

Aboriginal literature and the Rise of the Taiwanese New Cultural/ Historical
Imaginary in Contemporary Taiwan

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Abstract

This study examines the production of aboriginal literature in contemporary Taiwan in the context of the so-called “ocean cultural imaginary.” It explores the interconnection between Taiwan Aboriginal Cultural Renaissance and the rise of the new Taiwanese Cultural imaginary since the 1990s through an analysis of Syaman Rapongan’s celebrated “sea writing.” Syaman Rapongan, a prominent aboriginal writer who rose to fame in the late 1990s at a time when the new discourse of Taiwan as “a country of the ocean” began to emerge, has drawn critical attention not simply because of his aboriginal identity but because of his ethnographic portrayal of his tribal culture on a small island. His writing exemplifies how literary issues are implicated in broader cultural contexts. I will examine how Rapongan’s aboriginal discourse intersects with the new cultural discourse in complex ways. In the process, I will try to show that there is an intricate and sly intertwining of covert operation of Japanese colonial legacy and overt celebration of aboriginal cultural heritages in the discursive formation of the new cultural imaginary. The paper ends with a discussion of some crucial issues for a critical understanding of aboriginal literary writings in Taiwan. As the anti-independence KMT party won the 2008 presidential election, it is unlikely that the development of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary will continue to build on its current momentum. It would be interesting to see what new turns Taiwan aboriginal literature will take with the setback, of not the decline, of the “new” Taiwanese cultural imaginary.

The Aboriginal Cultural Renaissance in the Context of the New Taiwanese Cultural and Historical Imaginary

In a recent interview with the aboriginal writer Syaman Rapongan, the aboriginal scholar Sun Da-chun defines Rapongan’s writing as “ocean literature” and claims that it makes a great contribution to the discourse of “Ocean Taiwan” that has been gaining currency in Taiwan since the mid-1990s:

I would like to hear more about the connection between your experiences in the sea and your creative writing after your return to the *Tao* tribe [on the Orchid Island]. Taiwan is indeed a very strange place. It is surrounded by the ocean. And now it is said that Taiwan is a country of the ocean. But there is almost

nothing related to the ocean in Taiwan's literature or everyday life. I think that you have very good reason to be proud of yourself as your early work *Smitten with the Ruthless Sea* (Lenghai qingshen) and your recent writings, such as *Recollections of the Waves* (Hailang de Jiye) make remarkable contributions to Taiwan's "ocean literature" and to Taiwan's return to "geographical imagination of the ocean." (Sun Da-chuan and Syaman Rapongan 2005, 37)¹

Several important messages can be gathered from this short passage. First of all, Syaman Rapongan is identified as a writer of "ocean literature" and his creative works are illustrative of this type of writing in contemporary Taiwan. Secondly, his creative writing is built upon his experiences in the sea, which apparently have something to do with his tribal culture. Thirdly, there seem to be attempts in Taiwan to re-conceptualize Taiwan as "a country of the ocean." Fourthly, the importance of Syaman Rapongan's writing, apart from its literary achievements, can be understood in the context of "ocean discourse" which is gaining currency in Taiwan.

Syaman Rapongan made his name as an aboriginal Chinese-language writer with the publication of a collection of prose essays—*Smitten with the Ruthless Sea*—in 1998. Since then, he has won several important literary awards in Taiwan, including the "Wu Zhuo-liu Literary Award" in 1999 and the "Wu Lu-qin Prose Award" in 2006. He is not simply identified as an aboriginal writer but also hailed as "a writer of the sea." There are also other aboriginal writers who have received critical attention from literary critics in Taiwan. To name a few: Topas Tamapima, Walis Norgan, Liglave A wu, Yaronglong Sakinu. But none of these aboriginal writers' works have been interpreted as anything other than "aboriginal writing." The celebration of Rapongan as "a writer of the sea" points to his participation in a context of cultural discourse other than that of multiculturalism. It is noteworthy that *Smitten with the Ruthless Sea*, now commonly recognized as one of the most representative works of Taiwan's "ocean literature," was published in 1998. It came out just at a time when a new Taiwanese cultural imaginary was beginning to emerge. This new cultural imaginary re-conceptualizes Taiwan as "a country of the ocean" vis-à-vis China--a country of the vast land. In this new cultural discourse, the notion of "ocean" is taken to signify open-endedness and an extrovert attitude toward cultural interchanges whereas land denotes an introvert cultural imagination that stresses agrarian rooted-ness. To pit Taiwanese culture against Chinese culture in this way is to suggest that Taiwan and China share few similarities. It therefore aims at laying the groundwork of a cultural discursive formulation of Taiwan as a country different from China. Although it is debatable whether the theoretical framework that sets up the

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dichotomy between Taiwan and China is fully justified², the characterization of Taiwan as a “country of the ocean” certainly signifies the emergence of a new Taiwanese cultural imaginary at the turn of the century.

The discourse first surfaced in the presidential campaign in 1996 when the Democratic Progressive Party candidates Peng Ming-min and Hsieh Chang-ting coined the term “country of the ocean” to designate Taiwan (http://www.wretch.cc/blog/FrankCTHsieh&article_id=6317268). From then on, the notion quickly gained currency. It has been propagated widely in cultural and literary discourses (Dong-nien 1998, Dai Bao-qun 2003, Jiang 2004, Shi Zheng-feng). The most impressive attempt to consolidate this new cultural imaginary, however, is a series of maps of Taiwan issued by the Council for Cultural Affairs in the early twenty first century-- “Looking at Taiwan from Another Angle” (換個角度看台灣). In contrast to the standard map of Taiwan in currency after 1945, which implicitly stresses Taiwan’s close tie to China, this series positions Taiwan as an island in the ocean. It stresses its relation to Polynesian islands and East Asian countries rather than representing it as simply “a small potato” next to mainland China.(figure 1.~4) On all these maps are printed these words: “With clues provided by these maps, we may explore the position and the role of Taiwan. These maps represent the subjectivity (主體性) and the autonomy (自主性) of Taiwan. They give us an opportunity to know our homeland and envision our future.” What is so striking about this series of maps is not simply that the maps combine image and text, and therefore prescribe a certain way of looking at them. In a curious sense, these maps are also “meta-maps” which not only call attention to the ideological function of maps but also point to their own active participation in the ideological struggles in map-drawings.

One of the maps called “Our East Asian neighbors” places Taiwan in relation to other East Asian countries. Another one called “Our Austronesian Friends” maps Taiwan as implicated in a vast network of the Austronesian language family. And there is another one that shows Taiwan at the center of expanding concentric circles. No Taiwanese map-reader would fail to notice the provocative gesture of these maps. They certainly pit themselves against the map of Taiwan as nestled closely next to China-- a map that most inhabitants of Taiwan have been used to see over the past fifty years (figure 5). The maps challenge, question, and expose the relationship between maps and ideology subjection.

In addition to the very unusual angles that re-configure Taiwan, a feature shared by all these maps is the image of the vast ocean that surrounds Taiwan. If the more traditional map of Taiwan implicitly stresses Taiwan’s close relationship to China, these maps are meant to tell a different story. One map in the series gives us some

² Dirlik’s comments on the Wall and Silk road

clues. This map pictures Taiwan as a whale in the ocean (figure 6). Traditionally, “sweet potato” has been a popular symbol of Taiwan and the Taiwanese. The substitution of whale for sweet potato as the symbol of Taiwan signifies the displacement of “land” by “ocean” in Taiwan’s new cultural imaginary. As the critic Dai Bao-qun remarks: “Taiwan is not a small sweet potato on the south-east margin of Chinese territory. It is, rather, a big whale swimming freely in the East Pacific Ocean” (Dai 2003). That the National Taiwan Literature Museum has adopted the image of the whale as its logo testifies to the prevalence of this new discourse.

But it should be noted here that the new cultural imaginary is not an ingenious invention of the DPP party. The discourse is marked by two features: de-Sinicization and the binary opposition of Taiwan/ocean vs. China/land. As such, the discourse is reminiscent of Japanese discourse of civilization in Meiji Japan (Schad-Seifert 2003). In Meiji intellectuals’ critical reflection on civilizations, Chinese cultural influence was seen as detrimental to the formation of Japan as a modern society (Schad-Seifert 2003, 51). It was argued that de-Sinicization was essential to the re-construction of the Japanese identity (Lin 2002, 52-3). The designation of the Chinese civilization as characterized by continental stability, in contrast to the “oceanic” civilization of the West, was also prevalent in Japanese critical theorization of world civilizations at that time (Clammer 2001, 49). Thus, arguably, the Japanese colonial legacy plays a key role in the shaping of the discourse of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary. It is interesting to note that in the subsequent development of the new cultural imaginary discourse, the concept of Taiwan as “a country of the ocean” frequently appears in propaganda discourses from politically opposed camps ([October 4, 2007, <http://www.npf.org.tw/particle-3064-2.html>, accessed December 31, 2007](#)). The only difference is that pro-KMT propaganda substitutes a Chinese legacy for the Japanese colonial legacy, tracing the Taiwanese “oceanic” culture to the adventurous voyages (1405-1433) of Zheng He—a Chinese eunuch in the Ming dynasty who undertook seven naval expeditions to southeast Asia and to the east coast of Africa (<http://www.chiculture.net/0115/html/a01/0115a01.html>).

The implicit competition of Japanese and Chinese legacies in the shaping of the Taiwanese new cultural imaginary reveals that the discourse of new cultural imaginary is tied up with the discourse of historical imaginary. In their attempts to re-define Taiwan through a re-orientation of geographical and historical imagination, the de-Sinicization camp highlights, in addition to the implicit exploitation of the Japanese legacy, the rich aboriginal heritages in the formation of Taiwanese society and culture. The map “Our Austronesian Friends” issued by The Cultural Affairs Council clearly delivers this message. This map calls the map observer’s attention to the connection between Taiwan and Austronesian societies. It has been argued that

most Taiwanese people are descendants of Austronesian-speaking tribes (Li Xiao-feng and Liu Feng-song 1994,25; Stainton 1999, 41). The history of Taiwan, by implication, begins with Austronesian oceanic culture rather than with Chinese civilization (Li and Liu 1994, 3). The re-discovery and reclaiming of Austronesian cultural heritages in Taiwan are therefore essential to the reconstruction of the Taiwanese identity and historical narrative (Li and Liu 1994, 25).

The identification of Taiwan aboriginal peoples as Austronesian peoples first appeared in the discourse of Japanese anthropologists and Westerns who probably did not share one another's findings (Stainton 1999, 29-32; Torii Ryuzo 1996, Miyamoto Nobuto 1992).³ Given the pervasive influence of *Four-Hundred-Year History of the Taiwanese People* originally written in Japanese and first published in Tokyo in 1962 by the pro-independence doyen Shih Ming on the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary, it is very likely that it was the Japanese anthropologist findings, strongly endorsed by Shih Ming (Stainton 1999, 32), that inspired the proponents of the new cultural discourse. If Japanese anthropologists' work on colonial Taiwan can be regarded as part of Taiwan's colonial legacy, the intervention of Japanese colonial legacy in contemporary Taiwan identity politics creates a situation in which the aboriginal identity comes to assume a drastically new significance. Here we find a very tricky dislocation of the meaning of aboriginal identity, making possible the double positioning of the aboriginal as the quintessentially Taiwanese self *as well as* the minoritarian other.

When the Taiwanese aboriginal movement began in 1983 as an ethnic minority movement, it was couched mainly in multiculturalist terms (Xie 1987, 156, Wei 2007, 16-22). The aboriginal was seen to signify the cultural other who should be respected in a democratic, multiculturalist society. The recent development of cultural discourse about aboriginal culture, however, suggests a notion of the aboriginal as part of the self. This leads to an interesting interplay of "the aboriginal as the other" and "the aboriginal in the self" in contemporary Taiwanese cultural imaginary discourse. The split of the aboriginal as both a sign of the other and a sign of the Taiwanese self marks the site of aboriginal inscription as a site of ambivalence. The following analysis will try to demonstrate how this argument operates through the reading of Syaman Rapongan's celebrated "sea writing."

Features of aboriginal Chinese-language literature in Taiwan

³ These early proponents who identified Taiwan aborigines as belonging to the Austronesian family include the Dutch Indologist Hendrik Kern, Canadian missionary George Leslie Mackay, Anthropologist Janet Montgomery McGovern, Japanese anthropologists Mabuchi Toichi and Miyamoto Nobuto. See Michael Stainton, "The Politics of Taiwan Aboriginal Origins," in *Taiwan: A New History*, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999, pp.29-32.

Arguably, aboriginal Chinese-language literature (yuanzhumin hanyu wenxue) in Taiwan began to develop in the mid-1980s as an offshoot of the aboriginal movement (Sun 2003a, 5, Basuya Boyijernu 1999, 13). As a special grouping of literary writings by aboriginal writers,⁴ it is usually marked by some specific features. First of all, the use of the autobiographical “I”—a gesture of affirming the subject position of the aboriginal writer (Sun 2003 b, 32-3). The aboriginal scholar Sun Da-chuan points out that historically aborigines have been forced into the position of “object” in the discourse of non-aboriginal authors. Historical documents that register the so-called “conquest of barbarians” and anthropological studies of aboriginal societies are particularly illustrative of this type of discourse. As a consequence, aborigines are usually objectified as an abstract other (Sun 2003b, 27). It is therefore important for an aboriginal writer to speak from the position of the first person point of view so as to reclaim the aborigine’s status as a real human being (Sun 2003b, 35).⁵ This emphasis on the use of autobiographical “I” in writing may explain why prose essays constitute the largest corpus of aboriginal Chinese-language creative writings. In contrast to fiction and poetry, which call attention to the literary text as a fabricated artifact, prose essays, in the Chinese literary tradition, operate with an appeal to the notion of “authenticity” (Zhang Fang, 1996, 8; Ye Weilien, 1985, 124). This peculiar appeal to the notion of authenticity in aboriginal prose writing implicitly positions the autobiographical “I” as a scribe and guardian of his tribal culture, who faithfully documents tribal knowledge so as to keep it alive. At the same time, the autobiographical “I” acts as a cultural translator, mediating between his tribal culture and the dominant Chinese culture. Since the aboriginal writer often poses as a translator and tribal spokesperson, s/he is expected to possess authentic knowledge of his/her tribal culture. The status of the aboriginal writer therefore implicitly hinges on how well s/he masters aboriginal cultural knowledge. In other words, to be “recognized” as an aboriginal writer and to lay claim to that title, an aboriginal writer needs to demonstrate in writing a strong sense of “cultural competence.” Without the writer’s display of such competence, the sign of aboriginal otherness can not possibly thrive in aboriginal writing, neither can it work to challenge the domination of Chinese culture. Hence, one often finds in some aboriginal writing a tendency to deploy rich ethnographic details. Syaman Rapongnan is a case in point. More than any other aboriginal writer in Taiwan, he made his name writing about his tribal experience and culture. I will return to the significance of Syaman’s deliberate (dis)play of ethnographic details in his “creative” writing later.

To highlight the act of writing as a practice of cultural translation, an aboriginal

⁴ Definition of “aborigine”

⁵ Minority discourse

writer often deploys aboriginal words in the construction of his/her Chinese literary text. It is important to note that very few aboriginal writers write exclusively in their own tribal languages. This is not simply because aboriginal languages have no written inscription systems. Another reason is that writing in one's own tribal language, even if it could be done, would strictly limit the readership which might constitute no more than a few hundred in some cases. If one of the important functions of aboriginal literature is to build up a sense of collective aboriginal consciousness, writing in one's own tribal language (mainly in romanization in current practices) would hardly help aborigines divided by different tribal languages to communicate with one another (Sun 2003b, 22-3). Under such circumstances, the use of the Chinese language as the language for literary creation is not so much a surrender to the power of the dominant group as what Michel de Certeau calls a tactic—guileful ruse that poaches on someone else's place and turns it for one's own use (1984, xix-xxi).

However, to challenge the hegemonic domination of the Chinese language, it is important to stress the un-assimilable aboriginal otherness even if the writer is forced to use the Chinese language in writing (Walis 2003, Fu 2003). Many writers therefore resort to the tactical use of aboriginal words in romanization to interrupt the smooth flow of the Chinese language in the construction of a literary text. The persistent appearance of aboriginal words in a Chinese-language text underscores the inerasable traces of aboriginal otherness. This peculiar layout of aboriginal literary writing not only throws into relief the act of writing as an act of translation but also points to its failure as an adequate translation. In other words, the presence of aboriginal words in a Chinese language text foregrounds their own untranslatability. Thus, paradoxically, it is through this peculiar confessional gesture of its own limitation as a translation transaction that aboriginal writing implicitly challenges the assimilating power of the Chinese culture and its dominant signifying system.

All these features of aboriginal literature are found in the works of Syaman Rapongnan. He works mainly with the prose genre. Speaking almost always through the first person point of view, Syaman Rapongnan makes no distinction between the autobiographical "I" in his writing and Syaman Rapongnan as a person in real life. Moreover, his writing is saturated with what ethnographers call "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973, 7). Literal translations of *Tao* expressions are often followed by ethnographical explanations which elucidate the meanings of the expressions within the *Tao* culture. For example, in "Life in Waves," Syaman points out that a *Tao* man who can neither swim nor fish is called "a man being suffocated by the smoke of his neighbors," a specific *Tao* figure of speech, meaning that the man enjoys no smell of fish being cooked at home but only that coming from his neighbors' houses. This term, the autobiographical "I" explains, is pejorative in *Tao*'s cultural expression. It implies

that “the man survives on the body heat of his women rather than the fish he harvests in the sea” (p. 45). Highlighting local knowledge and expressions specific to the tribe of *Tao*, ethnographic descriptions of this kind mark the writer as a translator and his writing as imparting a body of knowledge foreign to the readers. These ethnographically flavored descriptions or terms not only underscore the distance between the (Chinese) reader and the world of the writer, but also stress the role of the writer Syaman as both a scribe and a translator of his tribal culture (Chen Zhi-fan 2006, 50-53).

Insofar as an aboriginal writer uses various tactics to insinuate a sense of otherness into his/her Chinese-language texts, a binary opposition between the aboriginal writer’s tribal culture and the Chinese culture is set into play. The writer often takes great pains to suggest that the gap between the aboriginal culture and the Chinese culture is unbridgeable, for the “aboriginality” of the text (and the writer) is defined by its visible separation from the dominant Chinese culture. However, as I pointed out in the foregoing discussion, in contemporary Taiwanese cultural context “the aboriginal” is not simply a sign of “otherness.” “The aboriginal” also stands for the quintessentially Taiwanese, and hence what constitutes “the Taiwanese self,” particularly in the construction of the new Taiwanese cultural discourse. The oscillation of the aboriginal sign between two almost irreconcilable identity positions reveals the complexity of the relationship between aboriginal discourse and the dominant Taiwanese cultural discourse. Syaman’s writing is remarkably helpful in elucidating this double, ambivalent inscription of “the aboriginal,” which enacts a complicated interplay of “the self” and “the other” in contemporary Taiwanese cultural imaginary. How this intriguing blurring of the differentiation of the aboriginal other from the Taiwanese self operates will be illustrated in the following through an examination of Syaman’s thematic dramatization of “home-coming” in his writing.

The (Re)turn to Aboriginal Roots

As many critics have pointed out, Syaman Rapongan’s writing basically portrays his journey home (Dong 2003, Yang 2006). Insofar as Syaman makes the dramatization of the return to his tribal home the core of his writing, he is representative of a group of aboriginal intellectuals who chose to go home to practice their literary writings in the heyday of the aboriginal movement. In an early discussion of the definition of “aboriginal literature,” the aboriginal scholar Sun Da-chuan sees tribal experiences as essential to an aboriginal writer’s writing (Sun 2003b, 39). The urge for the writers to return to their tribal homes and to build their writings on tribal experiences was strongly upheld in the mid-1980s, when the aboriginal movement was gaining momentum. Many aboriginal activists argued that

in order to re-claim their aboriginal identities, aborigines had to reconnect themselves with their tribal cultures. In answer to this call, many aboriginal writers returned to their tribal homes located far away from big cities in Taiwan (Guan 1997, 6; Wei 2003, 101-4; Wang 2003, 153-7). Rapongan was one of them. His celebrated work *Smitten with the Ruthless Sea* in fact thematizes in various ways his journey home and his consequent struggle to re-claim his tribal status as a *Tao* man through the gradual mastery of traditional *Tao* skills, such as spear fishing, boat-making, diving, and story-telling. In his prose essays, he depicts how he tries to shake off the stigma of Sinicization and to prove himself a *Tao* man through the conscious re-immersion in his tribal culture and knowledge.

It is interesting to note that Syaman Rapongan's "home-coming" theme finds resonance in many Native American novels and thus points to a wider context of aboriginal/native writing worthy of further comparativist pursuits. In his study of Native American literature, William Bevis finds that novels in the Native American literature tradition are often structured differently from those in the white American tradition. Novels in the white American tradition often adopt plots which are " 'eccentric,' centrifugal, diverging, expanding" (582). The individuality and freedom of the protagonist are usually the main concerns. In contrast, Native American novels tend to be structured by what he calls "homing" plots: "In Native American novels, coming home, staying put, contracting, even what we call 'regressing' to a place, a past where one has been before, is not only the primary story, it is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good" (582). These remarks seem also applicable to the works by Syaman Rapongan and many other aboriginal writers in Taiwan. The prominent role of the home-coming theme in indigenous literature in these very different cultural contexts certainly invites comparative studies. But as the adventure in that direction is far beyond the scope of this paper and strays away from the main concern of our present investigation, I shall limit my discussion to the cultural and political significance of the homing plot in the Taiwanese context for the moment.

Syaman Rapongan's writing dramatizes the process of his journey home—to unlearn his Chinese education and to "become" a *Tao* man again. The preface to the English translation of his prose essay "Smitten with the Ruthless Sea," also a piece of prose essay which reveals all the characteristics of his writing, is an illustrative example. It is worth quoting at length the text in order to demonstrate the formal as well as the thematic features of Syaman's works:

I remembered that when I settled down at my hometown and led a traditional life, I rowed the crafting boat father made for me to angle the dolphin fish and that was also my maiden voyage with the tribal people. I was lucky to catch one. Father sat by me and taught me how to dissect it. At that

time, I realized the significance of the flying fish and the dolphin fish, or the ritual fish, to the Tao in their generation; to put it precisely, it was their core religious belief. Therefore, father asked me to tell the soul of the big fish (2006, i).⁶

Particularly noteworthy here is the “novice” status of the autobiographical “I” in the narrative. Although a *Tao* himself, the autobiographical “I” is apparently alienated from his tribal culture and needs to acquire traditional *Tao* skills. Under the instruction of his father, he learns how to catch fish. He makes his first voyage only after he returns home after a long period of absence. And apparently he has not learned how to make a boat in the traditional *Tao* way yet. A lot of the *Tao* cultural experiences and knowledge are new to the autobiographical “I” in the writing. The father is represented here as a teacher, trying to initiate his son into the cosmic order of the *Tao* culture. He is almost without exception represented in Syaman’s writing as the model to be emulated.

The description quoted above is followed by a Chinese translation of the father’s chant in the *Tao* language (i-ii):

I hope you can visit my home every year
(mangdei ka so awawan a zomagpit do inawurud namen)
This is the heritage from our forebears
(ta niyapu namen do inapu namen ya)
This is the ceremony to bless you and us safe and sound
(ka tohyutoyun namen jimo mo katwan)
You shall generously assist me in saving my strength
(macyazonos ka do oyowyat ko)
And then lie on fine level ground
(kazasa mo do kapiyapyan)
Because I will plow the waves to sail to Petite Orchid Island with your soul
(ta ipanavusavuk ko imo Jimagawud)

The layout of the father’s chanting in romanized form alongside the Chinese version speaks tellingly of Syaman’s role as a translator of his tribal culture. He mediates between his tribal culture and the Chinese readers to whom the *Tao* language, as the layout implies, is a foreign language. Also noteworthy is the stress on the importance of keeping tribal customs and ceremonies alive through continuous practices. In addition, the chant gives us a glimpse of the use of “sea vocabulary” in the peculiar figurative expressions of the *Tao* culture.

The significance of the deployment of *Tao* “sea vocabulary” in Syaman

⁶ Translation and oceanic discourse....

Rapongan's writing can not be stressed too much. In fact, the writer repeatedly calls attention to the use of "sea vocabulary" in his writing in various interviews. In a recent interview, he reiterates the cultural specifics of the *Tao* language which finds expression in his writing:

The phrases the *Tao* elders use are highly metaphorical, which has had a great impact on my writing. For example, to say 'the sun of an old man is low' means he is aged or dying; the stars are 'the eyes of the sky;' 'men being looked down upon by the wind' refers to lazy men resting on the porch," he says. "*Such phrases don't exist in Chinese, because these two different cultures are of two different cognitive worlds.*"

(<http://taiwanreview.nat.gov.tw/ct.asp?CtNode=119&xItem=23752>, accessed Feb, 4, 2008, italics added)

As the interviewer Zoe Cheng points out: "Getting in touch with everything in *Tao* traditional culture--the ocean, diving, fishing, chopping logs for crafting boats, flying-fish ceremonies, or songs--describes the nature of Syaman Rapongan's life." Given the fact that the *Tao* culture is bound up with the sea, it is no surprise that Syaman Rapongan should fully exploit the *Tao* sea-drenched vocabulary. In terms of content, he not only tells stories about his tribe and his struggle to become a *Tao* man again, but also tries to pass on the stories he has learned from the older generations. In addition to the use of the home-coming theme, Syaman works deliberately with culturally specific *Tao* expressions and oral tradition to throw into relief aboriginal cultural otherness in a Chinese-language text. Thus, in both its form and content, Syaman's writing embodies Syaman's break away from Sinocentric culture to embark on his journey home.

Paradoxically, it is the "homing" movement in his writing that turns Syaman into a figure of ambivalence and his writing a site of split cultural imaginary. For, in spite of Syaman's self-positioning as a guardian and translator of his tribal culture, the pronounced thematic emphasis on his struggle to *become a Tao* man suggests that he is *not* a *Tao* man *yet*. The fact that he has to re-claim his *Tao* identity through the re-learning of all sorts of *Tao* traditional skills and knowledge already speaks implicitly of his undeniable alienation from his tribal culture. In other words, the "novice" status of the autobiographical "I" calls into question his claim to be a *Tao* aborigine, an *other* whose aboriginality pits him against the dominant Chinese culture. Indeed, as he makes it a point to show how hard he struggles to "shake off the stigma of Sinicization," the image of Syaman is one trying to reclaim indigenous culture and identity. As such, Syaman comes to stand for, probably much against his will, the typical Taiwanese in the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary. For the Taiwanese, as represented in the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary, is also someone who embarks

on the journey home to reconnect himself with the repressed, stigmatized Taiwanese identity. Acknowledging aboriginal matrilineal connection is part of the reconstruction of the quest. Moreover, the Taiwanese identity reconstruction project sees de-Sinicization as essential to the reclaiming of the Taiwanese identity and culture, which finds much resonance in Syaman's writing too.

Insofar as Syaman's story of identity reconstruction is made to converge implicitly with the story of a Taiwanese's identity reformation, Syaman crosses over the line that is supposed to separate the aboriginal other from the Taiwanese self. The sign of the aboriginal is violently dislocated. Rather than simply an inscription of otherness vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in Taiwan, it is also what constitutes the Taiwanese "self." In this intriguing de-stabilization of the meaning and significance of the aboriginal as a locus of identity, the story of Syaman-- i.e., his journey home—becomes, metaphorically speaking, a story of the Taiwanese's re-turn to his aboriginal roots in re-constructing his identity. It is noteworthy that advocates of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary argue that many Taiwanese are descendents of aborigines (Li and Liu 1994, 25). They contend that many migrants from China in the time past often took aboriginal women as their wives because very few Chinese women were allowed to come to Taiwan in the Qing dynasty. Since the female ancestors of many Taiwanese were aboriginal women, to designate Taiwanese as ethnic Chinese is, in this argument, a patriarchal practice that turns a blind eye to the aboriginal element as an important constituent of the Taiwanese identity. In other words, to reshape one's Taiwanese identity, one needs to acknowledge one's matrilineal aboriginal roots. It therefore follows that the aboriginal otherness in fact is an important constituent of one's Taiwanese self. It is identified as "otherness" only because one is alienated from one's mother culture owing to Sinocentric indoctrination. By implication, the reconstitution of one's own identity through the reconnection with one's mother culture⁷, which Syaman dramatizes in his writing, is an indispensable ritual for every Taiwanese.

Thus, it appears that aboriginal cultural discourse and the new Taiwanese cultural discourse have much in common. Both attempt a reconstruction of identity through the re-claiming of indigenous culture. And both have de-Sinocentrism at the heart of their discourse. In addition, both evoke the power of the indigenous spoken word to exorcize Sinocentrism in cultural formations. As I pointed out above, Syaman practices a strategic deployment of *Tao* vocabulary to challenge the domination of the Chinese language and culture in literary production. Disrupting the smooth flow of the Chinese-language narrative through the inscription of inassimilable aboriginal otherness, this peculiar layout creates an alienation effect which points to the

⁷ Conventional use of Mother culture and Syaman's patriarchal tribal culture.

symbolic violence of the Chinese language. Such a practice has become a characteristic of aboriginal literature. However, this peculiar language behavior can actually be traced back to the nativist literary movement in the 1970s which arguable was the cradle of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary.⁸ Many writers in the nativist camp at that time practiced a kind of “adulterated language” in which transcriptions of spoken Taiwanese are mixed with Chinese Mandarin in narrative. Through the resuscitation of the spoken word of the Taiwanese common people in their writings, nativist writers urged for a reconnection with repressed Taiwanese native cultural heritages (Chiu 2008). It is worth pointing out that the reclaiming of the stigmatized Taiwanese spoken language generated unexpectedly a heated debate and paved the way for the development of the Taiwanese identity movement (Ye Shih-tao; Peng Rui-jin). The contemporary discursive formation of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary is but the latest stage of the nativist development. Thus, arguably, the language behavior in aboriginal writing has its precedent in Taiwanese nativist writing of the 1970s. Indeed, as the scholar Shih-Chung Hsieh remarks, the rise of the aboriginal movement and that of the new Taiwanese identity discourse were closely interconnected in the beginning (156).

A few words of caution though. To pay attention to what aboriginal writing and the new Taiwanese discourse have in common as well as their historical interconnection is not meant to suggest that aboriginal writing supports or endorses the new Taiwanese discourse.⁹ Rather, the aim is to explain how the intriguing operation of the aboriginal sign as *both* an interventional inscription of the cultural “other” *and* the constitution of the Taiwanese “self” is made possible in the field of contemporary Taiwanese cultural production. Paradoxically, it is the strong insistence on its otherness and unassimilability vis-à-vis the Chinese culture that Syaman’s writing is turned into, metaphorically speaking, the writing of Taiwan. With its call for de-Sinocentric cultural restructuring through the (re)turn to repressed indigenous cultural roots, it fits in with the new Taiwanese cultural orientation. The “oceanic cultural orientation” and sea vocabulary that characterize Syaman’s writing make it particularly serviceable for the strategic differentiation of the Taiwanese culture from the Chinese culture—a differentiation that is at the core of the argument of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary.

Referring to the context of Native American literary production, Jeannette C. Armstrong makes the following observation: “All indigenous peoples’ languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it. Over time and many generations

⁸ The language movement of the 1930s in the colonial context.....

⁹ In fact, there has been a tension between these two discourses as the risk of co-option of the aboriginal movement by the growing Taiwanese identity movement is warily kept in sight. See Walis, Liao.

of their people, it is their distinctive interaction with a precise geography which forms the way indigenous language is shaped and subsequently how the world is viewed, approached, and expressed verbally by its speakers” (1998, 179). These remarks also hold true for Syaman’s writing. Syaman writes about his fish-catching experiences under the sea and about *Tao* tribal experiences revolving around the sea: spear-fishing, boat-making, knowledge of different species of fish fit or not fit for eating according to *Tao* cultural heritages, and story-telling about sea adventures in times past and now. Syaman finds in these aspects of *Tao* life rich resources for his literary creation. It is not difficult to see how Syaman’s aboriginal discourse can be strategically redeployed to illustrate Taiwanese new cultural imaginary: If the sea culture as depicted in Syaman’s writing appears exotic at the first sight, the sense of exoticism only exposes the Taiwanese reader’s alienation from his/her mother culture and underscores the need to reclaim it. The topographical writing of Syaman with all its rich sea images drawn from the materiality of living in a specific place is seen to offer an amendment to the illusive attachment to the so-called “cultural China” in abstract space. It is within the context of this specific Taiwanese cultural ambience that Syaman’s writing comes to be celebrated as the most illustrative example of Taiwanese “ocean literature.”

Taiwanese aboriginal writing in different contexts

The peculiar blurring of the line between the self of the dominant cultural group and the minoritarian aboriginal other makes the case of aboriginal writing in Taiwan particularly interesting for study. Take Native American literature as comparative reference. Many of the features identified by critics as characteristic of Native American literature are also found in Syaman’s aboriginal writing. These features include a great emphasis on the sense of place (Silko 1998, 12, Ortiz 1998, xii), the stress on the close connection between aboriginal language and the land (Armstrong 1998, 197), attention to local knowledge or ethnic epistemes (Krupat 1989, 11), the celebration of aboriginal ethics of geocentric worldview (Krupat 1989, 12), the importance of story-telling and collective memories (Silko 1998, 12), the quest for identity (Bevis 1987; Weaver 2001, 30-33), the sense of community (Weaver 2001, 48), and the role of the writer as a mediator between cultures (Krupat, Weaver 2001, 39). My analysis above demonstrates how Syaman’s writing possesses all these features. Aboriginal literature in Taiwan and Native American literature apparently share some very interesting features. A comparative study of these two corpuses of indigenous writing is certainly a worthy project. As the scope of this paper does not allow us to probe into the complexity of the subject, I would simply touch on one issue here. In writings of both indigenous groups, aboriginality is what constitutes

cultural otherness. Nevertheless, Syaman's case exposes unexpectedly the *aporia* in the whole concept of aboriginality that defines an aboriginal writer. The theme of "home-coming," which is often used to structure the movement in aboriginal writing, problematizes the writer's status as an aborigine speaking for his tribe. In a sense, the struggle to be recognized by his community as a *Tao* man implicitly undercuts Syaman's claim to *be* an *aboriginal* writer. Since his writing shows him in the process of *becoming* a *genuine* aboriginal man again, his aboriginal identity is something that is at stake. It is to take place in the future rather than a mission accomplished. The intriguing point is that this in-between-ness of Syaman in the process of *becoming* an aboriginal makes it possible for Syaman to stand for all Taiwanese in the new Taiwanese cultural discourse. For, in this discourse, the Taiwanese are construed as also reaching out for their matrilineal aboriginal roots.

This intertwining of aboriginal writing with the discourse of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary in the context of contemporary Taiwanese cultural production raises several interesting issues for the study of aboriginal literature in Taiwan and in other cultural contexts. First of all, it calls attention to the complicated relationship between aboriginal discourse and dominant cultural discourse. In the case of aboriginal writing in Taiwan, there is an intricate interplay between the two discourses. It is no longer adequate to simply pit aboriginal discourse against dominant cultural discourse and stress how aboriginal writing challenges the basic assumptions of mainstream discourse. Although that certainly is true to some extent, there is more at play here. In order to tackle the complexity of the issues, we need a more sophisticated theoretical framework beyond the simple binary opposition to re-conceptualize the sophisticated, and probably multiple positionings of aboriginal discourse in any specific cultural context. Secondly, the function of ethnographic writing in defining aboriginal literature likewise needs to be re-assessed in a more sophisticated way. As mentioned above, one of the reasons why Syaman is celebrated as a prominent aboriginal writer is because his writing incorporates very rich ethnographical details about his tribal culture. To be recognized as an aboriginal writer and to lay claim to that title, an aboriginal writer is often expected to demonstrate his/her mastery of tribal knowledge in his/her writing. In addition to the side effect of complicit exoticism which plays into the hands of a consumer market, this demand celebrates one type of aboriginal writing at the expense of others. Some critics might find in Syaman's writing a tendency to romanticize tribal life and experiences. Focusing almost exclusively on *Tao* way of life on the Orchid Island which is far off from the main island of Taiwan, Syaman seldom addresses issues that many aborigines confront in their daily lives. The conflict between modern life and tribal life is slightly touched upon, but there is not much in-depth investigation.

Indeed, the autobiographical “I” in Syaman’s literary creation is so in love with his tribal culture that he is never shown to be torn in conflicting desires. With his attention so riveted on reclaiming his cultural heritages through writing, Syaman shows no interest in confronting the problems of modernity head-on. As a result, subjects for aboriginal literary writing are inadvertently circumscribed.

Thus, the aboriginal scholar Sun Da-chuan makes some cautious remarks about the practice of aboriginal writers to focus exclusively on tribal experiences. He urges a critical re-examination of the display of ethnographical details in aboriginal literature:

For writers of our generation, traditional tribal life is already something in decline. We can only construct imaginative connections with our tribal cultures. You are one of the few who have a real tribal home to return to. But even you have the feeling that there is already a gap between you and your tribal elders. Hence, it is important that we aboriginal writers try to face reality which includes life in the cities in its present as well as in its future form, and address those issues in our writing. I am worried that young aboriginal writers write in a way to meet the expectations of mainstream readers and fill their writings with images of exotic animals in the mountains. That would seriously circumscribe the scope of our literary creation. I think young aboriginal writers should try to develop their writings in two directions: on the one hand, they should try to engage in dialogues with their tribal culture; on the other hand, they should look for issues connected with reality and its possible future development (Sun Da-chun and Syaman, 2005, 41)¹⁰

The point Sun Da-chun is driving at is that self-contained aboriginal tribes relatively uncontaminated by the process of modernization are already difficult to find in Taiwan. Thus, to demand that aboriginal writing be always tied up with ethnographical writing is to set very serious restrictions on aboriginal literary creation. As Sun argues, serious engagements with urgent issues that aborigines confront in modern life might open up more space for aboriginal writers. Although it is important to resurrect tribal cultural heritages, it is equally important to face up to problems generated by the spread of modernity for aborigines. In other words, we should realize that the ethnographical practice in aboriginal writing is likely to be double-edged. While it functions to resurrect aboriginal cultural heritages which are falling into oblivion, it can also be executed at the expense of other subjects worthy for critical exploration. To what extent the appeal of Syaman’s writing lies in its depiction of *Tao* life as almost uncontaminated by modernity is an issue worth further investigation. Although Syaman’s detailed description of *Tao* culture supplies us with much food for

¹⁰ Translation mine.

thought in searching for an ecological way of life, to expect all aboriginal writers to practice similar writing is to run the risk of subjecting aboriginal otherness to the economy of consumerism. This risk is not to be dismissed too easily. And this is what Sun Da-chuan tries to bring up in his comment on the current state of aboriginal literature in Taiwan.

Finally, the double positioning of Syaman Rapongan's writing as both minoritarian writing highlighting a sense of cultural otherness and mainstream literary creation exemplifying collective Taiwanese cultural features reveals how aboriginal literary creation is inevitably drawn into complex networks of ideological negotiations. As a result, aboriginal writers often find themselves writing under tremendous pressure. On the one hand, the demand for the writer to act as a spokesperson for his/her tribe creates what Arif Dirlik calls an "ethnic prison-house" (2002:218) that delimits the creative space of the writer. Producing politically correct writing to meet the expectation of his tribal people (and the aboriginal group in general) is certainly a fallible task. On the other hand, to survive in the declining literary market means to find a way to negotiate skillfully with dominant trends of cultural discourse. For an aboriginal writer, the pressure of "political correctness" comes from various and often opposed camps. However, in spite of the tremendous weight of the question of political correctness, the merits of a piece of aboriginal literary work are not determined by politics and ideology only. It is certainly possible that Syaman enjoys his prestigious reputation as one of the most representative aboriginal writers in Taiwan partly because his persistent portrayal of *Tao* life on the Orchid Island satisfies modern reader's yearning for an alternative way of life and partly because his sea-oriented writing feeds into the ongoing promotion of "oceanic cultural imagination" in contemporary Taiwan. But ultimately, his achievements as an aboriginal writer cannot be assessed in terms devoid of literary criteria. It is the vision of a creative space which refuses to be subsumed under politics and ideology that justifies aboriginal literature as literary creations.

Development of Aboriginal Writing in a New Political Climate

Via the case study of Syaman Rapongan, this paper tries to show the interconnection between the development of Taiwan aboriginal literature and that of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary since the 1990s. The issue of aboriginal identity plays a pivotal role in the discursive formulation of the new imaginary. The emergence of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary helps create a congenial environment for the nurturing and development of aboriginal discourse. The resurrection of aboriginal cultural heritages, which finds expression in Syaman Rapongan's writing, is not simply part of a multiculturalist project; it is seen as

essential to the Taiwanese quest for self identity. The recent victory of the KMT party in the 2008 presidential election, however, suggests that it is unlikely that the development of the new Taiwanese cultural imaginary will continue to build on its current momentum. It would be interesting to see what new turns Taiwan aboriginal literature will take with the setback, of not the decline, of the “new” Taiwanese cultural imaginary. No longer conceived as a story of the Taiwanese quest for the quintessentially self, how would the aboriginal story develop in the new political climate? This certainly is a new subject worthy of further pursuit.