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Twelve Tanka on Scooters by Huang Minhuei

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Dean A. Brink
Twelve Tanka
on Scooters

Huang Minhuei
スクーターを題にする
十二首の短歌

Working itself to the bone
the lovely scooter
is the pal of ordinary people

Taking precautions left, right, back and front
out of nowhere buses and taxis
are the great enemy

It is our fate
to endure the ordeal
getting wet rainy days
riding against cold winds

One thing I take solace in
my skin sensing the change of seasons

The whole family riding on the scooter
though cramped infinite happiness

A baby held by a parent through the red light
smiles to me having no idea of the danger

A love scene unfolds on a scooter
though I cry out "a breach of traffic etiquette!"

Though I still worry about my friend getting used to life in Taiwan
and riding a scooter I'm glad too

After the demonstration flying the flag of Taiwan
heading toward the founding of the country on a scooter full speed ahead

Grateful all thanks to the protection of the gods
two accidents and not a scratch

On the handlebar I tie a talisman
taking to heart my mother's words *slow down*

I worry about my old and rusted pal
these days not sure to ride you or scrap you

Huang Minhuei (黃敏慧, Kō Binkei), a younger member of the Taiwan Tanka Association, is of a postwar generation of Taiwanese who are interested in Japan and Japanese poetry. She composed this sequence of twelve tanka in a classical Japanese idiom while being devoted to the most mundane of contemporary topics in Taiwan: scooters. Through the scooter, associations are formed with class differentiation, national identity and politics, love, immigration, health and aging, and even religion. The first verse indicates the scooter's class identification as "the pal of ordinary people." The first-person account then situates the poet in light of being the underdog in relation to buses and taxis, and next in terms of the weather. In rendering this sequence of twelve tanka in English, the problem arose when trying to situate political and cultural details alluded to in the poet's often tongue-and-cheek affection for her scooter without adding background information in the poems. The remaining eight poems focus more on the object-relation between a citizen and her scooter, which in Taiwan is something between a national icon and a common convenience. Taiwan has more scooters per capita than any place on Earth, and is also rather densely populated. The tanka referring to worrying about a foreigner adjusting to Taiwan and riding a scooter suggests a core irony I try to convey in the diction throughout the sequence: scooter-driving is a world unto its own. This impacts her worry about her friend in light of wondering if the friend can master the unwritten rules of traffic in Taiwan (and adapt to variations in different cities, neighborhoods, and situations). Interpersonal relations also take on this other-worldly coloring as the family crowded on a scooter out of necessity becomes an embodiment of "infinite happiness" (modeled after "a world in a grain of sand"), as do the poems that highlight the otherworldliness in "A baby held by a parent through the red light / smiles to me having no idea of the danger" and the comic distancing of the poet from "A love scene unfolds on a scooter / though I cry out 'a breach of traffic etiquette!'" The other-worldliness surrounding the materiality of scooters and cultural implications is also reflected in the spiritual language of "protection of the gods" and "on the handlebar I tie a talisman," while the line "flying the flag of Taiwan / heading toward the founding of the country on a scooter full speed ahead" suggests a political vision for Taiwan that, being a utopian hope in the current context, also carries a sense of an other-worldly dimension. The materiality of the scooter itself is highlighted in the closing: "not sure to ride you or scrap you." Thus, by focusing on rendering the description of various relations in a lightly ironic tone, these translations attempt to capture how the poet presents her scooter within a spectrum of divisions and personal aspirations. The poet herself assured me that she now has a new scooter.