Aboriginal Literature in Taiwan

Kuo-ch'ing Tu

The aboriginal peoples in Taiwan (generally recognized as nine tribes, who are not Han Chinese and number about 320,000 people) occupy less than two percent of the 20,000,000 total population of Taiwan at present. They are the minority marginal peoples in reality as well as in name in a society dominated by Han Chinese, and have been neglected or even discriminated against as "savages," namely, uncivilized barbarians. Since Taiwan withdrew from the United Nations in the seventies and represented China no more in the international arena, the island has undergone imperative changes in politics, economy, and social conditions, resulting in the rise of a nativist consciousness and review of Taiwanese indigenous cultures. Since the eighties, following the development of the democratic movement outside the Party, Taiwanese society has moved toward pluralism in respect of politics, culture, and speech. The indigenous culture is an indispensable link in the chain of pluralist culture. At the same time, under the influence of the ethnic group movement in the United States and in response to international concerns for minority nationalities, the aboriginal peoples in Taiwan have finally shouted out "the cries of the oppressed," and voices of aboriginal literature in Taiwan have also started to ring out.

The aboriginal peoples in Taiwan, described as a "twilight group," are facing a crisis of collapse in their population, territory, language, and culture. As a part of the Taiwan aboriginal ethnic movement, the magazine Kao-shan ch'ing (Mountain Greenery) was launched in 1983, together with short-lived non-Party political magazines, one after another, challenging the various taboos in the existing system. In December of 1984, the Society for the Promotion of Taiwanese Indigenous Rights was established, and launched campaigns for the autonomy of indigenous communities, reclamation of their original names, and return of the land that originally belonged to the indigenous peoples. (In the past they were forced under the Japanese colonial and the Chinese nationalist governments to adopt official names in Japanese and Chinese respectively, and they have lost much of the land that used to be part of their tribal territory.) In addition, fueled by the publication of Yüan pao (Aboriginal Post) and Lieh-jen wen-hua (Hunter Culture) and the establishment of the Research Center of Taiwan Aboriginal Humanities, advocacy on behalf of the aboriginal peoples and aboriginal cultural activities are now in the ascendant. In 1996, the thoroughfare in front of the Presidential Palace, Chieh-shou Road, which commemorated Chiang Kai-shek, was officially renamed Ketagalan Boulevard, commemorating the earliest inhabitants of the Taipei area, a tribe of the P'ing-p’u aborigines known as the Ketagalan. The Taipei City Commission for Native Taiwanese Affairs, and the Executive Yüan’s Council of Aboriginal Affairs were established in 1996, as a result of the incessant effort of aboriginal activism for more than a decade.
The aboriginal peoples in Taiwan have their own languages, but none has a writing system. Anthropologists and archaeologists have established that their languages belong to the Austronesian family, whose speakers include the indigenous peoples of Taiwan, the Philippines, New Zealand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hawaii, and other islands of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Archaeologists think that it is likely that "the hundred Yüeh" of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.) in China belonged to the Austronesian peoples. After the First Emperor of Ch'in united China he pacified the Yüeh, and Emperor Wu of Han also attacked the Yüeh. Thus they were forced to emigrate, some directly across the Taiwan Straits and some heading south to the Pacific islands and then swinging up north to Taiwan about two thousand years ago. According to cultural differences, the Taiwanese aboriginal peoples are usually classified into two groups: residents in the flatlands are called P'ing-p'u and those in the mountainous areas are called Kao-shan. The P'ing-p'u originally comprised nine tribes, but they have been sinicized and have lost their original languages and cultures as a result of earlier exposure to outside influences. It has been speculated that one-fourth of the Taiwanese population have the blood of the P'ing-p'u tribes. The Kao-shan, also called Shan-pao, live mostly in the mountainous areas and along the east coast and islets off the coast. They are the indigenous peoples of Taiwan today, composed of nine tribes: Atayal, Bunun, Ami, Paiwan, Yami, Saisiat, Tsou, Rukai, and Puyuma.

The so-called "aboriginal literature in Taiwan" refers to literary works with the theme or subject matter related to the life, culture, thoughts, and feelings of the aboriginal peoples in Taiwan, regardless of whether the author is a Han Chinese or an aborigine. The development of aboriginal literature in Taiwan can be divided into three phases. The first phase exhibits the oral literature in the form of myths, legends, and ballads as handed down from one generation to another among the various tribes of the aboriginal peoples. Because the aboriginal peoples have never had records in writing, oral transmission had become the only way to preserve literary experiences. In the early thirties during the Japanese rule, the Japanese linguistic professors at Taihoku [Taipei] Imperial University, Ogawa Hisayoshi and Asai Erin, gathered together two hundred eighty-four aboriginal stories and legends, which they recorded in Japanese and in the original languages by romanization, thus preserving rare and valuable data [Gengo ni yoru Taiwan Takasago-zoku densetsu shu (A Collection of Taiwan Native Tribes’ Myths and Stories in the Original Languages), published in 1935 by Toko Shoin]. The Taiwanese poet Ch’en Ch’ien-wu brought together similar stories and translated from this repertoire forty-nine pieces into Chinese and published them in 1991. To record the oral literature of the aboriginal peoples is an urgent project in progress carried on by concerned scholars in Taiwan.

The second phase of aboriginal literature in Taiwan displays the works written by Japanese or Han Chinese based on the records of oral narration. During the colonial period, Japanese writers Sato Haruo, Oshika Taku, Nakamura Chihei, Sakaguchi Reiko, and Nishikawa Mitsuru all wrote about the subject. The father of Taiwan literature, Lai He, was indeed a person of foresight, and wrote as early as the
twenties and thirties poems about the pure and simple life of the aboriginal world, such as Cheng-yüeh shih-ssu yeh Chu-t'an fan chou (Floating the Boat on Pearl Lake at Night on the Fourteenth of the First Month). He had a deep sympathy for the Wu-she Incident in revolt against the Japanese, as expressed in the poem Nan-kuo ai-ko (A Doeful Song of the Southland); and he also, from the standpoint of the aborigines, reflected upon the history of the aboriginal peoples oppressed by the Han Chinese, as in Shih-yin hua-fan (Civilized Aborigines at Shih-yin). After the war, among the Han Chinese writers who wrote about the aboriginal peoples, Chung Li-he probably is the earliest with his Chia-li p'ō (An Aboriginal Grandma) published in 1960. The earliest aboriginal writer is Ch'en Ying-hsiung of the Paiwan tribe, whose Yu-wai meng-hen (Traces of Dreams in Foreign Lands), published by the Commercial Press in Taiwan in 1971, is considered the first collection of short stories by an individual aboriginal writer in the history of Taiwan literature, although the author, limited by the times, completely accepted Han Chinese viewpoints without expressing the self-consciousness of an aborigine. The writer who treated aboriginal subjects more often than anyone else is Chung Chao-cheng, who published Ma-hei-p'ō feng-yün (The Changing Winds and Clouds at Ma-hei-p'ō) and Ma-li-k'e-wan ying-hsiung-chuan (The Heroes of Ma-li-ke-wan) in the seventies, as well as Kao-shan tsu-ch'ü (A High Mountains Suite) and Pei-nan p'ing-yüan (The Puyuma Plains) in the eighties.

The third phase of aboriginal literature in Taiwan consists of works written in Chinese since the eighties by aboriginal writers with a distinct ethnic consciousness. Historically this is the debut of authentic aboriginal literature in Taiwan by aboriginal writers expressing their own unique life experience and innermost feelings. As mentioned above, the awakening of the self-consciousness of the aborigines started to manifest itself in the eighties, and is revealed in the recognition of the tragic destiny of the aborigines in the larger society, namely, for survival "men go out to sea" to take up hard work on oceangoing freighters and "women go down to the sea" to suffer in the abyss of misery as prostitutes. This literature also arouses the ethnic consciousness of the aboriginal peoples living in a society dominated by the majority Han Chinese, and it creates an awareness of crisis at the rapid decline of the aboriginal cultures. The aboriginal writers who attracted general attention for the first time in the literary circles of Taiwan were T'o-pa-ssu Ta-ma-p'i-ma of the Bunun tribe, whose Chinese name is T'ien Ya-ke, and Mo-na-neng of the Paiwan tribe, whose Chinese name is Tseng Shun-wang. T'o-pa-ssu graduated from Kao-hsiung Medical College and started to publish works in 1983; his short story "The Last Hunter" won him the Wu Cho-liu Literary Award in 1986. His works are recognized as "imbued with a unique mode of thinking as an aborigine" and let readers feel that they are more than anything else "authentic Taiwanese short stories." Mo-na-neng graduated from a junior high school and could not enter a teachers' college because of his poor vision. He left his hometown and struggled at physical labor in the city. Since he became completely blind, he has been making a living as a masseur in Taipei. He started to publish his poems in 1984. His collected poems Mei-li te tao-sui (Beautiful Ears of Rice), published in 1989, are "songs of the heart stitched together in braille by a blind man," and "the
footprints of the soul" of a poet who has lost the "window of his soul." The poet's greatest wish is that his works can help the aboriginal peoples, who are "facing overall discrimination, political and economic exploitation, and cultural crisis in the modern society of Taiwan," so that they will "find hope in desperation and joy in grievance."

As explained above, the call of aboriginal activism has awakened the Han Chinese to reflect on their various attitudes toward the aborigines in the past, and consequently we have Pei-ch'ing te shan-lin-T'ai wan shan-ti hsiao-shuo-hsüan (The Sad Mountains and Forests-Selected Stories of the Aborigines in Taiwan), compiled by the writer Wu Chin-fa and published in 1987. This anthology includes eleven short stories written by nine Han Chinese and aboriginal writers and represents the subject fairly well. As the editor confessed in the preface, this "is only the first act of my requital and atonement toward the aborigines in Taiwan." Furthermore in 1989, the same author compiled another anthology, Yüan chia shan-ti-lang-T'ai wan shan-ti san-wen-hsüan (Wishing to Marry an Aborigine-Selected Essays of the Aborigines in Taiwan), and atoned again on behalf of the ancestors of the Han Chinese for what they did in the past.

The appearance of aboriginal literature in the development of Taiwan literature has the following specific significance:

1. The life experience, thoughts, and feelings expressed in aboriginal literature are different from those found in the works by Han Chinese; hence aboriginal literature has expanded and enriched the content of Taiwan literature. As the aboriginal scholar Sun Ta-ch'uan has pointed out, Taiwan is surrounded by sea and the island has many mountains, and yet Taiwan literature seems to lack works expressing mountain and ocean experiences. In other words, due to the accumulation of traditional culture, the living environment of the Han Chinese seems to have long been removed from nature, and Taiwan writers, most of whom are ethnically Chinese, have concerned themselves mostly with the humanities, society, politics, and human relations. Therefore, both the hunter culture of the Bunun tribe and the ocean culture of the Yami tribe make up what has been missing in Taiwan literature, and thus Tsui-hou te lieh-jen (The Last Hunter) by T'o-pa-ssu Ta-ma-p'i-ma and Leng-hai ch'ing-shen-hai-yang ch'ao-sheng-che (Cold Sea and Deep Affection-An Ocean Pilgrim) by Hsia-man Lan-po-an are particularly rare and worth cherishing.

2. The aboriginal peoples are different from the Han Chinese in their way of thinking and feeling, and have made the vocabulary and syntactical rhythm of Chinese more varied. The Chinese works by aboriginal writers often show usages different from those characteristic of the Han Chinese, such as different word order, specialized words describing and differentiating fauna and flora or natural phenomena, as well as different conceptions of plot and narration. The differences reflect different natural landscapes and ways of thinking and infuse new vitality into the Chinese language, which some people believe is in danger of becoming ossified.
3. Aboriginal literature, with its unique cultural features, has expanded the range of time and space in Taiwan literature. The aboriginal peoples have lived in Taiwan for at least two thousand years. When we consider the history of Taiwan, we have to go beyond the four or five hundred years since the Han Chinese started to immigrate and trace it back to two thousand years ago, thus increasing the historical depth of Taiwan. Transversely, there are nine ethnic groups among the aboriginal peoples, each having its own language, customs, and cultural characteristics, and they add more ingredients to the diversity of the society in Taiwan. Although many social problems exist at present, understanding and respect between different ethnic groups and between Han Chinese and aborigines will help move Taiwan toward a harmonious society, and make Taiwanese culture even more comprehensive in content and features.

4. The aboriginal culture reflected in aboriginal literature demonstrates most eloquently the particularities of Taiwan literature that are different from Chinese literature in general. Aboriginal literature is to Taiwan literature what Taiwan literature is to Chinese literature, or Chinese literature is to worldwide literature in Chinese. Particularities give each literature its raison d’être, and each will strive to have an equal right for dialogue in the literatures of the world. Furthermore, by superior literary merits, each literature will not only embellish and enrich the literatures in Chinese worldwide, but become a part of all world literature to be appreciated by all human beings. Therefore the importance of aboriginal literature as part of the development of Taiwan literature, in the final analysis, has to be positively recognized.

Such being the case, this issue of Taiwan Literature focuses on the aboriginal literature of Taiwan with the expectation that it will enhance the reader’s understanding of the social background, cultural characteristics, and achievements of that literature. In selecting articles for translation we paid particular attention to representative works and variety. Regarding critiques, Yeh Shih-t’ao is a highly respected spokesman as a writer and critic, and his viewpoints will give the reader a better understanding of background and perspective in the development of aboriginal literature. On the other hand, we selected the pathetic call Please Listen to Our Voices by Po-er-ni-t’e representing the Yami tribe, whose accusation and earnest wish should make us seriously reexamine the social situation and cultural crisis of the aboriginal peoples. Regarding fiction, ”The Last Hunter” by T’o-pa-ssu is an award winning masterpiece and the most representative work to date, which no anthology of aboriginal literature can afford to miss. Even though this story has been translated into English by Carlos G. Tee (Chinese Pen, Winter 1996), we believe that our version, under the joint effort of the translator and the editors, offers additional merits in translation. The Street of Crying Sparrows by Wu Chin-fa, who has the deepest sympathy for the aborigines, is a very touching story. Incidentally, "crying sparrows" (yen yü) will allow Chinese readers to make an association with
such Chinese idioms as yen-yen yú-fei "deeply attached to each other [of husband and wife]" and yen-erh hsin-hun "conjugal bliss," thus implying the author's blessing at the end of the sad story. In addition to The Last Hunter, which expresses the mountain experience in the aboriginal people's daily life, we particularly selected The Call of the Flying Fish by Hsia-man Lan-po-an to represent the other side of their life, the ocean experience. Anthropology Professor Ch'en Ch'i-nan's essay Flying Fish and Automobiles reveals a similar life experience and way of thinking between aboriginal and technological man. Li-ke-la-le A-wu's narrative tells a story handed down by word of mouth; she speaks with the seldom heard voice of a female aboriginal writer. As for poetry, both Mo-na-neng and Wa-li-ssu Yu-kan are capable aboriginal poets and their poems express deep concern for the fate of their tribes. As for studies, we are particularly indebted to the translator's labor for being able to present this lengthy treatise on the oral tradition of aboriginal literature by Pa-su-ya Po-yi-che (or P'u Chung-ch'eng, as he is named in Chinese), with the hope that it will attract scholarly interest to do research in this area. The critic P'eng Jui-chin's evaluation of T'o-pa-ssu as an aboriginal writer with a sense of mission will help us understand better this outstanding writer and the style of his works.

Concerning the writing of aboriginal names and words, except for the names of the nine mountain tribes, which come from anthropological sources, all the aboriginal words in this issue come to us through the medium of Chinese characters. We have transcribed the aboriginal authors' names according to the Wade-Giles system. As for proper names and special terms that appear in the stories, we transcribe the Chinese characters in a manner that makes the resulting forms acceptable to an English speaker's eye and tongue. In a sense this procedure does an injustice to the aborigines of Taiwan, of which we are fully aware; but we also believe it is important for us and for them to make this material known to the general reader.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that Kuang-hua hua-pao (Sinorama Magazine) in Taiwan has published a series entitled Yü lu kung wu-T'ai-wan yüan-chu-min wen-hua (Dance with the Deer-Taiwan's Indigenous Culture), three volumes to date, in both Chinese and English with beautiful pictures and interesting articles. Surely it will give interested readers further understanding of the aboriginal culture in Taiwan. The contribution of the translators to this issue of Taiwan Literature is vital and instrumental to its publication as planned, and deserves our greatest appreciation.