Zhu Tianwen

In Taiwan, the Zhu family is like the Bröntes of England known for their literary achievements. Zhu Tianyi, youngest of the three, is a fluent essayist. Zhu Tianxin, the second daughter, has been publishing essays and stories since high school. In her novella “The Old Capital”—echoing a novel of namesake by the Japanese Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari—a second-person narration of Taiwan’s colonial past and present unfolds. The most outspoken of the sisters, Zhu Tianxin never hesitates to confront political authority in her stories.

In contrast, Zhu Tianwen’s gesture is ever so gentle and expression, lyrical. She is not a prolific fiction writer. To date, she has published only two full-length novels and a small number of short narratives. Yet their stylistic exuberance and expressive intelligence more than make up for her modest output.

Taiwanese by birth, Zhu Tianwen shows a strong sense of attachment to her spiritual homeland, China, especially in her writings before the 1980s. The influence comes from two men: her father, Zhu Xining, and Hu Lancheng.The two Chinese men were both forced by political circumstances to leave China. They became close friends and neighbors in 1976.

Zhu Tianwen’s father was an important military writer from the 1960s to the 1980s. Hu Lancheng is remembered for his superb essays and ingenious readings of Chinese philosophy. He has been the target of harsh criticism for his collaboration with the puppet regime in Manchuria during World War II and even more so for his fraught relationship with Eileen Chang, the most celebrated Chinese woman writer in the twentieth century. Zhu Tianwen’s ways of thinking and writing have been heavily influenced by Hu Lancheng.

Supported by the two patriarchs, on March 3, 1977, the Zhu sisters and their friends founded a literary coterie called *Sansan* (literally, three and three). The name referred to both the Holy Trinity and the political treatise, *Three Principles of the People*,by Sun Yat-sen, who founded the Republic of China in 1912. The coterie eventually disbanded in the early 1980s, but the former members continued to exert their influence in the Taiwanese literary and cultural fields as editors, critics, and publishers.

Zhu’s stories from the 1990s onward are densely wrought with uncommon imageries and esoteric allusions. “Fin de Siècle Splendor” is about a retired runway model’s superb sense of smell. Like in the English language, there is only a scintilla of basic vocabularies for odors in Chinese. “Fin de Siècle Splendor” is redolent of compound words that fail, expectedly, to evoke any olfactory sensations but are, nonetheless, visually splendid. With this novella, Taiwanese critics begin to refer to her as an alchemist.

In her next novel, Zhu continues her modernist experiment with language. Appropriately named, *Notes of A Desolate Man* is comprised of random thoughts of a gay man who mourns the loss of his best friend to AIDS. Some critics consider the novel pretentious and narcissistic due to its frequent citations of abstruse passages from European philosophy. The novel came closest to a performance of coloratura, most literally, with two full pages of “periodic table of red and green elements.” It is a category of things used to specify the many shades of red and green. The repetitive mentioning of red and green along with their modifiers throughout—for instances, strawberry red, parrot red, mantis green, Paris green—is imprinting.

In *Witch Talks,* Zhu’s novel about the uneventful everyday life of an urban recluse, the random tone that was already evident in *The Notes of A Desolate Man* becomes all the more marked. In this 2007 novel that took her a decade to complete, even the consistent chanting of colors, if only to contrast the grave loss of a childhood friend, gives way to perpetual ennui, interrupted only by spasms of plot development. She compares *Witch Talk* and its twists and turnsto “The Garden of Forking Paths” by Jorge Luis Borges, who, some believe, marks the end of modernism and the beginning of postmodernism in Latin American literature. Additionally, she likens herself to a medium who sees through the simulacrum of reality with the power to summon the bygones and to name the unnamed with her own language. For Zhu, the calling of a novelist is to name new things, or to name things anew, cleverly playing off of earlier references to her writing as witchcraft.

*Witch Talks* concludes her three decade long endeavor, from 1977 to 2007, to overcome her anxiety over Hu’s influence. What links the above three thematically different stories is Zhu’s determination to showcase herself as an independent woman of letters.

Zhu Tianwen admires Hu Lancheng, Jorge Luis Borges, as much as she does the Taiwanese auteur Hou Hsiao-hsien. She has been working as Hou’s screenwriter since 1983 when the two collaborated on the film adaptation of her short story, “Growing Up” (Dir. Chen Kunhou). To name only two of their collaborations: *A City of Sadness* (1989), winner of the “Golden Lion” award in Venice and Hou’s only martial arts film, *The Hidden Heroine* (2013).

With a tinge of metaphysics, Zhu Tianwen’s writings are always concerned with the stream-of-consciousness process of the “handwork of writing.” The narratives of her screenplays, in contrast, are stripped of allusions to literary and philosophical context within which she has chosen to situate herself as a writer.

List of works:

‘Master Chai.’ (1994) Tr. Michelle Yeh. *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*. NY: Columbia UP, 89-100.

‘Fin de Siècle Splendor.’ (1995) Tr. Eva Hung. *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*. NY: Columbian UP, 444-59.

*Notes of a Desolate Man* (1999). Trs. Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-Chuan Lin. NY: Columbia UP.

References and further reading:

Berry, Michael. (2003) ‘Words and Images: A Conversation with Hou Hsiao-hsien and Chu T’ien-wen’, positions: east asia cultures critique 11 (3): 675-716. (Zhu and Hou discuss their collaboration.)

Chang, Sung-sheng Yvonne (1992). ‘Chu T’ien-wen and Taiwan’s Recent Cultural and Literary Trends’, *Modern Chinese Literature* 6 (1/2): 61-84. (A helpful discussion of literary modernism in Taiwan.)