
Gwennaël Gaffric
Translator: N. Jayaram
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-ch’en, Lin Hai-yin, and Chu Hsi-ning in particular), as well as a portion of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s filmography.

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 Nokan 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, or
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.

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).

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).

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.

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