Hsia Yü’s Translingual Transculturalism from *Memoranda* to *Pink Noise*

J.B. ROLLINS

**The Taiwanese poet** Hsia Yü (夏宇),

although increasingly anthologized in America, is far better known in Asia – especially Taiwan, Mainland China, and Japan. Here she enjoys a cult-like following, owing in large part to her reputation as a sinophone poet with a global view, a quality still rare in Greater China or the Chinese diaspora, where most poets writing in Chinese remain relatively insular culturally. She has also developed a reputation for being unpredictably adventurous and creative, and for possessing a seemingly unlimited capacity for poetic experimentation. This adventurism forms the foundation for a translingual, transcultural poetry that goes well beyond the mixing of languages found in more conventional multilingual, polyglot poetry to include the invention of new languages unique to the poet herself, as well as forms of language poetry in which Chinese demonstrates linguistic elements never before exhibited. These characteristics of her work have been received with great enthusiasm by readers and scholars looking for sinophone writers who seem more ‘modern’ or contemporary, a longing that has grown in intensity over the past one hundred years, beginning with the May Fourth Movement.²

---

¹ Also romanized as “Xia Yü” and “Xiayu.” Steve Bradbury, in an email exchange with J.B. Rollins (28 December 2010), notes that the poet herself prefers the spelling of her name with the umlaut. It is not uncommon, however, to see it omitted in scholarly studies as well as popular reviews or stories about her. Throughout this article, the name Hsia Yü is given in its entirety, rather than merely “Hsia,” because it is the poet’s pen name and because doing so conforms to general Chinese usage.

² The May Fourth Movement, which took place in Mainland China from 1915 to
The wide distribution of Hsia Yü’s work and her growing fame have inspired many scholarly studies in both Chinese and English that attempt to place her work in an international literary framework such as feminism or postmodernism. In some cases, these studies have engaged in debate over whether her writing qualifies, in fact, as poetry. Oddly, however, despite the recent blossoming of Chinese transculturalist literature, Hsia Yü has yet to be studied from a transculturalist or translingualist perspective, despite receiving highly enthusiastic notice for her cosmopolitanism and internationalism. Fred Moramorco, writing in *Poetry International*, declares that Hsia Yü’s poems seem to want to devour the world as they record it. Hers is a rich, sensual, and absolutely international sensibility that is as much at home writing about Salsa and Che Guevara as it is writing about the Qing Dynasty or Old Cathay.

Ou-fan Lee “take[s] heart in her accomplishments which give the much misused term ‘world poetry’ a cultural distinctiveness and an individual imprint.”

---

1921, is sometimes referred to as the New Culture Movement. Extremely wide-ranging in its reaction to Western and Japanese imperialism, for the purposes of this essay, it is noteworthy that it had enormous influence on the modernization of Chinese language and the arts.


4 Chinese transculturalist literature is a post-May Fourth Movement genre that attempts to counter isolationist tendencies within Chinese culture by advocating universalist attitudes towards humanity in general, while emphasizing human rights. It employs, as expressed by Sy Ren Quah, “intracultural dialogue as a challenge to cultural hegemony”; *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Theatre* (Honolulu: U of Hawai‘i P, 2004): 16. 2000 Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian has been its most influential recent practitioner in dramatic works such as *The Bus Stop* (1984), *Wild Man* (1985), and *The Other Shore* (1986).
