Sandrine Marchand, *Sur le fil de la mémoire : littérature taiwanaise des années 1970-1990*

Lyon, Tigre de Papier, 2009, 390 pp.

Gwennaël Gaffric

Translator: N. Jayaram

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- 1 As the title indicates, Sandrine Marchand's book examines the fertile issue of memory in Taiwanese literature, focusing mainly on the period stretching from the early 1970s to the late 1990s. Exceptions are made, however, including discussion of some publications from the 1950s and 1960s (by Ch'en Ying-chen, Lin Hai-yin, and Chu Hsi-ning in particular), as well as a portion of Hou Hsiao-hsien's filmography.
- 2 In her introduction, Marchand presents an interesting history of Taiwanese literature, stressing the relevance of a study built around a process of memorial writing. Marchand's work is not confined to a unique conception of Memory but tries to demonstrate the intermeshing of several memorial modalities: memory and its relationship to a time (infancy, war, history), to other people (mothers, fathers, adults, American soldiers, the Japanese), to space (real or imagined native land, countryside, gardens), to sensations,

to language... Moreover, she has chosen to organise into thematic chapters the presentation of different facets of writings on memory, and often of forgetting, by creating a dialogue between different authors around a common theme.

- 3 Two authors take pride of place: Wang Wen-hsing and Ch'en Ying-chen. Marchand relies heavily on readings from them and refers to them in all chapters. She succeeds in getting to grips with the two authors in all their ambiguity in their relationship with memory, history, identity, and literature: Wang's ambiguity in his iconoclastic modernism, which clashes with his desire to act as inheritor of the ancient Chinese literary tradition, and that of Ch'en, stout champion of Chinese nationalism but at the same time deeply attached to Taiwan's historical experiences. The book analyses many other authors as well (Hwang Ch'un-ming, Li Ang, Ch'i Teng-sheng, Ch'i Chun, Chu T'ien-hsin, Kuo Song-fen...).
- 4 Marchand's aim is to present a range of forces, flows, and subjectivities that confront each other, raise questions, and reinvent themselves. She lays herself open to the charge of trying to be exhaustive. It should be stated at the outset that she has extensive knowledge of the rich trajectories of Taiwanese literature, and it would be unjust to accuse her of being unacquainted with major writers. Despite her clear choice of enlarging her field of investigation to a large number of writers, the process of selecting works inevitably raises the basic question of the literary canon, especially because of the great interest in the sensitive issue of memory. Which texts and authors are most worthy of discussion in order to best capture the process of "memorial reconstruction" in Taiwan's formidable literary magma of the years 1970 to 1990? A single event can often spawn multiple readings and interpretations: textual treatment of 28 February 1947, for instance, reveals the memorial distortions at work in Taiwanese literature; and while Marchand has discussed Kuo Song-fen, Hou Hsiao-hsien (cinema), and less directly Li Ang and Ch'en Ying-chen, she might have taken into consideration other writings on the event and different ideological positions such as those of Lin Shuang-pu, Lin Yao-de, Yeh Shih-tao, Cheng Ch'ing-wen, or Wuhe, to mention but a few. Admittedly the book has not sought to be an encyclopaedic inventory of the memorial issue in Taiwan in the years 1970-1990, but it would have been useful to touch on the recrudescence, which was significant then, of "big river fiction" (*dahe xiaoshuo*): that of Tung Fang-pai, Chung Chao-cheng, and Li Ch'iao among others. These authors – often identifying with Taiwanese nationalism – tried to reinvent through their historical novels the links between national and family memory. Also unmentioned are the nascent attempts at an "aboriginal" literature in Chinese (authors such as Monaneng and Walis Nokaan openly declare their writings to be part of an effort towards memorial exploration of "aboriginal" history). It is also regrettable that the author does not provide more detail on the extra-literary context of the period she studied: it would have been essential to explore other investment strategies in Taiwanese memory, especially historiography.
- 5 Marchand concludes by examining the complex issue of the language of expression chosen, but she does not consider all the literary production in "Taiwanese" language, ¹or in Hakka, which expanded greatly in the period reviewed, nor the writings of Wang Chen-ho, whose quest for a hybrid language (mixture of Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and English) was perhaps the most ambitious then. Nevertheless, Marchand is well aware that "in Taiwan, language – languages, one should say – has a special value in relation to Taiwanese identity and memory" (p. 308). While presenting Taiwanese

literature as “minor literature” (a view shared by other scholars such as Lee Yu-lin, Yang Kai-lin, and Carlos Rojas), in which “everything is political,” she rightly points to the importance of the memorial issue for authors who are openly political, such as Ch’en Ying-chen, or resolutely apolitical, such as Chu T’ien-hsin.

- 6 Marchand’s discussion benefits richly from numerous extracts taken from the works considered, as well as their French translations. Moreover, the bibliography is abundant, with a good presence of academic texts in Chinese. Marchand stands out with her inventive, often lyrical, writing and the original perspective she brings to bear on the texts, with reflections on generally unknown or neglected authors by those working on Taiwanese literature, such as Ernest Renan, Augustin Berque, and Édouard Glissant. It is regrettable that the book contains numerous errors (typos, dates, names, and occasional discrepancies between original texts and French translations).
- 7 To sum up, while the difficulty is that dealing with the notoriously selective issue of memory cannot escape a “canonical” choice, Marchand appears nevertheless to be aware of this obstacle. Almost at the outset, she quotes Borges: “To think is to forget differences, to generalise, to abstract” (p. 19).
- 8 Thus the book is – despite or perhaps because of the questions it raises – an essential contribution to Taiwan studies in France, and will stimulate further investigations into Taiwan’s rich literary legacy.

NOTES

1. What the author calls Taiwanese language is *Taiyu* (in Mandarin), or *Taigi* in Hoklo. It is related to *Minnan*, spoken in Fujian, and was the language of the majority in Taiwan until the KMT regime imposed Mandarin. It is estimated that 60 percent of the population still speaks the language.

AUTHORS

GWENNAËL GAFFRIC

Doctoral candidate at l’Institut d’études transtextuelles et transculturelles (IETT – Institute of Transtextual and Transcultural Studies) at the Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University, currently attached to the Institute of Taiwanese Literature at National Taiwan University.