

Identity, Multiplicity, and Resistance in Taiwanese Poetry

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In *The Completion of a Poem* (一首詩的完成, 1989), Yang Mu (楊牧, 1940–2020) presents eighteen letters to young adults, offering critical insights into the challenges facing Taiwanese poetry within the broader, contemporary literary landscape. Written during the 1980s—the final decade of martial law in Taiwan and a turbulent period marked by rapid economic growth, dynamic social, democratic, and artistic movements, and the dawn of multi-party democracy—these letters, though written in an accessible, conversational style, contain detailed guidance, enriched with carefully chosen examples, on the craft of poetry and how to become a poet.

Each letter is addressed to aspiring poets and examines fundamental aspects of poetry. Yang Mu touches on the definitions of poetry—its subject matter, form, and musicality—the role of the poet, and the nature of the creative process. Key issues such as the incorporation of foreign literature, the significance of modern literary movements, and the need for social engagement and historical consciousness are explored in depth. Yang Mu addresses a different topic in each letter, offering practical guidance on the intricacies of poetic craft in relation to each topic. An affectionate, nurturing tone throughout fosters a sense of intimacy and mentorship, rendering the correspondence not only instructive but also deeply personal.

In contrast to the subtlety and complication of his creative works, *The Completion of a Poem* adopts a more direct and explicit approach to the social and political concerns it addresses. The final letter, “Poetry and Truth,” summarizes these concerns. Reflecting on the relationship between poetry and society, Yang Mu acknowledges the prevalence of ugliness and atrocity in the world but insists that confronting these harsh realities does not require responding to curses with more curses, nor to howls with more howls. Although poetry has an obligation to confront the reality of disasters and conflicts, it must go beyond documenting the horrors of violence, bloodshed, and chaos. It “is not a movie projector” and “there is no reason to make it show the concrete details in full.”¹ Instead, poetry is an art form that distills reality into ideas through the interpretive framework that a poet employs to extract universal and accessible insights from lived experience. Poetry must therefore synthesize and organize the chaos and randomness of objective reality into

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thoughtful interpretations of an often-unattractive world. In this way, even when it deals with grim subject matter, poetry, through aesthetic refinement, achieves a beauty of its own.

These poetics are evident in Yang Mu's "Seven Turns of the Coast" (海岸七疊, 1980) and "Embark" (出發, 1980), which juxtapose the personal joys of fatherhood with the broader social unrest following the Formosa Incident, and in "Someone Asks Me about Justice and Righteousness" (有人問我公理和正義的問題, 1984), which explores the complex struggle to reconcile Chinese and Taiwanese identities and reflects Yang Mu's deep engagement with questions of national identity and social justice. These works illustrate not only how a poet can be inspired by and actively engaged with the sociopolitical realities of their time but also how the unbearable pressures of social upheaval can be transformed into powerful literary expressions that resonate with a broader audience. They show us how a socially conscious poet can capture the collective structure of emotion to communicate intellectual responses to societal turmoil, allowing his works to be read and appreciated in widely different contexts.

Yang Mu's social concerns permeate his entire body of work, demonstrating a consistent engagement with significant political and humanitarian crises. His writings excoriate the White Terror in Taiwan, express solidarity with the victims of the Vietnam War and the Bogside Massacre in Ireland, and critique the authoritarian excesses of Francisco Franco and the brutal Chinese crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests. This enduring commitment to addressing injustice wherever it occurs culminates in "The Lost Ring" (失落的指環, 2000), which reflects on the moral complexities of the Second Chechen War. In this work, Yang Mu envisions a young Chechen soldier stationed in the war-torn capital city of Grozny, engaged in combat against the Russian invasion. The fighter spends much of his time looking forward to a reunion with his sister, Heidi (referred to as H.D. in the poem), in the mountains after the completion of his current mission. When he encounters a lone Russian soldier, he shoots him down, only to discover his sister's ring on the man's finger and realize that she must be dead. In the final stanza, the grieving young man articulates a profound desire for Chechen independence, highlighting the intersection of personal loss and national struggle:

H.D., even if I were locked in a burning
crucible, *sans oreilles*, my concentration
would let me hear our suffering nation cry out for help
and let me respond, H.D. Heidi Ivana
H.D., even if they release their howling troops
to trample our country till the end of time
Grozny, *sans bouche*, my vocal chords would proclaim
independence and prophesy rebirth in spring²

The repetition of “H.D.” alongside the formal address “Heidi Ivana” personalizes the struggle, forging a connection between the individual experience of loss and the collective trauma endured by the Chechen people. Heidi now symbolizes the motherland. The imagery of being “locked in a burning crucible” conveys a state of intense suffering and transformation, suggesting that the speaker grapples with profound personal and national anguish. The imagery of “sans oreilles” (without ears) and “sans bouche” (without a mouth) implies a state of enforced silence, but the narrator’s “concentration” enables him to hear the anguished cries of his “suffering nation.” The acknowledgment of the “howling troops” highlights the relentless violence inflicted upon Chechnya, yet the narrator’s determination to proclaim “independence” signifies a resolute defiance against this oppression. Moreover, the concept of “rebirth in spring” evokes themes of renewal and regeneration, indicating that despite the overwhelming bleakness of the present moment, the soldier envisions a future where the nation will rise from the ashes of conflict. This fusion of personal and national identity culminates in a poignant statement about resilience, hope, and the enduring quest for freedom, thereby solidifying the poem’s emotional depth and political urgency.

“The Lost Ring” is based on a *New York Times* article on the Chechen War published on February 6, 2000, which recounts the harrowing ordeal of a woman who returned to war-torn Grozny to collect her personal belongings and encounters a Russian soldier who attempted to rob her. In a moment of desperation, she feigned death and, in the process, her ring slipped off her finger, but she survived. This foreign story was not Yang Mu’s only inspiration for the poem, however. His interpretation of it was deeply influenced by contemporaneous developments in Taiwan as well. In 2000, Taiwan held a presidential election, and before the election, China, anticipating that a pro-independence candidate would be elected, grew anxious. In December 1999, China signed a joint statement with Russia, reaffirming the two countries’ mutual resolve to combat separatists and “extremists” in defense of national unity and territorial integrity. In effect, China endorsed Russia’s war on Chechnya, and Russia, in turn, endorsed China’s stance on reunification with Taiwan and rejected the concept of a state-to-state relationship between China and Taiwan that had been proposed by Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), the outgoing Taiwanese president. In exchange, China recognized Chechnya as part of Russia, framing the conflict there as an internal Russian matter while also supporting Russia’s 1999 military crackdown on Chechen separatist forces. In the lead-up to Taiwan’s election, China escalated its rhetoric, issuing the white paper “One-China Policy and the Problem of Taiwan” (一個中國的原則與臺灣問題) and conducting a series of threatening military maneuvers, further heightening pre-election tensions.

Yang Mu’s poetics and his socially engaged writing, which seamlessly weave together the realities of political strife, personal reflection, and national identity, align closely with the central themes of this book. His ability to transform

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historical and contemporary crises into a literary form that resonates both locally and globally exemplifies the intersection of art and activism that we seek to explore. Through the lens of cultural, social, and gender multiplicity, his work reflects not only the complexities of Taiwanese identity and Taiwan's national aspirations but also broader, international struggles for justice, autonomy, and democracy and resistance against various forms of oppression. *Identity, Multiplicity, and Resistance in Taiwanese Poetry* therefore investigates how socially engaged Taiwanese poets have navigated shifting and often fraught cultural, political, and social landscapes, using poetry as a means of articulating resistance and asserting multifaceted identities. By examining their work, we hope to shed light on the ways in which Taiwanese poetry responds to internal and external pressures while contributing to global discourses on identity and resistance. The book underscores how literary production in Taiwan reflects the island's history of colonialism, its ongoing quest for self-determination, and the resilience of its diverse communities.

Many Taiwanese poets, especially in their rebellious spirit and commitment to engaging with social issues, share a similar ethos with Yang Mu. Like him, they reject simplistic portrayals of societal problems, choosing instead to confront the intricate complexities of modern life. Their poetry serves not only as a reflection of personal experience but also as a platform for critiquing political repression, challenging authority, and navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity. These poets are far from passive observers; they use their craft to voice dissent and demand urgent social change. Poetry, in this context, becomes a medium in which personal and collective struggles merge, transforming individual reflection into powerful social critique. Engaging with both local and global issues, these Taiwanese poets create a space for resistance while maintaining the aesthetic rigor that Yang Mu advocates, underscoring the role of poetry as a form of political engagement and artistic expression.

This volume delves into the poetry of rebellion in Taiwan, examining the diverse voices and identities that have shaped the genre. It revisits both historical and contemporary contributions, reassessing the work of individual poets and poetry movements, whether prominent or marginalized, voiced or silenced. The volume acknowledges the discontinuities, disruptions, and dislocations that have shaped Taiwanese poetic history. Through this lens, it positions itself at the intersection of Taiwanese, Mandarin, and Japanese linguistic traditions, exploring how poets have navigated questions of identity, resisted political hegemony, and grappled with the legacies of colonialism and nationalism, thus highlighting the cultural hybridity that defines Taiwanese poetry while also engaging with broader Sinophone and global literary contexts.

The rise of China has significantly reduced Taiwan's international space, often leading to the perception in the rest of the world that Taiwanese culture is merely a tributary or byproduct of China. This viewpoint renders Taiwan's distinctive contributions to modern Sinophone culture insignificant, overshadowed by the dominant narrative of China's rise. Such reductionist views not only diminish Taiwan's unique cultural heritage but also erase its multifaceted

history, which includes complex colonial legacies, Indigenous cultures, and a persistent drive for self-determination. Dismissing Taiwan's distinct cultural expressions or subsuming them under broader definitions of "Chinese culture" fails to capture the island's rich diversity and political realities. This erasure is especially harmful in the global literary landscape, where Taiwan's contributions remain undervalued or overlooked altogether.

By emphasizing Taiwan's own poetic traditions, this volume seeks to reclaim and celebrate the island's distinct voices. It deconstructs hegemonic and homogeneous notions of "Chineseness," revealing the intricate ways in which Taiwanese poets have navigated their identities under colonial rule, martial law, and contemporary political challenges. The island's linguistic diversity—ranging from Mandarin to Taiwanese to Indigenous languages—adds further complexity to its cultural profile, challenging monolithic views of the Sinocentric world. As well as highlighting this diversity and complexity, *Identity, Multiplicity, and Resistance in Taiwanese Poetry* explores multiple pathways to reposition Taiwan within the global literary landscape, emphasizing its role as an engaged and influential contributor actively shaping global cultural dialogues. This approach underscores Taiwan's literary and cultural autonomy, inviting readers to engage with its history on its own terms rather than through the lens of its geopolitical struggles with China.

Taiwanese poetry has often been marginalized in academic discourse, despite its significance and distinct features. When examined at all, it is frequently situated within the framework of Greater China. Christopher Lupke's edited volume, *New Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, for example, contextualizes Taiwanese poetry within Chinese literature, introducing three diasporic poets and two local poets from Taiwan alongside the works of approximately seven Chinese writers. There are several important monographs on Taiwanese poetry written in Mandarin. Chang Shuang-ying's (張雙英) *History of Modern Taiwanese Poetry* (二十世紀台灣新詩史, 2006) is a pioneering and ambitious work that documents the history of Taiwanese poetry, focusing on various debates and movements to provide a panoramic view of its development. In contrast, Cheng Hui-ju's (鄭慧如) *History of Modern Taiwanese Poetry* (台灣現代詩史, 2019) avoids focusing on debates and movements, instead emphasizing individual poets and their achievements. Acknowledging the impossibility of covering all poets, Cheng chooses to highlight key figures who represent different stages of Taiwanese poetry's evolution. Meng Fan (孟樊) and Yang Tsung-han's (楊宗翰) *A History of New Taiwanese Poetry* (台灣新詩史, 2022) shifts the focus back to the texts themselves rather than the sociopolitical entanglements between poets and their historical contexts.

The three Mandarin works challenge the conventional perception of poetry within the broader scope of literary history. Traditionally, in many literary histories, poetry has often been treated as secondary or supplemental, as though it were peripheral or less significant compared to novels. This novel-centric

focus overlooks the rich and complex contributions of poetry, reducing its role to that of a marginal genre rather than a vital and independent form of literary expression. Chang Shuang-ying, Cheng Hui-ju, and Meng Fan and Yang Tsung-han's works have addressed this imbalance by foregrounding Taiwanese poetry as central to the literary landscape. These scholars argue that poetry should not be viewed merely as an adjunct to prose but as a critical medium for capturing the sociopolitical, cultural, and linguistic evolutions of Taiwan. Through their comprehensive analyses, they elevate poetry from its traditionally marginalized position, illustrating how it reflects the nuanced and multifaceted development of Taiwanese identity, language, and modernist movements. However, while these works have advanced the recognition of poetry, they also come with limitations. Their focus on individual poets can sometimes result in a lack of attention to broader literary movements, sociopolitical contexts, or marginalized voices such as those of women, queer poets, and immigrants. This volume builds on these earlier efforts but seeks to offer a more expansive perspective, incorporating both the literary movements and the diverse voices that shape Taiwanese poetry. In doing so, it reframes Taiwanese poetry not as a supplemental literary form but as a dynamic and essential component of Taiwan's literary history.

Each of the twelve chapters of *Identity, Multiplicity, and Resistance in Taiwanese Poetry* offers a distinct perspective on these issues. The first part of the book, "Transcultural Intertextuality," comprises three chapters that examine how Japanophone poetry engages with and embodies transcultural elements through intertextual references. Yun-yuan Chen examines Le Moulin Society, arguing that its achievement lies in localizing Japanese and French literary styles while resisting Japanese colonial rule. Dean Anthony Brink, by contrast, analyzes Lung Ying-tsung's conflicted poetry, highlighting how Lung both embraced Japanese imperial rhetoric and sought opportunities for independent Taiwanese literary development. Rosa Lombardi discusses the debate between Chi Hsien and Chin Tzu-hao on the definition of "new poetry," exploring the tension between "horizontal transplantation" and "vertical inheritance," and how this tension has shaped modern Taiwanese poetry.

Part II, "Localization at Crossroads," highlights the diverse trajectories and pivotal decisions that have shaped the development of poetry in postwar Taiwan. Shu-wei Tu revisits two major debates from the 1970s: the "Modern Poetry Debate" of 1972 and the "Nativist Literature Debate" of 1977, arguing that these discussions shifted the literary landscape from poetic alienation to social engagement, leading to the rise of translingual poets and the Bamboo Hat Poetry Society. The localization movement since the 1970s has also led to the emergence of Indigenous poetry as well as Taiwanese Minnan and Hakka poetry. John Balcom examines how Taiwanese Minnan and Hakka poets use poetic forms to assert a distinct Taiwanese identity. Shu-ming Tung delves into Indigenous poetry, exploring themes of displacement, loss, and struggles with modernity while emphasizing resilience and the preservation

of Indigenous identity. Pei-yin Lin focuses on Hong Kong and Malaysian Chinese poets living in Taiwan, offering an alternative imagination of China and attachment to their homelands, which has diversified Taiwan's poetic landscape in recent years.

Part III, "Transformative Voices," consists of five chapters that explore poems of resistance and dissent in the aftermath of the White Terror, highlighting themes of protest and sociopolitical critique. Elaine Wong explores the development of concrete poetry in Taiwan, highlighting how poets have used it to engage with the materiality of language, particularly through the Chinese written script. Brian Skerratt analyzes the political poetry of Wu Sheng and Hung Hung, demonstrating how their works reflect on social injustice. Lin-chin Tsai explores female poetry as a form of "embodied knowledge," emphasizing how the work of female Taiwanese poets represents unique modes of knowledge formation, based on bodily experiences, that offer alternatives to patriarchal discourses on femininity. Wen-chi Li examines the concept of "difficulty" in queer works, identifying distinct queer poetics—provocative, humorous, anxious, and melancholic—that reflects personal struggles with identity, social rejection, and the challenges of documenting marginalized histories. Lastly, Yi-wei Lai investigates how social media has shaped the new generation of poets, enabling them to build tight social networks through which to express their social concerns.

This volume brings together scholars from the US, the UK, Italy, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, each contributing their perspective and expertise to create a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of Taiwanese poetry. As a remedy for the lack of English-language scholarship extending beyond mainland China, we offer a literary history that integrates cutting-edge research, addresses current debates, and identifies emerging trends in various fields of Taiwanese poetry and culture. Each chapter examines often overlooked primary sources to ensure that the book remains current and avoids replicating existing narratives. The focus on poets underrepresented in the English-speaking world, along with a focus on the linguistic richness of Taiwanese poetry, is central to the book's aims. Additionally, we highlight the experiences of minority groups such as the Hakka, Minnan, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ communities, offering insights into how personal and collective identities have evolved in the face of historical suppression. This exploration opens new avenues for understanding the intersection of poetry and identity. The voices of younger poets are also included, emphasizing their protests against social and political injustices and further showcasing the ongoing vitality and relevance of Taiwanese poetry in addressing contemporary issues.

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Notes

1. Yang Mu, *The Completion of a Poem: Letters to Yang Poets*, trans. Lisa Lai-ming Wong (London: Brill, 2017), 146.
2. Yang Mu, “The Lost Ring,” trans. Lisa Lai-ming Wong, in *Hawk of the Mind: Collected Poems Yang Mu*, ed. Michelle Yeh (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 144–45.