

## **Breaking Language Down: Taiwan Sound Poetry and Its Ways of Saying\***

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the appearance and rapid development of a genre that crosses the boundaries between art, music, drama, and literature, and that is being variously called “sound poetry” (聲音詩 *shengyin shi*), “language art” (語言藝術 *yuyan yishu*), or “text-sound art” (文本聲音藝術 *wenben shengyin yishu*).

I argue that Taiwan sound poetry develops as an alternative genre to Chinese poetic tradition, forging a disorienting aesthetics that is disruptive of conventional ideas of artistic quality. I conceptualize this phenomenon in its unique history and politics, extrapolating some key features that include: a poetics that strives not for semantic extension or enrichment, but that radically aims at “semantic abjection”; intervention in Taiwan language politics and translanguing context, through its contribution to a “culture of the ear”; a shift of attention from textual semantics to performance with audience/users’ participation; strategic denial of a genealogy rooted in the Chinese tradition, with sound poets’ pronouncements about *their* poetics as being an entirely Western import; double nature as local, Sinophone, and global.

### **Keywords**

sound poetry, Sinophone intervention, semantic abjection, translanguing,  
culture of the ear, performativity

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## Introduction

Picture this. The audience and the poet are seated in the performance space. The poet unravels a bundle consisting of a 120-meter-long tape, or ribbon, that is handed out among the audience members, who will also act as participants. The ribbon is stamped with characters and their alphabetic transcription. Each participant reads out loud the monosyllabic words that feature on the tape as it passes through their hands. The ribbon continues to grow longer and longer, stretching out among the audience members. As the participants sound these words, in monotone, their voices gradually stack together to form a low hymn . . . until the overlapping voices eventually return to a single one and the last word is read out.

The description above pertains to the performance of a sound poem by Taiwan-born artist Lin Chih-Wei (林其蔚). Since the end of the last century, a galvanizing interest in sound as main matter for poetry has been widely diffusing on the Taiwanese live scene. Poetry is being recited, sung, performed, recorded in art installations, or simply accompanied by music. It has entered all sorts of cultural environments, from the most popular to the most sophisticated and esoteric, from the Taiwan local to the cross-ocean international.

This paper explores the appearance and rapid development of a genre that crosses the boundaries between art, music, drama, and literature, and that is being variously called “sound poetry” (聲音詩 *shengyin shi*), “language art” (語言藝術 *yuyan yishu*), or “text-sound art” (文本聲音藝術 *wenben shengyin yishu*).<sup>1</sup>

I am therefore tackling a cross-disciplinary dilemma, where sound poetry, in both scholarly and experiential discourses, has suffered from being all too often neglected by critics and theorists.<sup>2</sup> Christopher Cox suggests that one of the reasons why sound poetry has remained largely untheorized is to be found in the overwhelming ubiquity of visual culture and the resulting lack of descriptive tools devoted to the aural. But while I *see* Cox’s point, remarks from sound poets Lin Chih-Wei, Yan Jun (顏峻), or Jeph Lo (羅悅全) have also revealed a reluctant attitude on their part towards theorizing in general, for fear of entering the official

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<sup>1</sup> Other less frequent terms include: 大聲詩 *dasheng shi*; 音響詩 *yinxiang shi*; 字—聲作曲 *zi-sheng zuoqu*; 聲響藝術 *shengxiang yishu*; 超文字 *chao wenzi*. These may be direct translations of European terms such as Lautpoesie; poésie sonore; audio-poem; Lettrism; text-sound composition; art of noise; Ultra Lettrism; art acoustique (Lin, *Beyond* 86).

<sup>2</sup> Most of the literature on sound in poetry is concerned with prosodic patterns and rhyme, and it is therefore of very little use when dealing with sound poetry. A range of helpful perspectives in approaching the aesthetics of sound poetry can however be found in Perloff and Dworkin.

discourse, being institutionalized, or being assimilated by the literary mainstream. Furthermore, the performance-based nature of sound poetry is itself ephemeral, and with many of these works already becoming irretrievable, it is often difficult to examine or make reference to them.

This essay is written as an initial attempt at analyzing and conceptualizing Taiwan sound poetry.<sup>3</sup> It argues that Taiwan sound poetry has developed as an alternative genre to Chinese poetic tradition, resisting linguistic mainland China-centrism, and in general the “hierarchy of languages” (Shih 172) in Taiwan, and forging a disorienting aesthetics that is disruptive of conventional ideas of artistic quality. I conceptualize this phenomenon in its unique history and politics, extrapolating some key features that include: a poetics that strives not for semantic extension or enrichment, but that radically aims at “semantic abjection;” intervention in Taiwan language politics and translanguing context, through its unique contribution to a “culture of the ear”; a shift of attention from textual semantics to textual performance with audience/users’ participation; strategic denial of a genealogy rooted in the Chinese tradition, with sound poets’ pronouncements about *their* poetics as being an entirely Western import; double nature as local, Sinoophone, and global.

Within the literary discipline, some scholarship on contemporary Chinese poetry constitutes a milestone in the development of my interest in this topic. The first report I found on the scene of poetry recitals in Beijing and on the poetry of Yan Jun, the most famous sound poet in mainland China, was in Maghiel van Crevel’s 2003 essay “The Poetry of Yan Jun,” which was first published online, and later revised and modestly included as a “coda” to his substantial monograph *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. Despite van Crevel’s own definition of this essay as leaning “toward the journalistic” (“More Than Writing” 459), it nevertheless offers a valuable glimpse into the ever so lively poetry scene in Beijing that features a variety of poetic styles, and mixed media. The Beijing poetry scene has also received the attention of Heather Inwood, who has merged cultural studies with poetic analysis in her book *Verses Going Viral*. Inwood presents several instances of poetry performance, elaborating on them as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Another incisive contribution to the subject is John Crespi’s *Voices in Revolution*, a monograph on the “auditory imagination” in modern China, which

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<sup>3</sup> Following an oft-adopted syntactic anomaly, in this essay I use the word “Taiwan” both as a noun referring to the actual country, and as an adjective when referring to sound poetry. This is preferred to the adjective “Taiwanese”, because it disambiguates from poetry written in the Taiwanese vernacular (閩南語 *Minnan yu* or Hokkien).

traces a modern tradition of poetry recitation and performance, from the 1920s onward. Spanning across mainland China and Taiwan, Michelle Yeh's relatively short article "Towards a Poetics of Noise: From Hu Shi to Hsia Yü" offers an important, albeit sweeping, connection with sound studies, quoting from the eminent sound theorist Jacques Attali, and calling attention to a "poetics of noise" in modern Chinese poetry. The most recent study, and perhaps the most pertinent to Taiwan sound poetry of all, is to be found in Michel Hockx's *Internet Literature in China*. In the chapter "Online Poetry in and out of China, in Chinese, or with Chinese," Hockx describes online Chinese poetry communities, and introduces visual poetry that makes use of Chinese characters by Chinese and non-Chinese poets. Among the poets discussed in this chapter, there we find Taiwan-born pioneering sound artist Yao Dajun (姚大鈞), whose sound poems are among those explored in this paper.

Although all these studies have focused in one way or another on poetry performances and performativity, examining interconnections between sound, technology, modernism, recitation, society, and more, they do not contemplate sound poetry as a full-fledged genre in contemporary Sinophone poetics from Taiwan. This blind spot replicates the virtual absence of studies in Chinese.

In the sections below, after an outline of the contextual circumstances within which Taiwan sound poetry evolved, I attempt a definition of the genre and describe what these poems do, while individuating some recurrent techniques. The essay concludes with a number of remarks and a view on future research.

## Taiwan's Culture of the Ear

In the introduction to his book *Chaoyue shengyin yishu* 超越聲音藝術 (*Beyond Sound Art*, 2013), which is exclusively dedicated to Western sound art, Taiwan-born, Beijing-based artist Lin Chih-Wei points out, as a disclaimer, that tracing the roots of Chinese sound poetry would entail investigating a wide spectrum of socio-historical conditions that he however does not explore in the book (*Beyond* 10-11). In another essay ("Taiwan" 154-71), after recognizing the main inspiration in Futurism and Dadaism, Lin traces the origins of Taiwan's new interest in sound to the very beginning of the 1990s. In an interview, Hong Kong sound artist Samson Young, while pondering over the incorporation of local elements in Chinese sound art, denies that there is an independent voice for Chinese sound art. From his current location in the US, Taiwan-born poet Yao Dajun

concedes the existence of an aesthetics of sound in the Chinese tradition,<sup>4</sup> but also talks of Chinese sound art as springing out of nowhere, and therefore facing the problem of asserting its originality against Western sound art (“Revolution” n. pag.). Beijing-based sound artist Yan Jun states that “there is no sound art in China now,” “sound art only belongs to the existing Western framework” (*Guest Edition #2*), and that the phenomenon of Chinese sound art is like the “‘re-invent[ion] of] [the wheel]” (qtd. in Yao “Revolution” n. pag.).

The claim of one’s own poetry as being completely detached from Chinese ancient and modern tradition is not unique of these sound poets. Already in the mid-twentieth century, joining the long standing debate over Chinese new poetry’s ties with Western poetry, the poet Chi Hsien (紀弦) issued a manifesto for his journal *Modern Poetry* (現代詩 *Xiandai shi*), where he asserted that its poetry was completely severed from Chinese tradition, and had a universal, rather than national, essence.<sup>5</sup> Already then, as today, such claimed and/or perceived lack of originality provoked belittlement of the poetic works in question, and perhaps it may be partially responsible for the paucity of scholarly work on the subject of Taiwan sound poetry. But, rather than entering the debate over the question of the originality of the genre, I will try to explain the motivations behind such claims, by exploring possible conditions and contextual circumstances that may have determined the appearance or new impetus of sound poetry.

Taiwan sound poetry did not come about in a vacuum. The way I see it, it is not a genre that was transplanted wholesale from the European context of the beginning of the twentieth century straight into twenty-first-century Taiwan. In fact, as I set out to outline in this section, sound poetry flourished in Taiwan because of congenial contextual circumstances that placed greater emphasis on aurality and determined a “culture of the ear.”<sup>6</sup>

I identify four main historical periods in which circumstances caused poetry practitioners to demonstrate a desire to diverge from conventional poetics, placing greater emphasis on aurality: the post-colonial, post-WWII period; the second half of the 1970s; early 1990s’ post-martial law Taiwan; and the first decade of the

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<sup>4</sup> Yao refers for example to the section “Record of Music” (樂記 “Yueji”) of the *Record of Rites* (禮記 *Liji*), and to the aesthetics of sound in Ji Kang’s 嵇康 *Treatise on the Non-Emotive Nature of Sound* (聲無哀樂論 *Sheng wu aile lun*).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the debate, through an introduction to Taiwan poetry movements from 1950s to 1970s, see Leroux.

<sup>6</sup> The term is borrowed from Cox and Warner, who use it in reference to the audio culture that has emerged since the 1960s in the field of European music.

2000s. Within this historical context, a number of corresponding social factors contributed to the emergence of sound poetry, including Taiwanese governments' language policies, increased attention to the authentic voice, post-martial law social expression, and the spread of technology in the home.

In the context of the intense language assimilation campaigns conducted by the colonial rulers<sup>7</sup> and after by the Nationalist government—the former advocating the use of Japanese, the latter insisting on the re-Mandarinization of the national language—a new, translingual generation of poets started experimenting with language viscosity and audibility already since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> These poets worked on poetic form in “reduced language,”<sup>9</sup> manipulating the linguistic unit of the word in ways that connect with both Western concrete poetry and pre-modern Chinese pattern poetry (圖像詩 *tuxiang shi*). When these first modern examples of visual poetry appeared, they displayed no concern for traditional metric rules or syntactic development, and yet they demonstrated a clear interest in sonority and in exploiting phonetic matter, according to variable rules, with or without connection to the characters' meaning.<sup>10</sup>

This shift in poetics may be closely connected with what the scholar Jing Tsu calls “the missing script of Taiwan” (144-73), as Taiwanese native speakers grew increasingly estranged from their own languages when, by turns, the missionaries, the Japanese colonial rulers and the Nationalists demanded new language allegiances, and the spoken sounds came into conflict with the written script. In fact, I argue that Taiwan's “culture of the ear” precisely began to take shape in this environment, where aurality and script became separated to a greater extent, the stability of the written script being challenged by the phonics of Taiwanese, and

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<sup>7</sup> In 1895, following the defeat of the Qing Empire by the Japanese army, the Emperor signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki, stipulating that Taiwan was to be ceded to the Japanese Empire. Japan officially ruled the island of Taiwan for 50 years, making it a Japanese colony from 1895 up until 1945.

<sup>8</sup> After World War II, Taiwan underwent a drastic political program of “de-Japanization,” during which Taiwan's ruling Nationalist party launched the National Language Movement, banning Japanese from publications, and thus effectively compromising the means of expression of a whole generation of writers who had been educated in Japanese during colonization (Yeh, *Frontier* 18-20).

<sup>9</sup> The term is adapted from “*écoute réduite*” (reduced listening), a term coined by Schaeffer to indicate the severance from sound's causality (Cox and Warner 95).

<sup>10</sup> The topic of musicality in Taiwan concrete poetry has attracted a discrete amount of scholarly attention. General studies include: Jiang Yizheng (江依錚); Zhang Yongyi (張詠沂); Xu Wenwei (須文蔚); Yang Yinliu (楊蔭瀏); Zheng Huiru (鄭慧如). For a discussion of the ways in which contemporary visual poetry in Chinese operates, and of issues related to its translation, see Bruno.

aurality eventually coming to occupy a predominant position over script (Tsu 171). Gradually, the debate over Taiwan's national language, the mother tongue, its sounds, and its literature became intertwined with the long-standing issues of tradition and modernity, of Sinicization and Westernization, and of the resulting degrees of proximity with the Taiwanese people. The discussion gathered greatly in impetus in the socio-historical climate of the second half of the 1970s, when, closely preceding the debate over "nativist literature,"<sup>11</sup> poetry and folk songs were once again brought together, in an attempt at finding Taiwan's authentic voice.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of the early 1990s, soon after the martial law was lifted and the government of Taiwan gradually removed the many cultural restrictions previously imposed, an underground student movement for the "liberation of sound" named "noise movement" conducted a critique of society through music and textual exploration. Social engagement was a main aim of these experimentations that aimed at challenging mainstream and institutionalised culture.<sup>13</sup> Ideological

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<sup>11</sup> In Taiwan, the term 鄉土文學 *xiangtu wenxue*, or nativist literature, was first employed in the 1930s, in connection with literature that was written in, or made some use of, Taiwanese vernacular language (i.e., 閩南語 *Minnan yu* or Hokkien). The term was then revived in the 1970s with reference to a corpus of works that took political marginality and the "authentic" Taiwanese as its subject matter.

<sup>12</sup> Notable expressions of this effort include the public recitations and performances of the Grassroots Poetry Society (草根詩社 *Caogen shi she*) founded in May 1976, and the "campus folksongs," another phenomenon of the mid-1970s. Poetry recitations (朗誦 *langsong*) and campus performances of folksongs were seen as ways to claim Taiwan's own voice, engage with the wider local audience, and arouse and stir feelings and emotions. Cf. Bai, "Taiwan," Lo, "Zero" 168-69, and Lin, "Taiwan" 154-67. In a 1978 issue of the poetry magazine *The Vineyard* (葡萄園 *Putao yuan*) several articles explore the nature, techniques and urgency of poetry recitation, in awakening and mobilizing society in the face of the current political and social issues, through the use of slogans and skilfully planned reciting techniques. These poetic practices of the mid-1970s can be seen as precursor of sound poetry's anti-cultural critique of the poetic act, as a strategy of political and cultural resistance in Taiwan. Nevertheless, artistic realizations of the majority of these performances were closer to the kind of poetics advocated by Huang Zunxian (黃遵憲) (1848-1905) and by 1917 New Culture movement figures with the slogan "my hand writes what my mouth says" (我手寫我口 *wo shou xie wo kou*)—not intended as the transcription of the pronounced words, but as the use of contemporary parlance, in a speech-like style. In this sense, the project of the Grassroots Poetry Society and the "campus folksongs" clearly diverges from the aesthetic forms of visual poetry and from the performances of sound poetry: whereas Grassroots poetic texts used sound (i.e., prosodic patterns) for facilitating the fruition of the poetic composition, which also displayed a clear semantic structure, neatly recognizable syntax, and a direct message loaded with feelings, as I will further detail below, sound poetry works on the phenomenology of sound, removed from syntax and semantic meaning.

<sup>13</sup> Taiwan "noise movement" parallels other noise movements around the world. It is strongly experimental in nature and anti-cultural in its aims, although this does not mean that it ignores

liberation, freedom of speech, easy access to information, and more frequent exchanges with the West allowed for cultural and artistic dialogue, with a preference emerging for pop culture, and the postmodernist attention to difference, uncertainty, and plurality.

In such a liberated and diverse environment, Taiwan's "culture of the ear" has been progressively expanding, resulting in many established poets writing lyrics for pop songs, recording albums with their poems, or participating in a variety of live events.<sup>14</sup> The mutual cross-pollination between poetry and sound culture continues to encourage hybrid artistic genres, opening up to multi-disciplinary and independent structures. In a very short period of time, literature, art, and sound, apart from seizing the cultural space, have also exploited new independent media. Many alternative cultural spaces were established in the 1990s. Poetry began to be performed everywhere, in university colleges, online, in theatres and music venues, on national television, in poetry cafés and art galleries, at festivals, and rave parties alike.

In the last decade or so, the environment of Taiwan's live poetry scene, together with the parallel, sometimes interchangeable art and music scene, has been a great source of inspiration for many a contemporary poet. Hsia Yü (夏宇), for example, reports in an interview that the inception of her 2007 iconic collection *Fenhongse zaoyin* 粉紅色噪音 (*Pink Noise*) was inspired by the many sound-art performances she attended in those years. In 2002, she had already released a double-album CD, containing poems from her collection *Fusion Kitsch*, arranged as rock songs by Chinese artists, or recited with music by the poet herself. But perhaps the clearest testimony of the increasing experimentation and achievements of sound poetry in Taiwan is provided by the 2014 Taishin Arts Award in Taipei, exclusively dedicated to pieces of sound poetry and art, thus putting the genre at the centre of the cultural debate.<sup>15</sup>

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tradition or consumerism. Its repertoire includes a vast variety of sounds, which are typically non-language based, but may vary from the natural to the electronic, the industrial, and the mechanical.

<sup>14</sup> The most famous figures include: Hsia Yü, Chen Kehua (陳克華), Lu Hanxiu (路寒袖), Lin Xi (林夕), and Fang Wenshan (方文山). In 2002, Hsia Yü released *Hsia Yü: The More Mixed up with Music the Better* (夏宇愈混樂隊 *Hsia Yü yue hun yue dui*), a double-album CD, whose title in Chinese contains a pun where the structure "愈 *yue* . . . 愈 *yue* . . ." ("the more . . . the more . . ."), substitutes the second 愈 *yue* with 樂 *yue* for music, and 對 *dui* for right, with 隊 *dui* for band, so that the title contains the meaning of my translation. In 2006, Ya Xian (痲弦) released *Sound beyond Xian*; in 2009, Guan Guan (管管) released a DVD named after his collection *The Brain Flower*, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Official recognition of sound experimentation in Taiwan has often generated controversy, being interpreted as a process of institutionalization of the genre. For Yan Jun, in the last years,



## Main Practices and Ways of Saying

In “Sinophone/Chinese: ‘The South Where Language Is Lost’ and Reinvented” Kim Chew Ng, citing from Wang Anyi’s comparative discussion of Taiwan’s and Mainland’s fiction, glosses that Taiwan writers’ emphasis on language techniques “simply extends and exaggerates the content and form of lexical definition, activating the content of Mandarin itself” (86). I want to argue however that, within the discourse of Sinophone Taiwan, the techniques used by sound poets in fact do not aim at extending or exaggerating the lexicon. Rather, in an act of resistance to the “hierarchy of languages,” according to which Mandarin is at the top, sound poetry makes a much more radical attack on logocentrism, and on the Chinese poetic tradition for the latter’s reverence toward the Sinitic script, by discarding, not extending, Chinese characters’ meaning within what I will call a poetics of “semantic abjection.”<sup>16</sup> There is no difficult semantic meaning to be understood, as there is no grammar or syntax to engage our intellect. Whereas poetry has generally presented the lyrical subject’s experience through a speaking voice as the source of utterance, through figurative language and images that circumscribe the psychological world of a unified persona, or more fragmented, multiple voices that activate our feelings and thoughts in the crucibles of semantic nuances, sound poetry operates in substantially alternative ways. As detailed below, sound poems are language-based compositions that are “recited in a voice that speaks, rather than sings,” and “whose principal means of coherence is sound, rather than syntax or semantics” (Kostelanetz 61-62). Sound poetry works as cognitive enhancer, as source of mental stimulation, directly acting on perception. As music, it is immersive and does not *signify*, because its words are used as activators of *sensible*

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“noise” has turned into “sound art,” thus synchronizing “with the process of formalizing a capitalist democratic society. Now everything is named. People know what they are doing and where they are” (Hanson). One of the curators of the exhibition of the Taishin Arts Award, Jeph Lo, has also been ambivalent, maintaining that sound arts should remain alternative (“Zero”). And Lin Chih-Wei, one of those shortlisted for the Award, is also for the maintaining of the underground status of sound art (“Taiwan Sound”).

<sup>16</sup> The notion of abjection is adapted from Kristeva and Spivak, where it receives complex psychoanalytical (Kristeva) and postcolonial socio-political (Spivak) elaborations. I here, however, simply use the term to refer to the process of linguistic degradation, and semantic expulsion that aims at voiding the word of its communicative meaning, presenting, to paraphrase Kristeva, a counter-word, the inside-out word (*Desire in Language*). In psychoanalysis, this process is seen as a form of psychic defence, necessary to create one’s subjectivity. In this particular context of sound poetry, I see it as a militant action in defence of a use of the Chinese characters that is independent from Mandarin.

meanings, stimulating states of mind, without the mediation of signification. These poems can build on the modulation of the voice, and they can ritualize sound, noise, and silence, away from the content of words. They are distinct from songs, because their verbal medium is written and voiced, but not sung. In its phenomenological aesthetics, Taiwan sound poetry can be easily linked to deconstructivist theories and critiques of metaphysical presence and logocentrism,<sup>17</sup> which indeed interact with much sound poetry in Europe and the USA. These and an array of aesthetic theories of sound, from Hugo Ball to Attali, can be used as reference for Taiwan sound poetry, too. But such legitimate references should not downplay the specificity of the Taiwan context, with its own avant-gardist translingual poetic tradition and its own poetics of sound that, to my mind, clearly differentiates it not only from much sound poetry around the world, but also from sound poetry as practiced and conceived in mainland China.

Linguistic sound is processed in the same way as non-human sound, the ears capturing the signals and sending them to the brain to be made sense of. The brain analyzes these vibrations and informs the perceiver of what type of sound is involved. But what happens if the linguistic units, for whatever reason, do not correspond to any plausible meaning? The brain still perceives them as sound, but ascribes musical qualities to them.

Let us imagine the context where we are surrounded by a foreign language that we do not understand. What we perceive is that language's sound features, without being able to catch the meaning. Since the brain cannot apparently avoid attempting to decipher the signals sent to it, interpretation will shift to the perceptual level. Similar observations were made by Taiwanese sound artist Wang Hong-Kai (王虹凱). In an interview with CUP Magazine, she stated that she began to be interested in sound when she first moved to New York and found herself in a linguistic environment that was different from hers:

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<sup>17</sup> Apart from Derrida's well known deconstructivist elaboration on the metaphysics of presence and the notion of *différance*, Paolo Virno's conception of language can be considered in assonance with the aesthetic concerns of many a sound poet. I refer in particular to the argument put forward in *Quando il verbo si fa carne* (2003), where Virno looks at language and syntax as blockage to the openness of perceptual, shared experience of reality, and to which he counters the performance of speech, because carried out in a public, interpersonal space and thus able of political action. Virno further individuates what he calls "second-degree sensism," that is sensations derived from linguistic modulation of sound and the aesthetics of certain words (38, 91-93).

And even now that I have no problems in listening, talking, reading and writing in English, I constantly look for, or put myself into, a condition of linguistic limitations. I like the excitement and obstacles of that. Not long ago, I was at an official dinner in Copenhagen, and listened to Danish for three hours. I felt as if I was listening to a long concert of experimental music. (n. pag.)

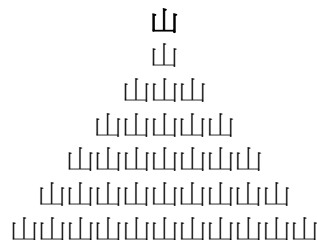
The quotation is relevant not only because it gives clues to certain mechanisms of sound poetry, but also because it confirms that this artist's interest in listening and sound was triggered by a translingual environment.

In order to examine the many varieties of Taiwan sound poetry, I have divided these works into three main groups, in accordance with the types of techniques employed.

### 1.

The first, perhaps most common, technique pertains to the extrication of semantic meaning from the sounded characters through repetition and other textual devices, such as homotony, rhyming, or the holding of consonants or vowels, manipulations that distance the performed linguistic segment from everyday speech. This technique links quite naturally with the work by many a concrete poet, such as Lin Hengtai (林亨泰), Lo Men (羅門), or Chen Li (陳黎), but it can be also observed in the rap-like performances by Guan Guan, and in some digital poems by Tsao Jerlian (曹志漣) and Yao Dajuin.

The performance of repetitive texts such as “Mountain” (山 “Shan”), by Lo Men revolves around the exploitation of the linguistic unit of the character as primarily visual and sonic material for poetic effect. The performance of one single character (*shan*), arranged in the shape of a mountain, produces a sound that can resemble that of the physical effort made when climbing a mountain.





It can be read in a varying tempo: as *shaaaaan*, as if the persona were emitting a deep sigh after a prolonged effort, or as a series of *shan, shan, shan*, shorter sighs expressive of the effort required during continued movement. Here, the visual repetition of one character emphasizes the context of its meaning, while its audio performance shifts its meaning to the realm of a bodily sensation.

Repetition can also be constructed with entire narrative segments, or lines, so as to create a pressing rhythm that is able to alter the processing of the linguistic units by the brain.<sup>18</sup> Many examples can be found, with eminent names such as Bai Ling (白靈), Bi Guo (碧果), Chen Li, Su Shaolian (蘇紹連), Xiang Yang (向陽), Xiaoxiao (蕭蕭), or Zhan Bing (詹冰). These poets' aesthetic aims include an inventive use of the Chinese language that relies on linguistic reduction, playfulness, triviality and eccentricity, in order to innovate poetry, in contraposition with the authoritative conventions of a poetics of lexical nuances and deep thought. Taiwan concrete poetry's treatment of sonic and visual matter brings poetry directly into the performance space and links in with sound poetry's use of linguistic but not semantic units.

The poet Yao Dajun started off as an online concrete poet, gradually becoming one of the most internationally renowned digital poets. He has been experimenting with the analysis and modulation of the pronunciation and tones of Chinese characters on screen:

I have gradually developed a sort of fetish for the character . . . working in synaesthesia, including electroacoustic/computer music and visuality, exploiting the form, the sound and the meaning of characters. It is a kind of total art. (Yao, "When" 120)

An example of such experimentation is the digital piece "Study on the Tonality & Athletics of Beijing Speech" (北京話聲調的運動性研究 "Beijing hua shengdiao de yundongxing yanjiu"). Despite the title's reference to Beijing parlance,

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<sup>18</sup> In a 2012 essay, I have discussed Chen Li's poem, "A War Symphony" (戰爭交響曲 "Zhanzheng jiaoxiangqu"), which also displays a repetitive narrative, demonstrating a clear interest in sound matter. This and other poems by Chen Li can be experienced as performed sound poems at his website entitled *Chen Li shi yue ying yin ji* 陳黎詩樂影音集 (*Collection of Performed Poems by Chen Li*).

here the use of linguistic sounds does not seem to wish to place the reader in a specific spatial dimension. It seems rather to aim at an oblique critique that may refer to Beijing as the place of political authority and its parlance as the language of political nonsense. The poem starts off with two characters, 乒 *pīng* and 乓 *pāng* (ping-pong), that visually and sonically alternate on the screen as in a table-tennis match. These are however soon substituted by other disyllabic words that have the same first tones as the binomial 乒乓 *pīng-pāng*, thus producing similar sounds and rhythm, albeit unrelated semantically: 叮噹 *dīngdāng* (on. jingle), 芳香 *fāngxiāng* (fragrant), 雞湯 *jītāng* (chicken soup), 鏗鏘 *kēngqiāng* (sonorous), 燈光 *dēngguāng* (lamp light), 骯髒 *āngzāng* (filthy), 驚慌 *jīnghuāng* (panic), 相當 *xiāngdāng* (quite), 風霜 *fēngshuāng* (weathered), 插秧 *chāyāng* (transplant), 幫腔 *bāngqiāng* (help singing), 東方 *dōngfāng* (East), 汪汪 *wāngwāng* (on. barking), 思鄉 *sīxiāng* (homesick), 鴛鴦 *yuānyāng* (Mandarin ducks), 西裝 *xīzhuāng* (men's Western suit), 滄桑 *cāngsāng* (vicissitudes), 窩囊 *wōnāng* (cowardly), 蒼蒼 *cāngcāng* (vast and hazy), 金剛 *jīngāng* (King Kong), 生薑 *shēngjiāng* (raw ginger). The poem could be read with reference to the 1962 “A New Song of Beimang” (新北邨行 “Xin Beimang xing”), a poetic composition by Ge Bizhou (戈壁舟) with pronounced political content and rhythmic end-rhyme in *ang*. If the reference is plausible, the political reading of Yao's poem is even more convincing, with the title presenting a pun, whereas 運動 *yundong* alludes to athletics as well as to political movement. In Yao's poem, the repetition of the homotonal, rhyming disyllabic compounds disrupts narrativity and shows that characters hold musical information and that the rhythms, textures and melodies of voiced characters communicate whether the words used form a coherent meaning or not. Although in these poems by Yao the characters used may be seen as belonging to Mandarin, because they are devoid of sense, they can be said to belong to no particular linguistic system. In fact, they are treated as pure sound, acting on perception, triggering sound associations. In a crucial, critical way, these “Chinese” characters are subverting their own system of signification, being playfully used as rhythmic units.

## 2.

A second, recurrent technique entails poets making use of recorded, real-life utterances that, because they are taken out of their original context, are able to draw attention to the sonic features (e.g., rhythms, pitches, timbres, non-standard parlance) of a word, or even whole narrative chunks of conversations. Real-life texts, with their obvious verisimilitude, localize the poem ever so strongly. We can

see this technique applied in Chen Roujeng's 陳柔錚 "Transported Taipei," Yao Dajuin's *Cinnabar Red Drizzle*, and Xiang Gu's "Animation of the Claims of the Upside-Down Duck," as well as Teng Chao-Ming's "To Sing or Not to Sing?," each of which has its own specific aesthetic effects.

Yao Dajuin's long poem (19.04 minutes) "Writing of Sounds of Writing" (書寫聲音書寫 "Shuxie shengyin shuxie"), from the collection *Cinnabar Red Drizzle* (丹紅的細雨 *Danhong de xiyu*), presents a collage of recorded environmental noises, such as traffic, typing, steps, music, and unidentified sounds, and human voices from various sources that sound like television, telephone, radio, regular conversations, or lectures. Some fragments are spoken in other languages, for example in German, English, or Chinese dialects. At times, the recorded voice is divided into segments, repeated, and even "scrubbed," as in a piece where a DJ moves a vinyl record back and forth.

In an interview with Li Shunxing (李順興), Yao Dajuin defined this kind of experimentation as a Chinese adaptation of the basic aesthetic concept of *musique concrète*, where the *objet trouvé* is the human voice, rather than non-human sounds. He claims affinity with some early Dadaist works, and implies that the use of "untouched" real-life materials aims at a deviation from Chinese traditional and mainstream poetics with its emphasis on rhetorical pathos. The purpose of the piece is then not to describe the material used, nor is it to manipulate materials so as to surprise, move, or even amuse with humor. The concept behind this and other poems by Yao is to enable the audience to extend their ability to listen. Yao has repeatedly stated that the text itself is quite irrelevant. What is important is to heighten attention towards listening as a process of experiencing, rather than extrapolating meaning (Yao, "When" 124). Or perhaps we could say that by drawing attention to the aural, sonic aspects of the words, the poet intensifies meaningful elements, outside semantics, that were being neglected.

"Chang haishi bu chang?" 唱還是不唱? ("To Sing or Not to Sing?"), by sound poet Teng Chao-Ming (鄧兆旻), was presented at the 2014 exhibition *ALTERing NATIVism: Sound Cultures in Post-War Taiwan*, held at the Museum of National Taipei University of Education (MoNTUE) in Taipei, and at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts. Teng's work included CD players, speakers, and high-definition ink-jet printings. The focus of attention of this piece is on the 1934 song "Yü ye hua" 雨夜花 ("A Flower in the Rainy Night"), whose text and paratexts, from its first publication to today, are manipulated into four printed posters which hung on the walls: one poster displays only punctuation marks; another one contains only dates; in another one the title of the song repeatedly floats

on the paper; another poster includes names, and a final one is compiled of citations from texts connected to the song. Visually, the text printed on the big posters resembles a concrete poem, with a lot of blank space between the words. Gradually, the text intensified, becoming less and less sparse, and more and more wordy.

“A Flower in the Rainy Night” is a song that has continued to be sung over 80 years, from the time of the Japanese rule on the island until today.<sup>19</sup> Throughout its history, the song has been exploited by all sorts of people, events, and ideologies, finally establishing itself as a representative Taiwanese folk ballad. Teng researched and collected the song’s numerous permutations, including all recorded albums and variations, its lyrics, its uses of symbols, its metaphors, all articles and performances related to it, and edited all the material chronologically, creating a history of the song’s life, which in a way is also a history of Taiwan.

Conceptually, this sound poem exemplifies a different approach to sound materials, since it uses the song as a marker of historicity.<sup>20</sup> By replacing one medium with another, by simply repeating the song’s title and punctuation, and listing dates, names and sources, Teng is able to emphasize specific socio-historical aspects of that text. In other words, Teng puts the chosen sound in relation with the social formations of a specific temporal space. The four posters evoke Taiwan’s unique range of sounds, from indigenous sound forms to Japanese and American propaganda, to the ubiquitous authoritarian sound of the martial law period, to advertisements of consumerist culture. Teng makes us notice the stratifications of the text in time, and interrogates how the more uncontrollable features of sound can become a paradigm for analyzing, classifying and sometimes regulating individuals and collectives. As French-born Taiwan resident and sound artist Yannick Dauby points out, sound, be it human or non-human, can be a tremendous source of information about a place (79). For these reasons, I see this technique as conceptually attempting to articulate Taiwan’s authentic voice against assimilation into the “colonist’s language.”

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<sup>19</sup> For a study of the uses of this song in a number of Taiwan political campaigns, see Guy.

<sup>20</sup> Apart from Teng Chao-Ming’s work discussed here, there are other examples of such an approach. Poet Tsao Jerlian, in the 1997 poem “Word Rave 1934” (字 Rave 1934 “Zi Rave 1934”), takes materials from volume 5 of the 1934 journal *Modern Magazine*, accompanying them with rhythmic electronic music. By collaging together segments of texts and repeating the words “modern,” “today,” and “faithful” taken from the linguistic context of the 1930s, she creates a bizarre feeling of modernity.

## 3.

Lastly, a third technique concerns the use of voiced segments—be they simple characters or entire lines—in ways that aim at obscuring meaning by creating noise. Examples are provided in Hsia Yü’s “Bad Trip” and Lin Chih-Wei’s “Tape Music.”

Hsia Yü’s “Bad Trip” is a track 1:07 minute in length that is entirely recited. The poet starts reading and, after a couple of lines, another voice starts reading from the beginning, and, after few lines, a third voice starts reading from the beginning, until, in the second stanza, a fourth voice joins in. All in all, the piece is recited by three female voices and one male voice. While, if taken in isolation, each single voice is calm and clear, the effect created by such a technique could be described as an overcrowded echo, something that minimizes the semantic meaning of the lines by making them unclear due to the noise of the superimposition.<sup>21</sup> Listening to this kind of texts that use sound as an invasive force is an experience that provokes an emotional response beyond linguistic comprehension: the superimposed voices have an evocative power and a mesmerizing effect, albeit the actual words become undistinguishable because of the superimposition.

Throughout the 1990s, Lin Chih-Wei situated himself at the center of Taiwan’s underground noise movement. He has written extensively on sound art and has often performed sound poetry around the world. For him, sound has always been an anti-mainstream cultural means. His piece entitled *Tape Music*, described at the beginning of this article, was performed in many venues, private and public, over nine years, from 2004 to 2013. It was also presented at Tate Modern London on 21 July 2012.<sup>22</sup> One year earlier, this and other Taiwanese sound artists’ pieces were performed as part of the Collateral Events at the 54th Venice Biennale of Art, under the title *Heard and Unheard—Soundscape Taiwan*.<sup>23</sup> In 2007 it was presented in various venues in Stockholm, Paris, Taipei, and Beijing, with the title *Sound Intestines*.

*Tape Music* may be reminiscent of the Dadaist Kurt Schwitter’s sound poetry performances of the 1920s. Conceptually, it also refers back to John Cage’s idea of

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<sup>21</sup> The same idea is conceptually and graphically expressed in Hsia Yü’s latest collection, *Pink Noise*, a book that is printed on acetate pages, in different fonts, and in black and pink colors, with texts mainly in English and Chinese, resulting in a visually and sonically superimposed textual agglomerate.

<sup>22</sup> A recording of various performances of this piece is available on the Tate website. See Lin, “Tape.”

<sup>23</sup> Other participating sound artists included: DJ @llen, Su Yu-Hsien (蘇育賢), Wang Fujui (王福瑞), and Wang Hong-Kai.



using the tape recorder as a musical instrument (Cage 3), while also operating an interesting deviation through the employment of humans instead of the machine. Another sound poem that springs to mind in connection with *Tape Music* is Paula Claire's 1979 *Involvulus (Declarations 1)*. That too featured a tape, in this case about eight meters in length, inscribed in black marker pen with all the words evolving from the root "volv," snarling up the audience and getting them truly involved, as they read what they saw and improvised what they heard. In Lin's *Tape Music*, the randomness of the words on the ribbon is highlighted by the fact that one sound is repeated several times, with regular Pin-yin transcription and non-normative spelling, before being changed into another one. Voiced again and again, the single characters are repeated over and over, making sound cross over noise. Therefore, the whole tape does not create any syntactic meaning; it simply arranges a series of sounds that are always voiced in a different way, according to the participants, their intonations, accents, and interpretations of the sounds.<sup>24</sup> *Tape Music* is therefore an organized text that engages with the audience in a controlled way. It produces mechanical sound, driven completely by humans, as if those partaking in the performance were part of a machine playing the sound off a tape. It is at once an individual and a collective sound, a physical sensory sound that plays as a tape recorder. The piece also creates a unique effect each time, with a temporary community performing a repetitive text in an event that cannot be repeated. The simple yet conceptually rich machine-like assemblage of the performers' voices—the audience, a collectivity of authors—mutates as the performance goes on, expanding each performer's connection. The result is an intensely corporeal energy that unravels among the performers.

## Conclusion

As detailed above, sound poetry evolved in the context of Taiwan through three main modes of textual performativity: 1) the creation of a graphically and acoustically enhanced poetic text that, through a rediscovering of onomatopoeia, voicing, and homotonicity, determines a different, perceptual understanding of the words; 2) the recording and composition of real-life linguistic segments, or use of found sound objects, often accompanied by written or visual representations of the text; 3) recordings or free improvisations in performance aiming to create noise as a

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<sup>24</sup> In some performances made with a Chinese-speaking audience, the poet has also exploited the four tones of Mandarin in order to create variation in a peculiar choral-like manner.

method to undermine semantics and provoke a powerful effect through a kind of incantatory or chanted mode.

All of these works incline to intermediality, open-form compositions, experimentalism, alternative channels of performance, and stronger resistance to commercialization, which has made the genre resolutely avant-gardist in character, culturally destabilizing, and generally challenging in aesthetic expectations and conceptual assumptions. The innovative operations of sound poetry are concerned with the inclusive and penetrative power of voice, the capability of sound to disrupt linguistic narrativity, the unreliability of the human brain, and the arbitrariness of linguistic meaning.

In many performances, the traditional separation between performer/poet and audience is reconfigured, both by the absence of a predetermined semantic meaning to be transmitted, and by shifting the roles. The audience is the performer, the poet becomes the listener. Moreover, in bringing text and the bodies of the audience members together in a more intimate relation, through the voice, this poetics runs counter to the idea of a transcendent (or self-contained) realm of poetic creation. Following the ideal of narrowing down the distance between art and society, the reliance of sound poetry on live performance, and on experiencing sound in a phenomenological way, appears to stand in opposition to the stay-at-home, isolating culture determined by the silent reading of a book.

As with so much sound poetry around the world, Taiwan sound poetry confronts traditional poetics with the alternative notion that language and intellect have been overused, and that emphasis on visual and aural aspects can detach from meaning, liberating new possibilities in ways of saying. The performed-textual techniques encourages us to pay attention to the glitches and differences in the performer's voice, the intonations, the modulations, the voice speed, the pace and rhythm, the prosodic patterns created anew at the time of the performance, the modulations of the voices, the pitch, the diction, the accents, the sighs, the unexpected sonic events—everything there is to be heard that can be emotionally significant, but that is not meaning. Sound poetry is about language, but its spotlight is cast not on grammar, syntax, or semantics, but on the power of words beyond semantics, into the performance.

The crucial cultural and political environment of Taiwan's colonial past and Sinophone intervention has determined a series of literary practices that can be seen as subversive tactics. Although these sound texts may use Chinese characters, Pinyin, Taiwan National Phonetic system, or IPA transliterations, they are subversive towards the Chinese script. In fact, the intervention of sound poetry in Sinophone

writing aims at undermining expectations of signification and starting over with destabilizing ways of saying. In this light, I would argue that sound poetry is a highly political tactic aimed at crossing cultural, historical, and linguistic boundaries, by favoring sound over the authority of the Sinitic script. Sound poetry's strong reliance on performance and on the participatory mode can also be seen as part of this strategy.

I have argued that, while the proponents of Taiwan sound poetry insist upon breaking with Chinese poetic tradition, advocating Western trends and trying to avoid definitions, a correlation can be in fact recognized in the artistic engagements of sound poetry with a specifically Taiwanese avant-gardist use of language, as initiated by the translingual post-war generation of poets, who, within their linguistic context, shifted their attention to the concreteness of form and to a poetic experience that was more sensorial than intellectual.

The anxiety of the separation from mainland China, and resulting suspense of international recognition of Taiwan as a nation-state have constituted the social and economic environment that prompted Taiwan's avant-gardist change in aesthetics since the beginning of the twentieth century. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the new aesthetics forged by Taiwan sound poetry for a new audience has still much to do with a contemporary perception of mainland China as the superpower that threatens an assimilation of Taiwan localness on the global stage. This is why it links in quite naturally with the circuit of Sinophone literature (as theoretically articulated by Shih in "Cosmopolitanism"), with its use of phonics, scripts and sounds that rearticulate Chinese-language writing in a discordant voice. At the same time, because voice, with its vibrations of sound, literally affects the audience in a physical way, Taiwan sound poetry can perhaps fulfill the ambition of bending language to the point that it mobilizes the desire for a global communication. It is therefore important that, expanding as a platform for global intercultural exchange, Taiwan sound poetry is explored and described together with other global practices, so as to enable the wider participation of Taiwan sound poetry in new research and in the global discourse.

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