

# Yu Guangzhong's Modernist Spirit: from *In Time of Cold War* to *Tug of War with Eternity*

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## 1 Introduction

The arrival of the Modernist Movement in Taiwan had a profound, widely felt impact. There isn't a single Taiwan writer who made a name for himself during the 1960s and 1970s who wasn't challenged and changed by modernism. After the 1977 debate over nativism, however, modernism became a target of criticism, even repudiation, and over time the tempestuous Taiwan modernist moment has increasingly been misconstrued and misunderstood. One by one, writers who had been infatuated with modernism broke with it completely, as if from a scourge. From the viewpoint of literary history, however, it is an incontrovertible fact that modernism brought something entirely new to Taiwan literature. Looking back and taking stock from the vantage point of the end of the century, we find that the Taiwan author who was most actively involved in the establishment and, more important, the transformation of modernism in Taiwan was, of course, Yu Guangzhong (Yu Kwang-chung) 余光中 (1928–2017). In this chapter, I undertake a reassessment of the role played by Yu in the Modernist Movement of the 1960s and offer an answer to the question as to whether Yu merely copied the Western modernist aesthetic or whether he changed modernism through his deliberate, critical reception of it. This question is not yet answered in extant Taiwan literary histories, and it deserves careful consideration.

## 2 Transforming Modernism

Yu Guangzhong was one of the first torchbearers of modernism in Taiwan during the post-Chinese Civil War era. Early in his career, influenced by the legacy of romanticism, including, in particular, the sensibility of the May Fourth-era Crescent Moon group, Yu completed the poetry collections *Zhouzi de beige* 舟子的悲歌 (Sailor's sad songs, 1952), *Lanse de yumao* 藍色的

羽毛 (A blue feather, 1954), *Zhongrushi* 鐘乳石 (Stalactites, 1960) and *Tianguo de yeshi* 天國的夜市 (Night market of heaven, 1969), among other titles. These four books are of great significance when placed in the context of the time when they were published. Historians of Taiwan poetry have hitherto placed too great an emphasis on the role played by Ji Xian 紀弦 (1913–2013) in promoting modern poetry in the 1950s and have overlooked the fact that during this decade, when anti-communist literature was reaching the point of its greatest flourishing, there was in Taiwan society also a latent romantic ideology. Yu Guangzhong, in his early poetry, was already demonstrating a rich imagination and great skill with metaphor; his early works also contain an intermingling of passionate feeling and cool analysis. Had Yu not been through this period of experimentation with romanticism, it would have been difficult for him to develop the modernist mind-set that eventually came to characterize his work. Yu was writing *Stalactites* just at the time that *Wenxue zazhi* 文學雜誌 (Literary review), under the guidance of editor-in-chief T. A. Hsia 夏濟安 (1916–1965), was beginning to introduce Western literature to Taiwan. Yu's nascent modernist tendencies are apparent in the four books mentioned above, which taken together thus give a very clear indication of the direction he would pursue in the years that followed. In the West, what we call modernism had its origins in the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the full development of capitalism. People in the urban middle class gradually came to the realization that they had been reduced to the status of cogs in the economic machinery, which gave rise in them to inexpressible feelings of anxiety and despair. Modernist literature endeavors to imagine how modern people might escape the social realities that constrain them; it aims to depict the flow of human consciousness; and it looks for the meaning of existence through an investigation of the self. This sort of modernism, however, underwent a significant transformation after it reached Taiwan, and Yu Guangzhong played a major role during every step of the process of Taiwan's remaking of modernism.

In the late 1950s, the political authorities continued their large-scale interference in the ordinary affairs of Taiwan society. If the hearts and minds of the Taiwan intelligentsia were troubled by anxiety and despair, it was certainly not because of capitalism but rather because of life under martial law. At a time when every aspect of life was influenced by the fight against communism, Yu Guangzhong looked to modernism for poetic inspiration, and this was, of course, also a form of passive resistance to the dominant ideology that prioritized resistance to communism. An examination of Yu's poems of that time, however, shows that he did not accept Western modernism totally and uncritically. He never had blind faith in every last feature of