

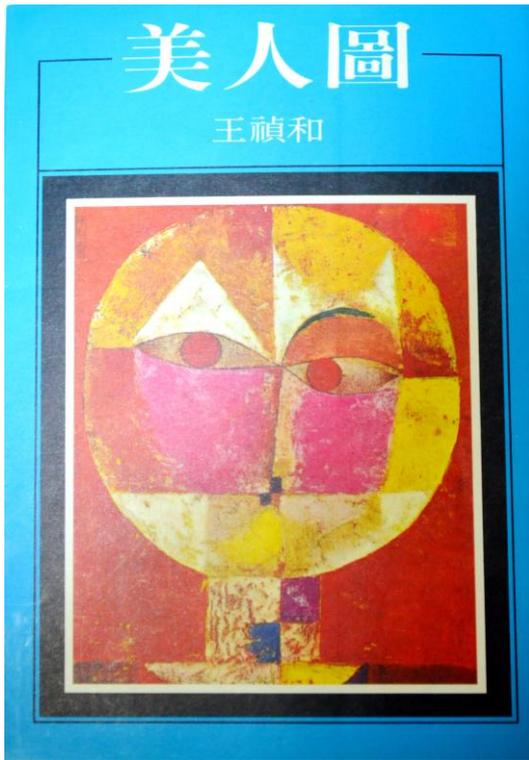
# **The Comical Body: Another Nativist Literature in Taiwan**

Chih-chi Weng ([cupakay@gmail.com](mailto:cupakay@gmail.com))

National Chengchi University, Taipei

The commonly discussed Nativist literature in the 1980s Taiwan is what I call the “conservative Nativist literature,” which shares a China-centric aspiration of the KMT or shows a “politically safe” stance. However, my presentation focuses on another Nativist literature, which is rarely discussed: the comical Nativist literature in the 1980s rather than its conservative predecessor in the 1970s. The 1980s Nativist literature is so avant-garde that I argue this alternative Nativist literature brings forth aesthetics innovation that deserves more attention..

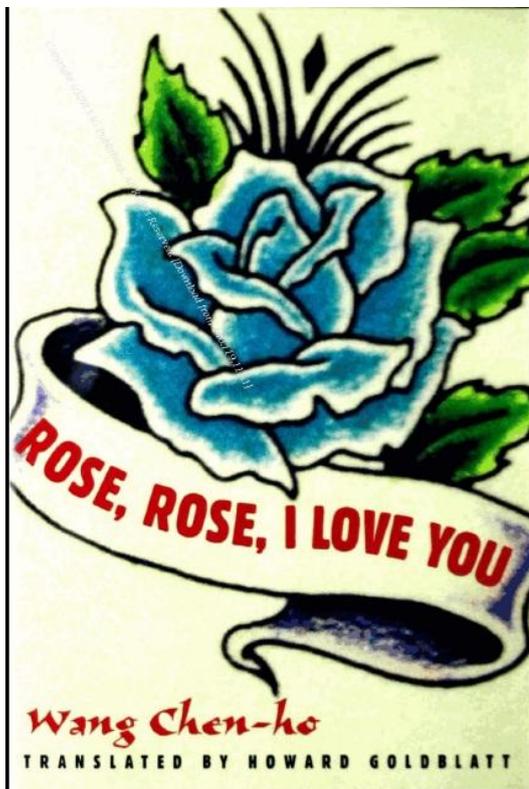
The examples of this alter Nativist literature include Chen-ho Wang(1940-1990)’s *Portraits of Beautiful People* (1981) and *Rose, Rose, I Love You* (1984), Yi-yun Lin (1956-)’s *Everybody Loves Reading Comedy* (1989).



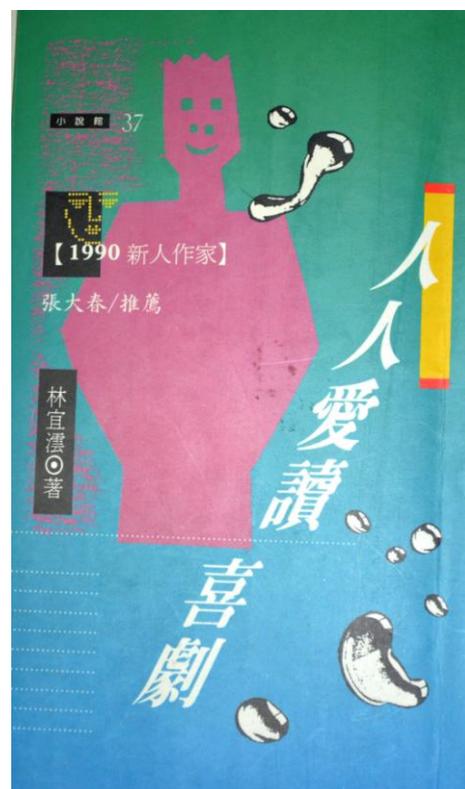
*Portraits of Beautiful People*



*Rose, Rose, I Love You*  
(Chinese Edition)



*Rose, Rose, I Love You*  
(English Edition)



*Everybody Loves Reading Comedy*

Wang is known for his portrayals of the sexualized persons and sexualized bodily functions or characteristics. For example, sexual plump women, prostitutes, homosexual persons, and obesity, scatological jokes about clowns (such as the stupid men who fart), and body odors. The other writer, Lin, is committed to representation of the strip shows and the obese men..

They interrogate the process of capitalist modernization by referring to and relying on the writing techniques from American literature although these writers are politically critical of American hegemony. The adopted style is naughty, absurdist, sarcastic; for example, Wang is famous for distorting or “de-standardizing” the Chinese language by mixing and matching it with English, Japanese and dialect words in order to make the Chinese language sound nonstandard, eroticized, and obscene. Very often his distorted language is used to portray the sexual activities of the body. Representations of the sensuous body are especially important in this literature. The purpose of my presentation is to offer observations by focusing on “the body” in the 1980s literature.

First, I look at the body in Chen-ho Wang’s fiction.

The story of *Portraits of Beautiful People* takes place in a tourist agency, where most of employees madly embrace everything American. They show off by preferring to use English as their lingua franca, and to exhibit their attractive bodies styled after

the American mainstream esthetics. Interestingly, the writer challenges both their language and beautiful bodies.

The female characters in *Portraits of Beautiful People* are all made sexualized.

For example:

Grace Hu convulsed with laughter, her breast without a bra shook badly in her low-cut dress. Daniel Chang and T.P. Ku (pronounced as “to kick ass” in Chinese) were talking about jargon used in Mahjong, such as “touching oneself,” which sounds like “sexually caressing oneself.” As they saw Grace Wu laugh so wildly, they stopped talking immediately and stared at her breast, wishing they could see through her clothes. Grace Hu laughed again and her two tits rocked and shook, now they were like a pair of baseballs flying out of the baseball game field.<sup>1</sup>

貞潔狐更是笑得前仰後合，沒戴罩子底乳房在她低胸的薄衫裡搖來撞去得十分厲害，眼看就要三振出局了。丹尼爾·張和踢屁股本在一旁大談麻將經，什麼自摸，什麼胡，什麼番……地正聊得唾沫橫飛，見到那一隻貞節狐笑得形骸都快脫散了，立止談「經」，目光都停在貞潔狐底胸前，恨不得能夠透視到底去。……又浪笑了一大陣，乳房又顫又跳，要成一雙界外

---

<sup>1</sup> *Portraits of Beautiful People*, Taipei: Hongfan Company, 1982. P.7.

球了。(頁 7)

……丹尼爾底話還沒完，貞節狐就已格格地笑得兩隻無拘無束的大奶就要全壘打出來啦！踢屁股與丹尼爾的兩隻眼又不聽使喚了，只曉得往她底胸行起最熱切的注目禮。(頁 12)

T.P Gu and Daniel could not remove their eyes from Grace's unruly breast.<sup>2</sup>

In the quotation above, Grace Hu is a young lady with good shape. Her male colleagues Daniel and T.P. are fascinated with her body. Wang compares the viewers of Grace's breast to the spectators of a baseball game. Both baseball games and breasts are preferred objects of male gazes in Taiwan that they become one. Every time Grace laughs, it means to the male onlookers one offense in a baseball game. It may go to a "strike-out," a "four ball," or a "homer." The baseball game is metaphorical of the bra-free breast, which is "dangerous" and "powerful." As Grace is the woman beyond control, similar to a baseball beyond the field, she easily controls the gazes of men.

Wang also highlights ugliness often. In *Portraits of Beautiful People* numerous ugly characters presume themselves to be beautiful, but they turn out to be criticized throughout this novel. For example, the protagonist of the novel, the upright Mr. Lin,

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, P.12.

is to pass passages Mrs. Wang while she is on the phone with her son:

Every pimple on Mrs. Wang's face are shining to transmit a maternal glory.

"Jimmy, you really are impossible. All you thinking about is cartoon and cartoon."

She picks up the cup, takes a dip of coffee bought in Ambassador Hotel, and her pimples shine again.

" All right, all right, mommy promises you, but you have to study English hard. Ok? Ok, mmm. Bye-bye."

As soon as Mrs. Wang hangs up the phone, as if touched by a witch's magic stick, her face becomes an overnight sesame seed cake, cold and repelling.

"Where are you going, Stupid? I didn't see you all morning, but there are many files to be done, do you know that?"

Lin immediately tells her the work assigned by V.D Wang.

"All right, so you're the only one who's busy in the office, others just do nothing and still take the salary?"

She puts down the coffee cup heavily. Pimples on her face become darker in a rapid fashion how the the prices of gasoline rise to a horrifying degree.,

As Mrs. Wang finds Lin do nothing and stay in the same place, pimples on Mrs. Wang's big-flat face becomes darker and darker. Her overnight sesame seed cake now becomes a black sesame seed cake.<sup>3</sup>

汪太太臉上的每顆痘痘都發著亮，母性的光輝。「吉米，you are really impossible，你滿腦筋就是卡通，卡通」端起杯子，品嚐了國賓飯店的香咖啡，臉上的痘子更是光輝無比了。「All right, all right, 媽咪答應你，不過你可得好好學英語噢！ok?ok?嗯嗯，byebye。」一放下電話，汪太太的大扁臉像給巫婆的魔杖點過，登時變成了隔夜的燒餅，又冷又硬。「你這二楞子到哪裡偷懶去啦？一早上都見不到你，一大堆文件堆滿了抽屜，你知不知道？」小林連忙把早上性病王交託他辦底公事一樁樁向她呈報。

「All right，全公司就只你一個人忙，旁人都閒著沒事幹，都在白拿薪水？」喀啞一聲，將咖啡杯用力一放，臉上的痘痘一顆接著一顆地發起黑來，像節節上升的石油價格，叫人看的又驚又怕。

見小林還站在原地發呆，汪太太大扁臉上的痘痘更黑污上來，隔夜的燒餅倒成了黑芝麻餅啦！（41~42）

In the passage above, Wang describes a middle class woman whose pimples are strongly influenced by her mood. Pimples shimmer while she shows her love to her

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, P.41-2.

son, and pimples darken when Mrs. Wang interacts with her subordinate Lin. The narrator of the novel indicates the emergence of ugliness by focusing on this woman's pimples.

The narrator makes pimples as an 'overnight sesame seed cake' and a 'black sesame seed cake', their appearance symbolize an obnoxious mood. It's the simile and also the comparison. Even though the atmosphere isn't harmonious, the association with pimples in thinking is amusing.

As a member of the "beautiful people," Mrs. Wang is ugly. To most of readers, pimple is rejected, but to the narrator and Mrs. Wang, pimple is the requirement, and when the difference is produced, there are laughs occurred.

The depictions of the sexual and the ugly are also abundant in *Rose, Rose, I Love You*. *Rose, Rose, I Love You* takes place in Hualien, a coastal city by the Pacific Ocean. Far from major cities in Taiwan, Hualien has been economically dependent on tourism.

In *Rose, Rose, I Love You*, the sexualized persons representatives are those bar girls to be. The bar girls embody the sexual in the novel. The narrator in the novel is similar to the narrator in *Portraits of Beautiful People*, for he is also attentive to sexualized details of the body. He is obviously attracted to the bar girls' breasts and depicts them in various forms. There's the breast which has done an implant surgery:

Stumpy Courtesan, already forty-four years old, possessed an alarmingly oversized breast (I'll let you in on a secret: she'd had implant surgery in Taipei, but three years and eight months later her Marilyn-Monroe tits suddenly started migrating. Even after a prolonged hospitalization, they stubbornly refused repatriation).<sup>4</sup> (Translator: Howard Goldblatt)

The phrase "Marilyn-Monroe tits" indicates a standard of beauty during the time of the narrative, which is situated during the Vietnam War. Because of the Vietnam War, the presence of American soldiers looms large in Taiwan, which is more thoroughly permeated by various aspects of American hegemony, including American popular culture.

Marilyn Monroe's body is the ideal body, and it drives people to make a sexual fantasy, to mimic the shape, to own the figure. Stumpy Courtesan makes the Marilyn Monroe tits on her body through an implant surgery, and the surgery isn't successful enough because they migrated.

One of the best-known ugly characters in Wang's fictions is a teacher of English, Dong Siwen, whose name literally means "one who understands refinement." Yet his

---

<sup>4</sup> *Rose, Rose, I Love You*, New York : Columbia University Press, c1998. P.8.

name serious contradicts his appearance. He's an intellectual with an obese size, ample hindquarters, and an enormous belly. He looks like anything other than a teacher of English, in fact were better suited to a general administration head who was on the take. Rather, he is more similar to a vulgar businessman. Teacher Dong is virtually a mirror image of Shi Song.



Shi Song is a popular clown figure on TV in Taiwan.

Furthermore, Teacher Dong is also famous for a scatological characteristic: He farts loudly whenever he feels excited or nervous. During a sex-education lecture ironically arranged in a church, Teacher Dong is so inspired by the speaker, the hemophilic Doctor Yun Songzhu that he intervenes in the lecture by farting:

It wasn't until seven or eight minutes later that the congregation had another chance to hear Siwen's celebratory wind-breaking. No one was disappointed, for it was even more sonorous than its predecessor; an apt comparison would be to the first explosions of New Year's firecrackers. Just imagine: even Yun Songzhu stopped in midsentence and couldn't continue his sex-education lecture for several seconds, even then the tremor in his voice made it clear that he was badly shaken. It was a repeat performance- the same excitement and joy combined to drive the wind loudly out of Siwen's backside. An indication of mood, perhaps?<sup>5</sup> (Translator: Howard Goldblatt)

The wind-breaking is an effective explosion in this seemingly serious occasion (but this occasion, to teach local bar girls English in order to cater to American GIs, is never a seriously serious). This anti-aesthetic faux-pas, the farting, contracts the church as a solemn space. Farting in the public is usual, but farting loudly in the public will be a surprise, and that's the punch line for laughing.

In the discussion of comedy, ugliness is seen an affection of negation.<sup>6</sup> The experiences of ugliness is not beautiful, and it is ripping the worthlessness for

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, P.171.

<sup>6</sup> Rong-ben Nai, *Laugh and the Aesthetics of Comedy*, Beijing: China Drama Co., 1988. P.193.

showing. As Nikolai Chernyshevsky discussed in ‘Comical’<sup>7</sup>, negation is necessary in a comedy because getting through negation, human being could feel free . However, beauty is thought of simple and unitary, and ugliness is a variation. Beauty has a definite opinion, whereas ugliness is a kind of innovation. Wang creates a new sense of beauty, and produces more changeable meanings by comical bodies.

The last example of the body I’d like to discuss is in Yi-yun Lin’s fiction. Many critics discuss Yi-yun Lin along with Chen-ho Wang, partly because they are from the same town of Hualian, and partly because they are famous for their comical style in fiction.

In his novel *Everybody Loves Reading Comedy*, he describes the carnivalesque bodies that are chaotic, tumultuous and ebullient. The story takes place in the H city, where a dance group ”Lily” is lead by Mr. Chuang. The female members of Lily appeal audiences by blowing kisses on the street and emphasize how feminine their bodies look. In a curtain call of the show is a scene of revelry scene.

After A-shue sang, she took a bow and saying: “Finally, all of us come on the stage for thanking you again.” The stage shines, and Mr.Chuang turn on the speaker at the backstage. The magnificent and mighty Plum Blossom March

---

<sup>7</sup> Nikolai Chernyshevsky *Discusses Literature*, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House,1979.P.95.

plays with a loud crash, and then, the female members of Lily all come on the stage naked. They march on the spot high-spiritedly as if they were Trojan warriors who fought energetically. Everybody in the audience gets shocked with his mouth opened, and falls into the mixture of amazing music and shaking torsos. Young men at the corner sing together presently, whereas A-shue is so excited that she asks everyone to sing together. The crowd seems to be hypnotized and follows the music. The voice becomes stronger; the plum blossom overspreads everywhere. Little by little, there assembles a mighty current. In a boring, silent summer night, the show seems to break through the old roof of the theatre, and to liberate the place<sup>8</sup>

In the passage quoted above, the naked women are dancing the can-can dance, and singing a patriotic song on stage. Lin portrays a scene where noises and splendid bodies intertwine to a grotesque degree. I find it relevant to recall M. M. Bakhtin, according to whom the revelry is the voice of anti-culture and the popular culture for celebrating the desire of sensory organs. This revelry is against the official culture, or the authoritative culture. It's a grand banquet that people can join, and everyone could be the director, audience, or the performer alternatively and freely.<sup>9</sup> In Lin's work, I

---

<sup>8</sup> *Everybody Loves Reading Comedy*, Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co. P.47-8.

<sup>9</sup> Kang Liu, *Bakhtin's Dialogism and Cultural Theory*, Taipei: Ryefield, 2005. P.262.

believe the naked scene at a curtain call breaks through the daily norm. As the legs are busy kicking, they are also trying to kick off the restrictions of the society.

I claim that this alternative Nativist literature, which is rarely discussed, is so avant-garde that it brings forth innovation of aesthetics. The comical Nativist fiction relies on the body as a key metaphor for the contemporary society. Besides, the comical Nativist fiction mixes and matches the skills of literary modernism with those of literary realism skills. As I believe to interpret the comic fiction either as a modernist work or as a realist work is not sufficient, I have tried to tease out the mixture of the supposedly high modernism and the seemingly vulgar realism in the works by Wang and Lin.

-End