin-p’ing], translated by Yeh Ti and edited by Lü Hsing-ch’ang, published by the Tainan City Culture Center in 1995, is an indispensable publication for the study of Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang and Modernist poetry in Taiwan. The book is divided into five volumes: (1) poetry, a collection of his creative poems, (2) critiques, a collection of his literary criticism, (3) fiction, his short story “Rouge and the Lips,” (4) essays, including memories, prefaces and postscripts, (5) critical studies on the author. A draft chronology of Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang’s life and publications compiled by Lü Hsing-ch’ang is appended to the book.

For this special issue on Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang, we asked Professor John Balcom to serve as the guest editor in charge of selection and translation of the contents. This special issue includes a complete translation of Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang’s 1979 edition of collected poems in Japanese, Moeru hō [Burning Cheeks], which was translated into Chinese by Chen Ch’ien-wu and published in Li poetry magazine, No. 114, April 1983, as well as his essays and prose, to demonstrate his many-sided achievements as a poet, an essayist, a critic, and a cultural historian. The three articles of studies are exemplary, each with its insight and fresh viewpoint, especially Professor Michael Yeh’s detailed analysis and appreciative comments, which are meticulous and insightful.
In the nineteenth issue of this journal, on “Taiwan Literature during the Period of Japanese Rule,” published in July 2006, we selected six poems each by Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang and Lin Hsiu-erh in contrast with the works of several other “Saline Zone” poets. For critical studies, Professor Ch’en Ming-t’ai’s “Modernist Poetry in Prewar Taiwan: Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang, the Fengche [Le Moulin] Poetry Society, and Japanese Poetic Trends,” a treatise that carries weight, was published in the second issue of the journal in December 1997. Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang definitely exerted his influence on the development of modern poetry in Taiwan during Japanese rule, and this issue presenting most of his poetic works in English translation will provide a useful reference for understanding the development of Taiwan’s modern poetry and the history of the introduction and reception of Western literary trends in Japan and in China in the twentieth century, as well as for the study of contemporary literature in Chinese worldwide from the perspective of comparative literature. Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang’s sister is Professor Balcom’s wife Yingtsih’s mother, therefore this issue has a particular significance for the translators and readers. Finally, we must acknowledge that Professor Balcom’s translation is based mainly on the Chinese translation of the original works, and we have refrained from editing or otherwise tampering with the translator’s understanding of the texts and his style of rendition. For the publication of this special issue, we are very thankful for the assistance he has given and for the significant contribution he has made.