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**The Introspection of “Positive Decadence” in Taiwan Urban  
Literature**

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This paper will deal with the decadent phenomenon in Taiwanese urban literature in relation to space by analyzing *Dadongqu* (1995) written by Lin Yaode 林耀德. In the 1990s, when the third stage of Taiwan’s urban literature occurred (according to Lin Yaode, there are three stages of development in urban literature, with the first stage being in the 1930s, the second stage in the 1960s, and the third stage in the 1990s), more stories were created with city life being the background, such as *Dadongqu* (1995) by Lin Yaode, *Gongyu Daoyou* by Zhang Dachun 張大春, and so forth. Instead of debating over the issue of whether or not urban literature is the product of urban development, the writers in the 1990s emphasized the atmosphere of decadence

as a “phenomenon” in a developing city, and how inner positive thinking underlies an outward decadence.

Many studies treat decadence as a negative term. In *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder*, Pick (1993) contended that evolution is accompanied by degeneration and mutation, wherein mutation is regarded primarily as negative. Pick applied the term “mutation” to explain the (selfish) individualism, craziness, and indulgence in literary decadence, arguing that literary decadence was related to an author’s pathological problems. He also believed that decadence exerted a negative influence on literary developments, which could be exemplified by the decadent literature of Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Asia, during the Taishō period (1912-1926), the idea of decadence flourished with the establishment of New Sensation School in Japan. The writers of the School used decadence in their works as a symbol of sorrow and pain.

In *Dadongu*, one of the writing techniques that can be witnessed is Lin’s writing of space as “blankness”, which is intended to convey a decadent ideology: the loss of

truth, self-imperfection, and spiritual alienation. Instead of composing a coherent paragraph, Lin created blankness among sentences by making them independent from one another. This technique dates back to Song Dynasty (960-1279), when painters deliberately left parts of the canvas blank rather than filled in with patterns. In *The Aesthetics of Empty Space* Chen Jiajing 陳嘉璟 explained the function of blankness in space. According to Chen, if space is filled up with items, just as too much furniture is placed in a room, there will be no space for people.<sup>1</sup> Also, in the *Collection of Aesthetics*, Li Zehou 李澤厚 mentioned that with the combination of direct and incidental beauty comes the true beauty. The "direct beauty" refers to the beauty of the material or physical objects while the "indirect beauty" is derived from the beauty of blankness, which is invisible but imaginable. The combination of the two types of beauty makes it possible to sustain human sensibility and imagination, generating the joy humans feel in a particular place.<sup>2</sup>

Michel Foucault coined the heterotopia, a space different from mainstream society.

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<sup>1</sup> Chen, Jiajing 陳嘉璟. *The research on the beauty of room space*. 維摩斗室空間美感之研究. Taipei: Fa Gu Publishing, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Li, Zehou 李澤厚. *Collection of Aesthetics* 美學論集. Taipei: Carmel Publisher, 1987. 373-76.

He claimed that a heterotopia consisted of components in the reality as well as those in the non-reality. The following paragraph is quoted from Lin Yaode's *Dadongu* as an example of a heterotopia:

“Dadong District, at 2:15am. The roads which intersected with each other like a checkerboard were lined with countless lights. A profound sense of sequence pushed this moment to the highest point like the surging tide. The entire universe collapsed into the bottomless checkerboard. All the lightening streets stretched in a startling way on the map, swallowing every single location hidden in the dark. All the histories and spaces were sucked in the black holes of the billboards and indoor patterns. The relief sculpture on the spacecraft, the deserted Japanese sports car, the copper shield of Scottish style, and the other abstract symbols were included in the innocent buildings standing in rows.” (Page 12)

It can be found from the above passage that the space in question includes not only the items which fit in it, such as the lights and the street, but also those which are not assumed to be there, such as the spacecraft and the copper shield. Namely, the real and surreal overlap with each other, which is intended to illustrate an uncontrollable urban space.

The quoted passage above also displays an unusual arrangement of sentences. The way these sentences are presented is different from established and familiar novel genre. These sentences seem to be unrelated to one another due to the lack of detailed

description or a so-called blankness, causing the passage to be incoherent. Throughout this novel, this blankness technique is frequently applied, making its style more a poem than a novel. Additionally, this blankness adds an element of “defamiliarisation” to the novel. Bertolt Brecht proposed the theory of defamiliarisation as a means to disrupt the plot purposefully, or have the development stay in a certain point for a long time. The aim behind such disruption is to provoke the curiosity and interest of the readers. To create defamiliarisation in *Dadongu*, Lin Yaode provided readers with a sense of novelty, requiring them to actually engage in meaning making within the novel; their participation is required, in short. The blankness works as a stimulus, which spurs readers to use their imagination.

At a glimpse, of *Dadongu*, it seems to be a work of decadence literature. According to the Chinese dictionary *Ci Yuan* 辭源, "decadence" is defined as: 1. Collapsed 坍塌  
2. Demoralized 低落, drooping spirit 精神頹靡. In the Wei 魏 and Jin 晉 Dynasty, there were the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove 竹林七賢, who made efforts to change the political situation of the dynasty but failed in their attempts. To forget about their inability and desperation to effect change, they diverted their attention into toward sensational joy, indulging themselves in alcohol and singing, and liberated

themselves from social manners. This phenomenon of decadence can serve as an example of demoralisation and a drooping sagging spirit, as mentioned in the *Ci Yuan* 辭源. According to the Merriam-Webster English dictionary, "decadence" has three different meanings: 1. Marked by decay or decline 2. Literature: of, relating to, or having the characteristics of a group of late 19th century French and English writers tending toward an artificial and unconventional style: of, relating to, or having the characteristics of the decadents 3. Characterized by or appealing to self-indulgence.<sup>3</sup> It can be found from the second definition that decadence is applied to literature. Ben Avigdor stated that decadence in literature is “mental disease and weakness, and even madness.”<sup>4</sup> In 1868, Théophile Gautier brought up discussed what “decadence” in literature is when he wrote the introduction for the poetry collection of Charles Pierre Baudelaire. According to him, the writing style of decadence literature is delicate, complicated, and erudite. On the other hand, the context of decadence literature focuses on exploring the depth of the inner mind of humans, such as depraved emotions, craziness, horror, balderdash and mysteriousness. Based on the above explanations, decadence can be perceived as egoism people show

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decadent>

<sup>4</sup> Ben Avigdor's letter to Berdychevsky was written between November 25, 1898, and December 19, 1898. The resource is from the Romanticism and Decadence in the Literature of the Hebrew Revival which written by Hamutal Bar-Yosef

by addicting to the ideology of indulgence after they find themselves unable to change the outside environment.

In *Dadongu*, Lin Yaode presented decadence by portraying the college students as those who were addicted to drugs and casual sex, and engaged in fights with the local gangsters. The protagonists dismisses ignored the social rules and the popular mainstream perspectives, and indulged themselves in sensational excitement. Nonetheless, as happy as they were on the outside, they felt empty inside. This urban writing illustrates how the city is occupied by space machine, how those people who are manipulated by capitalism engage in decadent behaviour; people indulge in the pursuit of lust to escape from decadence; they liberate themselves from lust to find their true identity.

Although decadence is the theme throughout *Dadongu*, decadence itself should not be viewed simply as negative ideology; instead, it should be seen as a by-product of progress. Matei Calinescu argued that "the ideas of modernity and progress on the one hand, and the idea of decadence on the other, are mutually exclusive only at the crudest level of understanding." That is to say, the decadence itself implies not only

egoism and self-indulgence; it also possesses a dualistic angle: decadence in tandem with significant societal developments. Furthermore, he stated that “The fact of progress is not denied, but increasingly large numbers of people experience the result of achievement with the anguished sense of loss and alienation. Once again, progress is accompanied by decadence. Insofar as it is an unavoidable aspect of life, decadent is nothing to be fought, it is a necessary phenomenon and belongs to every age and every people.”<sup>5</sup> The statement manifests that decadence is a normal outcome of rapid urbanization. When people fail to adapt or catch up with rapid change, decadence emerges. Although decadence is the subsequent phenomenon of rapid urbanization, it does not impede society from developing. Therefore, it is unnecessary to view decadence in a negative way.

In addition, the abovementioned blankness utilized in Lin Yaode’s writing proves that Lin did not treat decadence as nothing but negativity. The blankness found in the paintings of Song Dynasty embody the philosophy of Daoism, including Zhuangzian toward life: the “unity of nature and humans 天人合一”. According to Daoist philosophy, an inhabitable house is supposed to offer “empty” space. Namely, when a

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<sup>5</sup> Five Faces of Modernity, 183

house is packed with furniture and has little room left, it is no longer suitable for human life. What they advocate is that fullness and emptiness are both necessary and should be preserved. With either of them absent, the unity Daoism pursues cannot be achieved. By using blankness in his writing, Lin attempted to express that decadence, akin to the emptiness in Daoism, is indispensable to one's life.

In conclusion, based on the analysis made in this study of Lin's work, it can be argued that decadence has a positive function. It has the potential to activate the drive to challenge, to experiment, and to fulfill the unity promoted by Aesthetics. The blankness technique is an experimental approach to literature. With this technique, Lin opens up more possibilities involving the definition of "decadence", including a form of positive decadence.