

## Introduction: Indigenous Becomings for the New Millennium

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This special issue is devoted to expanding our understanding of Indigeneity in contemporary Taiwan. Literary critics typically divide Indigenous literature into three stages: an ongoing oral tradition of premodern origin; the period of politicization, from roughly 1984–2000; and the millennium to today (Chiu 2023; Huang 2013, 251). Our focus on this third category builds on the wealth of scholarship already devoted to Indigenous writing and intellectual debates from the previous period, with the hope of identifying points of rupture and continuity across this transition. To this end, we foreground ecological thinking, both for its historically important role in shaping

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Indigenous identity and its imperative to think holistically—horizontally, vertically, matrixed, or otherwise—about individual subjectivity, social relations, and the lived environment.<sup>1</sup> We also draw inspiration from Chen Chih-fan's 陳芷凡 study of Indigenous literatures, which emphasizes the ongoing “becoming” of Indigenous cultural identities and understands “Indigeneity” as a “model of subject articulation” (Chen 2023, 16). With this sense of becoming in mind, our conjunction of the term with ecology is not intended to assert some inherent tie between Indigenous life, the environment, and/or animism, but to reflect on “ecologies of Indigeneity” more broadly.

The novelty of the collected essays is best understood in the longer context of trends and debates about Indigenous literature.<sup>2</sup> At its inception, “Indigenous literature” or *yuanzhumin(zu) wenxue* 原住民(族)文學 was itself a contested category. Puyuma scholar Tung Shu-ming 董恕明 synthesizes the relevant debates into three central thematic concerns: identity, topic, and language (Tung 2013, 12–14). In the 1993 inaugural issue of *Taiwan Indigenous Voice Bimonthly* (*Shanghai wenhua* 山海文化), for instance, Puyuma scholar Sun Ta-chuan 孫大川 (or Paelabang Danapan) insists on the primacy of identity for defining Indigenous literature and argues that authorial identity is “an Archimedian point that cannot be done away with” (Sun 1993, 100). As late as 2005, however, Tsou scholar Pasuya Poiconu (also Pu Chung-cheng 浦忠成) continued to contest this point, arguing that, regardless of identity, literature dealing with Indigenous issues can also be considered as Indigenous literature (Pasuya Poiconu 2005). In the late 1980s, Atayal writer Walis Nokan (瓦歷斯·諾幹) advocated for Indigenous literature to be composed in Indigenous languages and scripts owing to his concern that Indigenous literature composed in Sinographs risked becoming a minor branch of Chinese literature (Chen 2020, 24). While this latter criterion was eventually abandoned as an exclusive determining factor due to limited readership and script standardization (Tung 2013, 11), it names a legitimate concern about the taxonomic fate of such literature that is still relevant today. In short, there has always been more than one vision of what Indigenous literature is, can, or should be, and it is as participants in the various consolidations and expansions of these concerns that the collected essays should be understood.

Beyond taxonomic concerns, there are also several defining thematic and stylistic features of Indigenous literatures from the pre-millennium period. Chief among them are the use of first-person narratives, which are typically employed in the pursuit of a deeper understanding of one's sense of self (Tung 2013, 16). This is connected to a related concern about documenting and recording one's respective Indigenous culture, which imbues many works from the period with an almost ethnographic sensibility (Chen and Chiu 2021, 53). There was also a notable effort by writers to incorporate Indigenous linguistic and syntactical components into their Sinographic writing, imbuing such works with an irreducible Indigenous quality (Tung 2013, 58). The final notable characteristic is the incorporation of “political complaint,” inasmuch as Indigenous writers composing in Sinographs often wrote not only for their own communities but also to convince their majority-Han readership of the justness of their cause (Pasuya Poiconu 2005, 179). One will

<sup>1</sup> This list of terms is borrowed from Félix Guattari's definition of ecology in his *The Three Ecologies*. For more, see Guattari (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Portions of the following history of Indigenous literature are taken from Shernuk (forthcoming 2026).

find few of these themes or styles in the works discussed in this special issue, marking each study as a distinct contribution to the body of post-millennium, Indigenous literary possibilities.

Since the millennium, Indigenous literature has diversified significantly in both content and style. Chiu Kuei-fen and Chen Chih-fan have documented a distinctly cosmopolitan turn, with authors now looking beyond issues of political complaint to the permutation of cultures and balancing of multiple worldviews (Chen and Chiu 2021, 63). On the one hand, this has manifested in new forms of individual introspection, with topics expanding to include the experiences of Indigenous women (in contrast to the male-dominated narratives of the late-twentieth century) and new forms of sexual desire.<sup>3</sup> For example, *Thigh Mountain* 大腿山, an award-winning 2025 story collection by the Truku writer Apyang Imiq, explores the pleasures and predicaments of younger and queer members of Indigenous communities who strive to re-adapt themselves to life in the tribe after spending their formative years in the city. On the other hand, it has resulted in previously localized considerations of environments and ecologies taking on global dimensions (Huang 2013, 251), as well as broader reflections on the place of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples relative to other minoritized ethnic groups around the world.<sup>4</sup> In stylistic terms, realism no longer serves as the default mode, and experiments with modernist, magical realist, and speculative writing represent only a sample of the new directions (Chen and Chiu 2021, 63–65). Tang Shu-wen identifies another distinct stylistic shift toward an “aesthetics of transitional justice.” Such an aesthetics is often achieved through creative devices of “anachrony” that evoke counter-hegemonic temporalities (Tang 2023). While Tang discusses Taiwanese millennial fiction more generally, this observation applies to recent Indigenous literature as well. Pangcah writer Nakao Eki Pacidal's recent novel, *Makaketonay to paloma* 蕉葉與樹的約定 (2025), for example, follows the ghost of a baseball player from the Japanese colonial period who haunts the present time. The author's collaboration with Mirror Fiction, a popular literature platform that aims to cultivate IP for transmedia adaptations with an international perspective, also indicates a more complex media ecology for post-millennial Indigenous literature.

The four essays collected in this special issue further expand our understanding of post-2000 Indigenous writing and bear witness to the ever-becoming nature of Indigeneity. To this end, Nicolai Volland's essay explores the potential of “trans-Indigenous solidarity” through two recent novels: *The Man Without a Mailbox* (2022) by Syaman Rapongan and *The Sea Breeze Club* (2023) by Wu Ming-Yi. His analysis challenges the “Han-yuanzhumin axis that has dominated earlier Indigenous literature” and demonstrates various modes of connection between different ethnic groups, which manifest through ambiguous political expression as well as environmentalist activism. Such connections can be found beyond Indigenous communities from Taiwan, among those who “find themselves incongruent with the technocratic, developmentalist, and

<sup>3</sup> For examples of these, see Shernuk (2021); see also Dingru Huang (2025).

<sup>4</sup> An analysis connecting Paiwan and Tibetan experience can be found in Shernuk (2021). Additional examples raised by Chen and Chiu include Walis Norgan's post-2000s works *War Cruelties* (戰爭殘酷, 2014) and *Readings in Seven Days* (七日讀, 2016), which connect ROC Indigenous struggles to those in Palestine and Cambodia, as well as North America, respectively.

economically driven modern (nation-)state and its epistemic regimes.” In *The Man Without a Mailbox*, Syaman Rapongan depicts the unlikely bonding between two Uyghur men who had come to Taiwan with the Nationalist Party and Tao people on Orchid Island; in *The Sea Breeze Club*, Wu carefully explores the permeable boundaries of Indigeneity through the intertwined life stories of the Truku protagonist Tunux and the character of Xiuzi, who is from a Hakka background but is quasi-adopted by an Indigenous couple.

If Volland’s essay focuses on the more affirmative and generative effects of trans-Indigenous alliance based on shared precarious conditions and proposes to understand the formation of Indigenous identities as dialogic processes, Jason McGrath’s essay cautions against the narrative of “settler indigenization” in service of Taiwanese nationalism through a case study of the TV series *Seqalu: Formosa 1867* (2021). McGrath teases out the lurking thread of “settler-colonial unconscious” in the nationalist endeavor of envisioning a distinct collective Taiwanese subjectivity that simultaneously desires and disavows the authority and authenticity of Indigeneity. In his analysis of *Seqalu*, McGrath focuses on the character of Butterfly, whose father is Hakka but whose mother is from the Seqalu tribe. McGrath reads the character as “a sacrificial virgin martyr for the new nation.” Her hybrid lineage serves the purpose of settler nationalism, and her beautiful and pure body is aligned with the precolonial and primordial landscape of Taiwan rich with native flora and fauna. In addition, McGrath highlights two particular media technologies that facilitate the elevated expression of “founding myth of Taiwaneseeness” as embodied by Butterfly: CGI technology that generates native and sometimes mythical species and aerial cinematography that captures the sublime landscape from above. When juxtaposing Xiuzi from *The Sea Breeze Club* and Butterfly from *Seqalu*, one may notice their similarities and the gender dimension in trans-Indigenous contact that can be further explored: Why is Xiuzi, an oppressed and abused Hakka woman, chosen as the allegorical embodiment of the fluidity of (non)Indigenous identity?

If Volland’s and McGrath’s essays provide focused analyses of contemporary literary and media representation of Indigenous communities through close reading, Hsu Ming-chih’s informative essay offers a more bird’s-eye view and diachronic examination of the shifting trends in canonized Indigenous literature by comparing two anthologies published more than two decades apart: *Anthology of Taiwan Indigenous Literature in Chinese* (2003) and *Anthology of Taiwan Indigenous Literature* (2024). Hsu emphasizes the role played by *Taiwan Indigenous Voice Bimonthly* magazine in the canonization of Indigenous literature. Paelabang Danapan, the founder of the magazine, also edited the above-mentioned anthologies. Hsu observes the linguistic, generational, and thematic expansion in the 2024 anthology and proposes a “perspective of Mountains and Seas” to observe the evolution of the Indigenous literary canon, a phrase derived from the magazine’s original title, *Culture of the Mountains and Seas* (山海文化). The magazine is a significant nexus in the media ecology that has formed a dynamic literary field, sustained the production and circulation of Indigenous literature, and contributed to the creation and expansion of a literary canon by publishing and promoting Indigenous authors and organizing events such as literary contests and symposiums. Hsu also envisions a future of Indigenous literature beyond the parameter of the literary field revolving around the “Mountains and Seas.” He notes how

Indigenous writers from the millennial generation expand the thematic concerns of their predecessors and experiment with themes such as gender and sexuality, science and technology, as well as urban life, with more diverse techniques beyond critical realism.

This special issue also includes an English translation of the Puyuma writer Ma Yi-hang's literary essay "What Have the Ladies Forgotten?" 淑女忘記了什麼. This essay is included in an essay collection titled *The Potemkin Village* 假城鎮, which won the prestigious Taiwan Literature Award for Books in 2025. The essay recounts the author's own experience, replete with poignant insights and bittersweet revelations, as a drag queen with Indigenous heritage and as an actor for *Splendid Float*, the first feature film depicting drag culture in Taiwan. In Ma's writing, one can observe what Paelabang Danapan describes as Indigenous literature's "creative disturbance" of the hegemonic language and ideology. For Ma, intersectionality is not only a theoretical terminology associated with marginalization, oppression, and political awakening but more importantly an opportunity for playful and imaginative performance. The essay evokes multiple layers of temporalities and memories, both personal and collective, that are also shaped by the narrator's participation in and exposure to media representations of Indigeneity and queerness. With blunt honesty and a sharp sense of humor, the essay daringly probes into the performativity and authenticity in gender and Indigenous identities as well as in friendship and kinship.

Together, the four pieces included in this special issue demonstrate various ecologies of Indigeneity in the new millennium: from the material and institutional ecology of cultural production and circulation captured by Hsu to the imaginary ecology of trans-Indigeneity solidarity envisioned by Volland, from the media ecology that contributes to settler nationalism critiqued by McGrath to the intersectional ecology of identities and memories portrayed by Ma. These Indigenous ecologies further distinguish themselves from their twentieth-century peers by the range of becomings they depict. There is a notable diversification of the canon to include new subject positions and thematic concerns, from sexual minorities to Indigenous-Han relations, as well as critical reflection on the nationalistic and ideological risks that accompany Indigeneity's entry into more mainstream discourse. Collectively, the presented essays provide us with conceptual maps for understanding recent works of Indigenous literature and help us to discern the evolving contours of Indigenous literature in Taiwan.

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