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## Artistic Practice as a Project of Decolonization: Xu Bing and Wu Tien-Chang — A Proposal of Decolonial Methodology<sup>1</sup>

### Pratique artistique comme projet de décolonisation : Xu Bing et Wu Tien-Chang — Une proposition de méthodologie décoloniale

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This essay explores the concept of artistic practice as a means of decolonization, examining how art can foster critical thought without descending into mere propaganda. The author discusses *coloniality* as a contemporary power dynamic that perpetuates social hierarchies, emphasizing its psychological impact on identity and self-perception, particularly among colonized peoples. Drawing on theorists such as Lacan, Fanon, and Agamben, the essay proposes various methodologies for decolonization through art. These include archiving everyday objects to mobilize affective experience and critical thinking, displaying affective traces of the abject to expose colonial power dynamics, and employing techniques such as artistic epidermization to externalize internalized inferiority and facilitate a shift in the viewer’s subject position. These approaches challenge dominant narratives and encourage viewers to engage with their emotional

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws upon elements from my previously published works, reinterpreting them within the framework of artistic decolonization. For reference, see Liu, J., C., H., «The Translations of Ethos and the Unheimlich: Wu Tien-chang and the Post-Martial Law Era in Taiwan», in *Imaging and Imagining Taiwan: Identity Representation and Cultural Politics*, Chang, Bi-yu and Klöter, H. (eds.), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012, pp. 105-122 / Liu, J., C., H., «Aestheticization of Post-1989 Neoliberal Capitalism: From the Forms of Life to the Political Uses of Bodies», *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 41(1), March 2015, pp. 41-64.



experiences. The works of contemporary artists Xu Bing from China and Wu Tianchang from Taiwan are analyzed to illustrate these techniques, demonstrating how their art embodies the struggle against colonial legacies and the ongoing dynamics of contemporary colonialism.

**Keywords:** *Affective Coloniality, Artistic Decolonization, Xu Bing, Wu Tianchang.*

Cet essai explore le concept de pratique artistique comme moyen de décolonisation, en examinant comment l'art peut favoriser une pensée critique sans sombrer dans la simple propagande. L'auteur aborde la *colonialité* comme une dynamique de pouvoir contemporaine qui perpétue les hiérarchies sociales, en soulignant son impact psychologique sur l'identité et la perception de soi, particulièrement chez les peuples colonisés. S'appuyant sur des théoriciens tels que Lacan, Fanon et Agamben, l'essai propose diverses méthodologies de décolonisation à travers l'art. Celles-ci incluent l'archivage d'objets quotidiens pour mobiliser l'expérience affective et la pensée critique, l'affichage des traces affectives de l'abject pour exposer les dynamiques de pouvoir colonial, et l'utilisation de techniques telles que l'épidermisation artistique pour extérioriser l'infériorité intériorisée et faciliter un changement de position subjective chez le spectateur. Ces approches remettent en question les récits dominants et encouragent les spectateurs à s'engager avec leurs expériences émotionnelles. Les œuvres des artistes contemporains Xu Bing de Chine et Wu Tianchang de Taïwan sont analysées pour illustrer ces techniques, démontrant comment leur art incarne la lutte contre les légacies coloniales et les dynamiques contemporaines du colonialisme.

**Mots-clés:** *Colonialité Affective, Décolonisation Artistique, Xu Bing, Wu Tianchang*

### Coloniality and Archivation

Can artistic practice serve as a project of decolonization without falling into the trap of political propaganda? How can artwork propose critical thinking without being a doctrinal statement? How can artistic images move people so the viewers can feel the power of dislocation and re-adjust their subjective position?

Why am I talking about *coloniality* now? Why is it an important question? By 'coloniality', I refer not to historical domination by foreign powers but to the present-day colonial power dynamics that operate in our contemporary societies. It is a matrix of power dynamics that predetermine and reproduce hierarchical relations, the privileged as opposed to the oppressed, the ones who possess the properties and the others who offer their labor but are deprived of everything. Quijano addressed it as coloniality of power, or what Walter Mignolo called the "Colonial Matrix of Power".

What I find most fascinating but also most disturbing is the marks and depths of coloniality left on the affective dimension of the human psyche. Fanon said that colonial desire is articulated about the place of << the Other >>; that is, the fantastic space of



‘possession’ that no one subject can singly occupy<sup>2</sup>. As Homi K. Bhabha, put is, this space permits anyone to dream of “the inversion of roles” and “to stage the drama of identity”<sup>3</sup>.

Fanon also said that there are double processes of the imprint of the complex of inferiority in the colonized people: first, economic; second, internalization. Fanon characterizes this mechanism as the “epidermalization” of inferiority, “a racial epidermal schema”<sup>4</sup>. It is as if the deep-rooted sense of inferiority, in the depth of the soul, is transplanted onto the skin. You feel the unfitness and impropriety, even uncivilizedness, in your skin sensation, with all the visible traces: the skin color is not right, the accent is not right, the dress style is not right, the gestures, tastes, behaviors, etc. I call it *affective coloniality*.

During the Japanese colonial period (1895-1945), through literary texts, cultural policies, education system, and public discourses, we noticed a clear *politics of the psyche* and a particular mode of *xin* -the heart and the mind- is shaped. This mode of *psyche politics* requires the total identification and loyalty of the subject. Taiwanese people must learn how to speak the pure Japanese language, think and behave in Japanese ways, cleanse away their << barbarian heart >>, and purify themselves by instilling the Japanese spirit in their souls to become acknowledged as one of the Japanese subjects. The *barbarian heart*, the so-called *yidi zhi xin* (夷狄之心), is a concept borrowed from *zunwang rangyi* (尊王攘夷 honoring the emperor and riding off the barbarians). Here, the enemies to be gotten rid of are not the foreigners of neighboring countries but the internal alien and uncultivated elements that do not fit into the emperor’s system. It is in this colonial discursive framework that Taiwanese people felt that they despise themselves with ambivalent feelings against themselves for being “incomplete men”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Fanon, F., *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Markmann, C., L., London: Pluto Press, 1986, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Bhabha, H., K., «Foreword», in Fanon F., *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Markmann, C., L., London: Pluto Press, 1986, p. xxii.

<sup>4</sup> Fanon, 1986, *op.cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Liu, Joyce C.,H., «Immanence, Double-abjection and the Politics of Psyche in (Post) Colonial Taiwan», *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 17(2), 2009, pp. 261-288.



Such a sense of a wrong, incomplete, diseased, and bad body is felt as the state of abjection, to be expelled by the symbolic system, and can be corrected only through a change from the interior, an alteration of the *xin* 心 (heart). The matrix of affective coloniality can be produced and reproduced through education and the archivation of knowledge. Lacan also explained affective coloniality as the taming, civilizing, and fascinating power of the image, the Gaze of the Other. The museum can perform its social function as a place to educate, cultivate, and tame the people. Lacan reminds us of the question: “Who comes here? What do the audiences see in these vast compositions?” Lacan said “They see the gaze of those persons who deliberate in this hall. Behind the picture, it is their gaze that is there”<sup>6</sup>. The display of the archives and paintings in the museum demonstrates the gaze of the Other, i.e., the demand by the Other, the Law, the Symbolic Order.

Let us consider the techniques of Alternative: Archivation as an Act of Decolonization. Shall we consider Lacan's suggestion: “to cut him off from this point of ultimate gaze, which is illusory”<sup>7</sup>. Or can we adopt a different mode of reading, to read “the artist's small dirty deposits” on the canvas? Lacan said, “If a bird can paint, it would do it by letting fall its feathers, a snake by casting off its scales, a tree by letting fall its leaves”. The little blues, little whites, little browns of Cézanne: these are the artist's “small dirty deposits”. “Let us not forget that the painter's brushstroke is something in which a movement is terminated. [...] we are faced with the element of motive in the sense of response, in so far as it produces, behind it, its own stimulus”. The gesture and the strokes: “it passes into something that is materialized and which, from this sovereignty, will render obsolete, excluded, inoperant, whatever, coming from elsewhere, will be presented before this product”. “It is by means of the gesture that the brushstroke is applied to the canvas. [...] All action represented in a picture appears to us as a battle scene, that is to say, as something, necessarily created for the gesture”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Lacan, J., *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981, p.7, p. 113 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1973).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114-117.



We can also consider Agamben's strategies of profanation, play, and archaeology to challenge the regime of the sacred law. Agamben's writings on the law, the ban, and the line of separation lead us to the question of the fundamental act that sets the order of the management of life. The fixation of separation concerns the conceptual operation of the law inscribed into language and logos and consequently severs and negates the rest. Every separation contains or preserves within itself a religious core on which the exercise of the law is based. Agamben's inquiries into the logic of inclusion and exclusion, separation and exception, and the biopolitical fractures stipulated among people all point to the dispositive of language and the legitimization of History that effaces all pre-histories. Agamben said: "One day, humanity will play with the law just as children lay with disused objects, not to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. [...] This liberation is the task of study or play"<sup>9</sup>.

In this essay, through the analysis of two contemporary artist, Xu Bing from China and Wu Tianchang from Taiwan, I want to propose the methodology of artistic decolonization through alternative modes of affective archivation: First, << Archivation of the Affective Traces >>, including memories of bodily experience, disclosure of the logic of memory techniques, and a mode of questioning, challenging, and play through reusing and archiving these affective traces. Second is the << Technique of Epidermization >>, that is, techniques of exteriorizing internal effects, restaging bodily movement and the temporal duration on the canvas through layering the paints' thickness and brush strokes, and management of the space. Third, << Affective Mobilization >>, not to mobilize the action of the crowd in the streets, but to mobilize the affectability and thinking, and hence renew the sensibility of the complexity and the impact of the historical process. Fourth, << Transposition >>, to move the viewer's subject position, to be affected by the other's affect, and to re-align one's own position.

## **XU Bing's Project Archivation and the Background Stories**

### **The Background Stories**

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<sup>9</sup> Agamben, G., *Profanations*, New York: Zone Books, 2007, p. 64 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 2005).



I want to start with XU Bing's artwork and discuss how an artist can achieve his artistic practice as a project of critical thinking that exposes his challenges of coloniality in contemporary societies.

Xu is a world-renowned contemporary artist from China. Born in Chongqing in 1955 and raised in Beijing, he went through the Cultural Revolution and spent his teenage years, as all his contemporaries did, in a peasant village located in a remote mountain valley. Xu entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in the 1970s and acquired his artistic skills in woodblock printing. Moving away from the social realist trend of his time, Xu's art was known as avant-gardist conceptual art and became famous in the late 1980s. After the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989, because of the tightened political pressure and artistic restrictions, Xu left China and moved to the United States in 1990. His artworks such as *Book from the Sky*, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, *Square Word Calligraphy*, *Background Story*, *Tobacco Project* and *Phoenix Project* were exhibited all over the world. Besides numerous awards, *Art News* in the U.S. also considered Xu one of the 40 influential artists in the world in the twentieth century. Xu returned to China in 2007 and has been serving as the vice president of China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing till now<sup>10</sup>.

Xu's *Background Story: Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges* (*Beihoude gushih: Yanjiangdiejhangtu* 背後的故事: 煙江疊嶂圖), an installation that was exhibited at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2014 (Figure 1), can provide a methodology of reading the art work.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gao, Minglu 高名潞, *Xu Bing: Xu Bing deyishu jiqi fangfalun* 徐冰: 徐冰的藝術及其方法論, (*Xu Bing: Xu Bing's Art and His Methodology*), Taipei: Eslite Publisher, 2003, pp. 10-15 / Wang, Chia-Chi 王家驥, *Guidebook to the Exhibition of Xu Bing: A Retrospective*, Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 20014, pp. 5-6.



Figure 1. Xu Bing, *Background Story: Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges* (2014)

In this installation, Xu took the scroll painting *Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges* (ca. 1604) by the late Ming great master Dong Qichang (董其昌 1555-1636) of the seventeenth century, a classic collection from the National Palace Museum in Taipei, as the blueprint for his adaptation. Dong's *Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges* itself was an imitation of the painting of the same title by a Northern Song painter Wang Shen (王誥 1036-ca. 1093) of the eleventh century. The structural compositions of the landscape of the two pieces by Wang and Dong are roughly the same, while the lines and the brushes are entirely different. Likewise, in Xu's *Background Story: Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges*, we see a similar composition to that specific work of the same title by Dong. The installation was arranged with three large light boxes, 520 x 2185 cm. The viewers saw an echo of Dong's painting on the surface of the frosted-glass panels, with scattered houses and trees here and there, rolling hills and strips of water, and mist extended in the middle and stretched to the background. When walking behind the large glass boxes, however, the viewers would —perhaps to their surprise— see an assemblage of waste objects glued onto the glass, such as fishing lines, cotton balls, scraps of local newspapers, wooden sticks, dry grass, and twigs of various trees picked up from nearby areas, pieces of brick from neighborhood constructions, and so on. The local artists who collaborated with Xu said that, to collect these objects, they walked around Taipei city streets and campuses to pick up these discarded objects from various corners of the city. Even though the viewers of this assemblage work saw a constellation of hills, trees, and houses that resembled the

painting by Dong, the result of this collection process was that Xu's three-dimensional installation presented the physical labor and temporal movement behind the scenes or the "forms of life." Xu achieved similar results in his exhibitions in various other cities by projecting light onto the two-dimensional flat space.



Figure 2. The scene behind the work *Background Story: Misty Rivers and Layered Ridges* (2014)

Xu has constructed the installation of *Background Story* Projects, starting from 2004, for 15 exhibitions, respectively in Berlin, London, Gwangju, Suzhou, New York, Massachusetts and other places. It appears to me that Xu presented his meta-aesthetics through his project of *Background Story*. On the one hand, the forms of people's life were depicted on the surface of the artwork and the primary process of the consumption of the objects and goods is concealed through the stylized aestheticization, while on the other hand, in the background of the panel, the consumed and used-up objects, the remnants of people's life and the forms of death, the used-up objects, are assembled in an entangled way through the artists' body movements and linked to different forms of past lives in the cities. These re-assembled and re-configured forms of death told us different stories of the forms of life that had been experienced. The meta-aesthetics presented through Xu's work offers viewers a distancing perspective from which to observe the utilitarian logic hidden behind the stylized forms of life. This perspective could also further lead us in our reading of his other artworks.

## Tobacco projects



Figure 3. Xu Bing, *Tobacco Project: 1st Class* (2014)

Xu's *Tobacco Project* (菸草計畫 *Yancao jihua*) (Figure 3), for example, provided excellent illustrations of the relation between the functional uses of the bodies and the utilitarian logic behind the uses of the objects. *Tobacco Project 1999-2011* originated from Xu's visit to the tobacco factory in Durham, North Carolina, during his trip to Duke University in 1999. The Duke family in fact established the British-American Tobacco Company in Shanghai at the beginning of the twentieth century and was the first company to introduce tobacco-rolling technology to China. Over the past years, Xu has explored different aspects of the uses of tobacco and its complicated relations with Chinese societies and histories in different exhibitions, such as *Tobacco Project: Shanghai*, *Pipe*, *Little Redbook*, *Chinese Spirit*, *Tobacco Book*, *Backbone*, and *1st Class* (Figure 3).



Figure 4. Xu Bing, *Tobacco Project: Pipe*



Figure 5. Xu Bing, *Tobacco Project: Little Redbook*



Figure 6. Xu Bing, *Tobacco Project: Tobacco Book*



杜克英美煙公司生產地——外灘陸家嘴地區

Figure 7. Xu Bing, *Tobacco Project: Shanghai*

In *Tobacco Project: Shanghai* exhibited in 2004, the juxtaposition of the skyscrapers at the Bund (外灘 Waitan) (Figure 7) with the photos of the old tobacco factory at the harbor a century ago was a striking example of Xu's stylized and complex representation of historical and << behind the scenes >> processes. The Bund was the waterfront area in central Shanghai where mansions owned by international trading companies were clustered from mid-nineteenth-century onwards, after Shanghai was forced to open itself to international trade as one of the five treaty ports. This was on top of China's having to grant Great Britain extraterritoriality and the cession of Hong Kong Island, dictated by the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 upon the failure of the first Opium War, also named as Anglo-Chinese War, in 1839-1842. Here, then, is the symbolic historical moment when China was launched into the path of modernity. Today, in the twenty-first century, the Bund is even more crowded with the high-rise buildings of international banks and business centers. The traces of China's socialist past and its postponed economic development during the Maoist era in the middle of the twentieth



century were almost entirely erased. Instead, China has caught up with the rest of the world in terms of its economic power with tremendous will and speed within the past two decades. Not only has the progress of modernity been seamlessly sutured, but China has entered center-stage as a world financial power.

What Walter Benjamin called “the aestheticization of politics”, the will of the nation that shaped the landscape with bombardments and barbed wires<sup>11</sup>, is now transformed in the post-1989 and post-socialist eras in China into the aestheticization of neoliberal and transnational capitalism. The project of the aestheticization of neoliberal capitalism reflects not only the alteration of the landscape with super-tall buildings but also the modes of desire deep-rooted in the people, that is, the desire to catch up with and enjoy the materialist and economic growth as the rest of the world. *Tobacco Project 1999-2011: 1st Class*, an installation size of approximately 1500 x 600 cm, that was first exhibited in Virginia in 2011 and also exhibited in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2014, tells us of these intriguing modes of desire. The shape of this piece looks like a tiger-skin rug, but is composed of over 500,000 cigarettes, with the aroma of tobacco permeating the entire space of the exhibition hall. The tiger-skin-shaped contour of the *Tobacco Project: 1st Class* refers first and foremost to the trophy won through capitalist logic, but it also indicates more fundamentally the desire of the people longing for each and every one of the pieces of the 500,000 cigarettes. Here, capitalism's logic displays itself in the accumulation and expansion of capital and its claim of *laissez-faire* economic liberalism through free trade, open markets, economic liberalization, reduction of the government's control, and enhancement of the private sectors of the economy. What is accumulated and expanded is not merely capital in the form of money but all calculable future capital, that is, the financialization of the global markets and the distortion it brought to local economics, including drastic economic inequality, the damage to the farming industry and the pollution of the rural environment. Xu's artwork thus presents his exposition and his sharp critique of neoliberal capitalism's logic and aestheticization.

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<sup>11</sup> Walter, B., «Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*» trans. by Wikoff, J., Jünger, E., (eds.), *New German Critique*, 17, 1979, pp. 120-128, pp. 122-126.

### Phoenix Project: The System, the Capital, and Coloniality



Figure 8. Xu Bing, *Phoenix Project*

*Phoenix Project* (鳳凰 *Fonghuang*) (Figure 8) is another extraordinary example of Xu's critique of the effect of the post-1989 neoliberal and transnational capitalism in China. *Phoenix Project* was commissioned in 2008 to create a sculpture for the new World Financial Center atrium in Beijing. Earlier that year, Xu had returned to Beijing, 18 years after he left China in 1990, and been struck by the sight of the rapidly changed city and the harsh working conditions of migrant laborers at the construction site. In an interview, Xu said "When I first visited the building site, I had a sense of shock". The poor working conditions for the migrant laborers made his skin << quiver >> (Vogel). These views provided a sharp contrast to the laborers' conditions in socialist China in the mid-twentieth century when he himself used to be one of them working in rural villages. He then gathered the migrant workers at the construction site to help him with the artwork and assembled the rusted and wasted tools used by these workers for his *Phoenix Project* —a huge sculptural work composed of two metallic birds lifted 12 feet above the ground, measuring 28 meters long and weighing 6 tons each. If we look closely at the close-up of the photographs of the sculptures, we can see objects such as tower crane hoists, rusted tire rims, steel saws and scoops, iron barrels, screwdrivers, hose tanks, girders, safety helmets, glass fragments, and construction gadgets. These garbage-like objects were the necessary subsistence indispensable to the migrant laborers in their



daily work and lives. These migrant laborers also became attached to these metallic tools, while they themselves also became part of the objects consumed by the rapid developmental projects and were easily disposable through the production process. The elegant but horrifically gigantic figures of the mythological birds, symbolizing the rebirth of China in an ironic way, hang above the ground in the new business center, now marking the alternation of the landscape of Beijing city.

CBC, in the end, canceled the commission and, after a long process of negotiation, the artwork was exhibited instead in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, among other places in the U.S., in 2014. The displaced location of the exhibition of this sculptural Phoenix, removed from Beijing and re-installed in New York, to me, manifested the ironic turn of the capitalist move, with the huge iron birds as the embodiment of the aestheticization of the neoliberal capitalist logic and the re-birth of a new China, energized by its tremendous financial power.

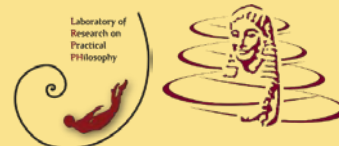
### **WU Tian-Chang's Epidermization, the play of the *un-heimlich* Project**

Cultural and language policies that constitute identities and ethnic partitions

The logic of *ethos* was at play in the drastic changes of government in Taiwan's recent history, through military force and severe political oppression, first at the hands of the Qing (清) government and then of Japan in 1895, and from Japan to the KMT government in 1945. What is complicated in this historical process is that the definition of *heim* is re-constructed at each political regime change through the cultural and language policies of different governments. During the fifty years of Japanese colonial rule, cultural and language education was so successful and thorough that a new generation of Taiwanese considered themselves to be imperial subjects of the Japanese empire. In 1945, after the termination of Japanese colonial rule, the KMT regime of the Republic of China took over Taiwan. After putting down the riot caused by the 228 Incident in 1947<sup>12</sup>, the KMT declared a «State of Emergency», imposed martial law (1949–

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<sup>12</sup> The February 28 Incident (二二八事件) or 228 Massacre was an uprising in Taiwan that began on February 28, 1947 and was suppressed by the Kuomintang (KMT) government, resulting in between ten thousand to twenty thousand civilians killed, see Research Committee (1991), Chen and Yu (1992), Hsu (1996).



1987), forbade the use of Japanese in newspapers and magazines, and banned Japanese music and movies. Not only did the intellectuals who had received a good education under Japanese colonial rule soon lose their influence in society, but also the majority of the population was denied access to higher social echelons because of the language policy. The subsequent cultural and language policies during the 1950s and 1960s banning the use of Taiwanese dialect in public further intensified the suppression of *benshengren*. The ethnic partitions caused by the 228 Incident were further aggravated through these policies, and the social hierarchy was likewise established. A new sense of *heim* was shaped. Education and the promotion of Chinese traditional culture made mainland China the sole cultural and spiritual << home >>.

The stability of this political state was gradually shaken after the Republic of China had left the United Nations: international relations were cut off and political recognition was denied<sup>13</sup>, and the KMT government's violation of human rights in the white terror period was publicly exposed. The Kaohsiung Incident<sup>14</sup> (高雄事件) in 1979 brought people's awareness of the political terrorism of the KMT government to the surface. The debates over a 'Chinese consciousness' and a 'Taiwanese consciousness' during 1983 and 1984 further crystallised the polemics of the confusing issue of Taiwanese identity and Taiwanese consciousness<sup>15</sup>. Gold has noted that the "quest for a unique Taiwan identity"

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<sup>13</sup> In 1971, the People's Republic of China (PRC) succeeded in taking the seat held previously by the Republic of China (ROC; Taiwan), a founding member of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, following the passage of UN Resolution 2758. Since then, most UN members have switched their diplomatic allegiance from Taipei to Beijing, see Yang (1996).

<sup>14</sup> In the Kaohsiung Incident of 1979, Kuomintang's military and police broke up the island's first major Human Rights Day celebration (10 December 1979), and subsequently arrested and imprisoned virtually all leading members of Taiwan's budding democratic movement. One of the major issues in the *Formosa Magazine*, the organiser for the Human Rights Day Celebration, was to disclose the historical tragedy of the 228 Incident, which had been suppressed immediately after the imposition of Martial Law in 1949. The tortures these people suffered during the imprisonment, non-stop interrogations, beatings, punching, cigarettes scorching, were severe. The Kaohsiung Incident galvanized most people's political conscience, some along with the incident, some gradually in the following years. For a brief introduction to the background of these political events and social changes, see Yang (1997).

<sup>15</sup> The debates over the 'origin' of Taiwanese literature and culture, or the definition of the history of Taiwanese literature, have been carried on since early 1980. The term 'Taiwanese literature' was established during the debate on this issue from 1983 to 1984. For a good overview of the above-mentioned debates, 'Chinese consciousness' or the 'Taiwanese consciousness' in Taiwanese literature and culture, see Chang Wen-chih 張文智, *Dangdai wenxue de Taiwan yishi*



began early in the mid-1970s, along with Taiwan's "increased diplomatic isolation and the rise of the *tangwai*, the dissident party"<sup>16</sup>. Gold also pointed out that, in the 1980s and the 1990s, "defining Taiwanese identity is still a process at the stage of rediscovering a history comprised of a diverse array of components, but it has become a conscious project"<sup>17</sup>. However, this conscious project of identity building unwittingly moves toward another construction of *heim*, and of *ethos*.

The year 1987 is a symbolic landmark that witnessed not only the end of the 40 years' martial law era in Taiwan, but also the emerging dynamics in the transformation of power relations in the political, aesthetic and cultural spheres. The avant-garde movements in art, literature, dance and theatre of the late 1980s, supported by both *benshengren* and *waishengren*, were driven by the same force that demanded a new order, a new order that could defy the dictatorship of the regime of the white terror. Little theatres and avant-garde artists performed political drama in the streets. Heated public forums debated the reformation and re-election of the national assembly that was still composed of a group of 90-years-olds elected in the 1920s. The criticism against the control and censorship of newspapers, publications, performances, public assembly and political parties was reported in daily newspapers. The students' and workers' movements organised strikes to voice their protests. But this widespread social unrest gradually mutated into a new logic of ethos and a new definition of *heim* in the 1990s. A *heim*-rhetoric of a different kind emerged, the *heim* that is supported by the concept of the people, *minjian* (民間), and is directed toward a relatively closed system of the *bensheng* nativist narrative, nativist in terms of the language and the ethnic origin applicable only to the early settlers.

Some major changes in government cultural policy in the 1990s indicated this shift in the nativist discursive mode. Based on the Statutes on the Establishment of the National

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當代文學的台灣意識 [Taiwanese Consciousness in Contemporary Literature], Taipei: Zili News Press, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Gold, T., B., «Civil society and Taiwan's quest for identity», in Harrell S., and Huang, C.-C. (eds.), *Cultural change in postwar Taiwan*, pp. 47–68, Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1994, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Gold, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 64.



Culture and Arts Foundation (國家文藝基金會設置條例), the National Culture and Arts Foundation (國家文化藝術基金會) was founded in 1996 and the awards for local-oriented art were established. Lee Teng-hui 李登輝, president during 1988–2000, encouraged universities to reduce the number of courses related to China or even abolish them. Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁, president from 2000–2008, stressed that Taiwan subjectivity should draw on local geography, history and life experience, and that the objectives of textbooks should be free of Chinese consciousness. The main function of the Archive for National Culture (國家文化資料庫), for example, is to collect, preserve, analyze and publish historical documents on Taiwan culture, and to develop local cultural resources so that the subjectivity of Taiwan culture could be established<sup>18</sup>. The lack of recognition in the international political arena and the stateless status of Taiwan made it all the more urgent to construct a Taiwan subjectivity and identity.

Such emerging politics of *heim* are a reaction against, and also a mirror that echoes and repeats the mainland-oriented politics of *heim* enforced by the KMT. The only difference between the old and the new is that the myth of the *heim*, our *jiaxiang* (家鄉) or *guxiang* (故鄉), that it has changed from the ‘central plain’ (*zhongyuan* 中原) and the ‘divine kingdom’ (神州), to the land of Taiwan.

*The 1996 Taipei Biennial: The Quest for Identity* (台北雙年展：台灣藝術主體性) and the series of 2-28 *Commemorative Exhibitions* (二二八紀念美展) from 1996 onward are prime examples of this nativist wave of identity construction. This series of exhibitions had an educational purpose. By recreating historical sites and images, the exhibitions intended to foster the communal sense of identical cultural and political positions<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> see Yang 1999, Council for Cultural Affairs, CCA [Council for Cultural Affairs 行政院文化建設委員會], 1995. *Wenhujianshe fagui huibian* 文化建設法規彙編 [Compilation of statutes of cultural affairs]. Taipei: Council for Cultural Affairs.

<sup>19</sup> According to Lin Mun-lee 林曼麗, the director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, the first exhibition in 1996 focused on memorialising the 228 Incident and showed «pieces both directly and indirectly related to the incident, including essays and photographs» and thus contained «educational and historical significance» (Lin, Mun-lee 林曼麗. Guanzhang, xu 館長序 [Director's foreword]. In Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1998, p.7. Chen Shui-bian also stressed specifically that the exhibition must «bring the artists' work back around to the actual event, to demand that the artists look closely at the event and enter into the historical circumstances surrounding it» (Chen Shui-bian, 陳水扁. 1998, Shizhang xu, 市長序 [Mayor's Foreword], in



The intention to construct an appropriate cultural iconography through the << memorialization >> of the traumatic historical moment is manifested in the works exhibited<sup>20</sup>. The objectives laid down by the curators of these exhibitions attracted artists to submit artworks of shared sentiments. These exhibitions responded to the epoch's affective needs, reflecting the people's feelings and shaping the community's emerging consensual consciousness. But a mode of distinction also evolved: There is a certain side of 'them' that was targeted in the exhibition as the one to be accused or condemned, and a certain side of 'us' who demanded apology, compensation, and even claimed the right to punish and correct the wrong. The line between the internal, domestic, and same and the external, foreign, and different was manifested by the intended viewing position implied in the images.

This act of icon construction leads us to the question: what viewing positions are pre-inscribed in these images? Or, as Lacan formulated it: "Where does the gaze come from?"

"The social function, which was already emerging at the religious level, is now becoming clear. Who comes here? Those who form what Retz calls '*les peuples*', the audiences. And what do the audiences see in these vast compositions. They see the gaze of those persons who, when the audiences are not there, deliberate in this hall. Behind the picture, it is their gaze that is there"<sup>21</sup>.

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Hsiao Chong-Ray, 1998, pp. 3-4.) Through the narratives of 30 historical scenes selected and arranged chronologically by Vince Shih 施並錫, with the hope that the exhibition could «enter and understand history» (Shih, Vince Bing-Shyi 施並錫. 1999, *Weile bu rang lishi shijian chongyan: Chongsu lishi xianchang yu tuxiang de cezhan sikao* 為了不讓歷史事件重演——重塑歷史現場與圖像的策展思考 [In order not to repeat the historical event: Thoughts on the Reshaping Historical Sites and Images], in Taipei Fine Arts Museum 1999, pp. 10-20.)

<sup>20</sup> For the reactions to these exhibitions, see Hsieh Li-fa (1997), and Huang Bao-ping (1997). Hsieh Li-fa 謝里法, 1997, *Lun ererba shijian zai Taiwan meishushi shang de diwei* 論二二八事件在台灣美術史上的地位 [On the role of the February 28 Incident in Taiwan art history], in Hsiao Chong-Ray 1998, pp. 38-43. Huang Hai-ming 黃海鳴, 1997. *Senchu yanli, yuwang ji jiyi de dongkou—shi fenxi Wu Tianzhang jiuqi gezhan zhong de shikong jiegou* 滲出豔麗、慾望及記憶的洞口——試分析吳天章九七個展中的時空結構 [Saturate through the cave of glamour, desire and memories: On Wu Tien-chang's exhibition in 1997], *The Artist/藝術家* 45(3), p.445-447.

<sup>21</sup> Lacan, J., 1981, *op.cit.*, p. 113.

The gaze of the communal, in the name of the people, appropriated by the established power network makes the audience view history from a particular position.

### Wu Tian-chang's artworks and his contemporaries



Figure 9 (left). Wu Tianchang, *The Symptom of the Syndrome of World Injury I* (1986)  
Figure 10 (right). Wu Tianchang, *The Symptom of the Syndrome of World Injury II* (1986)

Wu Tien-chang's artworks from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s also conveyed to us his conscious and radical protests against the violence perpetrated by the KMT regime during the martial law era<sup>22</sup>. Wu Tien-chang was born in 1956 in Keelung (基隆), a northern harbour of Taiwan. He graduated from the Chinese Cultural University (中國文化大學) as a student of art in 1980 and began his career as an artist in the early 1980s<sup>23</sup>. As a member of the Modern Art Group of Taipei, Wu employed bold experimental techniques in rebellion against conventional Chinese landscape brush painting and the modernist abstract painting that were mainstream in the 1970s. Beginning with *The Symptom of the Syndrome of World Injury I-IV* (傷害世界症候群, 1986), *The Injury of the*

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<sup>22</sup> The works he did during late 1980s and early 1990s. For example, *The Injury of the Red* (1986), *The Symptom of the Syndrome of World Injury* (1986), *The Injury of Taiwan* (1988), and *the Rule of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Jieshi, Jiang Jinguo* (1990).

<sup>23</sup> Wu Tien-chang has been invited, besides the exhibitions in Taiwan, to international exhibitions many times. Such as Hara Museum ARC, Tokyo, Japan / *K-18 Mutual Acknowledgement Exhibition*, Kassel, Germany / *Taiwan: Kunst Heute*, Ludwig Forum Aachen, Germany / *Asia-Pacific Contemporary Photography Exhibition*, Tokyo, Japan / *2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial*, Queensland Art Gallery, Australia / *The 47th International Art Exhibition of the Biennale di Venezia* / *Touring Exhibition Inside Outside: New Chinese Art*, Asia Society, New York, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art / *1st Asia-Pacific Biennial*, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan / *CLOSE-UP*, Contemporary Art From Taiwan Touring Exhibition, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria B.C. Canada / *Cyber Asia-media Art in the Near Future*, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan.

*Red* (關於紅色的傷害, 1986), and *The Injury of Taiwan* (台灣傷害, 1988) and then to *About the Dark Green Hurt* (關於暗綠色的傷害, 1989) and *Homage to the unknown hero—228 Memorial* (向無名英雄致敬, 1992), his works presented a world of violence, or a critique of violence.



Figure 11. Wu Tianchang. *The Injury of the Red I*. 1986.

The recurring images of the eye motif, the downward falling figures of the assassinated, murdered and executed corpses, the repeated depictions of crime scenes, and the tall brick prison wall, all speak about the feelings of damage, secrecy and fear in a highly militarised, policed, and monitored environment, and reflect the collective memories (of the warring history) of the civil war, the traumatic experience of the 228 Incident, and the ethnic hostility caused by it. In these paintings, the figures and gestures are all masculine and sharp edged. The frames are disrupted by out-stretched fists, arms or wounded bodies. The anger over the suppressive environment is obvious and direct. In the series regarding the dictatorship, including the *Rule of Mao Zedong*, *Deng Xiaoping*, *Jiang Jieshi*, *Jiang Jinguo* (關於毛澤東的統治時期, 關於蔣介石的統治時期, 關於蔣經國的統治時期, 1990), *Composite Damage I-II* (合成傷害, 1993), and *Wounded Funerals I-IV* (傷害告別式, 1994), the motifs of wounded individuals and submissive crowds fill up the space occupied by the gigantic figures of political rulers. The deprivation of the senses and the right to see, to speak, to hear and to breathe is synthesised with objects of abjection on the canvas.



Figure 12 (left). Wu Tianchang. *The Rule of Jiang Jieshi* 1990  
Figure 13 (right). Wu Tianchang. *The Rule of Jiang Jinguo* 1990



Figure 14 (left). Wu Tianchang. *The Rule of Mao Zedong* 1990  
Figure 15 (right). Wu Tianchang. *The Rule of Deng Xiaoping* 1990



This thrusting force to break loose from the straightjacket and the self-assured position of moral justice in Wu Tien-chang's artworks of the 1980s was shared by his contemporaries, such as Yang Mao-lin, Hou Chun-Min (侯俊明), Mei Ting-yen (梅丁衍) and Chen Chieh-jen (陳界仁). Let us take Yang Mao-lin as an example. In his series *Made in Taiwan* (台灣製造), we see enlarged images of steel-hard fists, arms and legs filling up the space of the canvas. The hard lines of the muscles and the contours of the torso are highlighted. There is no softness in the lines and the composition, nor is there any ambiguity. The anger and accusation is clearly stated through the images<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Wu Tien-chang, Yang Mao-lin and Lu Tien-yen were later welcomed and praised in the early



Wu Tien-chang's art after the mid-1990s, however, confronted us with far more complex subject positions. He began to switch his concern to the questions of home, or *heim*, or the ambivalence attached to the status of Taiwanese-ness<sup>25</sup>. In his series of paintings during this period, we no longer see the anger, accusations, and blatant criticism portrayed in his earlier protest-laden works through the hard lines and edges of the masculine bodies. Instead, we see demure but seductive and performative gestures of figures from the past, the marine sailor with the guitar, the school girl and woman dressed in the fashion of the 1950s and 1960s in Taiwan, the citations of images taken from cigarette advertising posters of the 1930s in Shanghai, a painting of a 1950s market place by local Taiwanese painter Lee Shi-Chiao, and a film poster by Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢) about a story of a small town in the 1960s. The backdrop of the pseudo photo-studio, the stylised rococo studio settings, the famous tourist spot Spring and Autumn Pavilion (春秋閣) in Tsoying (左營), near the military camp in Kaohsiung, also tell us something about life in the 1950s and 1960s in Taiwan.

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1990s by Ni Tsai-chin, a nativist art scholar and critic and later the director of the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (the NTMFA) from 1997 to 2000, as the ones who really responded to Taiwan political reality in an earnest local manner, as opposed to the other artists who were still practicing western modernist fashions. This article was written in 1991 and started the series of debates on the Taiwanese identity in Taiwanese art. See discussion below.

<sup>25</sup> For example, the *Dream of Past Eva* series (春宵夢) from 1995 to 1997, *Home Sweet Home* series (親密家庭) (1996) and the *Worldly Life* series (戀戀紅塵, 紅塵不了情) (1997).



Figure 16(left). Wu Tianchang. *On the Damage to Spring and Autumn* 1993

Figure 17 (right). Wu Tianchang. *Home Sweet Home* 1996

These complex citations and montages of images from different eras all point to moments in the 1950s and 1960s in which the mainlanders, *waishengren*, and local Taiwanese, *benshengren*, meet and the time in which all the problems originated. These meetings are full of ambiguous flirtations and conspiracies. Women from the mainland dressed in the Shanghai style, women brought up in the Japanese educational system dressed in discreet school uniforms, the << feminised >> sailor holding a guitar, with his genital organ protruding within his pants, and family scenes with seductive gestures: all these suggest a black sense of humour and dark eroticism behind the serene scene of the familiar setting, the stability and familiarity of this new homeland to be constructed during the martial law period, concealing but also revealing in an oblique way the atmosphere of fear, secrecy, distrust and unfamiliarity.

These pseudo-studiophotographs were designed to look like photographs, decorated with painted frames and artificial flowers, the artificial plastic flowers used for funerals in Taiwan. The juxtaposition of innocence and flirtation, hidden malice behind the happy faces of the family members, *eros* and death, and the collage of deceased still life, all suggest an altered and uncanny milieu of the sight of familiarity, a familiar and cosy home that has changed its face, a tinge of the *unheimlich*. This tone of the *unheimlich*



reveals the image-maker's difficult and ambivalent attitude toward home, or the place to come to terms with.

The theme of the uncanny, the *unheimlich*, is metonymically represented in Wu's 1994 work *Wounded Landscape* (傷害風景), the first painting in a series. Though it is entitled 'wounded' landscape, reminiscent of the keynote of damage and injury in his previous works, beginning with *The Symptom of the Syndrome of World Injury* (傷害症候群) in 1986 to the series of *Wounded Funerals* in 1994, the centre of the canvas in this painting is no longer the wounded figures. We see only the facade of a desolate house, as if it is emerging from the darkness of the background. This piece is a black and white photograph, tinted with spots of green, purple and brownish colours, as in old photos. In the foreground is an emptied-out space, lit by a spotlight. This empty space and the gloss of the painted shiny blue frame capture our immediate attention. The decision to remove human figures from the centre of the canvas is symbolic. Wu Tien-chang has shifted his attention away from external violence and physical violations, and moved toward the violence hidden behind the scene of familiarity. There are no longer images of political protests or physical violence. Instead, we see (portraits of) pseudo-salon photos, with women or << feminised >> men posing in front of an artificial studio landscape. One critic has interpreted this change of style as the artist's self-conscious appropriation of traditional Taiwanese local and folkloric elements to build up an alternative Taiwanese subjectivity and that Wu's strategy revealed a self-amending cultural apparatus to heal the wounded feelings of the past<sup>26</sup>. This view of 'alternative

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<sup>26</sup> see for example Chen Hsiang-chun 陳香君. 2003, Wu Tien-chang: Xiao hua pian jiaguo de shishi 吳天章：笑畫批判家國的史詩 [Wu Tien-chang: An epic of critique on the nation-home], *Artco/典藏今藝術*, 124, January 2003, pp. 110-114. Lee Wei-ching 李維菁. 2003, Wu Tianzhang: Geshihua yu chongzuo de zhengan 吳天章：格式化與重作的震撼 [Wu Tien-chang: The impact of programming and re-doing], *The Artist /藝術家*, 344, (January 2003), pp. 246-251, Lo Pao-Chu 羅寶珠 Lishi xianshi, xuni/Wangxiang de tonggou yu chajie—Wu Tianzhang de yishu licheng 歷史現實·虛擬/妄像的同構與拆解——吳天章的藝術歷程 [Historical reality, isomorphism, and deconstruction of Simulacrum/ Paranoid—On Wu Tien-chang's Artistic Process], *Modern Art/現代美術*, 121, (August 2005), pp. 36-51. Yang Ming-e 楊明鏗. 2005, Guanghuan de beihou—Wu Tianzhang zhanyan fushi xuhua 光環的背後——吳天章展演浮世虛華 [Behind the halo: The Vanity Fair performed by Wu Tien-chang], *Modern Art/現代美術*, 121 (Auguste, 2005), pp. 24-35. Huang Hai-ming, 黃海鳴. 1997, Senchu yanli, yuwang ji jiyi de dongkou—shi fenxi Wu Tianzhang jiuqi gezhan zhong de shikong jiegou 滲出豔麗、慾望及記憶的洞口——試分析吳天章九七個展中的時空結構 [Saturate through the cave of glamour, desire and memories: On Wu Tien-chang's exhibition in 1997], *The Artist/藝術家*, 45(3), pp. 445-447.



Taiwanese subjectivity' suggested to me a typical (communal) desire in the public narrative of the 1990s to re-establish local Taiwanese identity and subjectivity. In Wu Tien-chang's series of the mid-1990s, we actually see visual references to the Taiwanese past in a more ambivalent manner. Concerning this series, Wu Tien-chang himself said that there are two particular themes he had in mind: first, the death captured by photographs, and second, the typical shallowness of Taiwanese culture. It is true that these paintings imitate salon photos in the style of the 1950s and 1960s in Taiwan. It is also true that through the gaudiness of the dress, the shoes, the hairstyle, the hats and the flashy sun glasses, we see what Wu Tien-chang called *Taike* (台客). However, there are more subtle twists of meanings to it.

*Taike*, literally meaning "guest of Taiwan". "Ke" means outsiders. The phrase originally refers to outsiders, but is later used to convert the unfitness into the tag of local colour. Therefore, *Taike* was originally a pejorative term used by the *waihengren* to mock at the shallowness and vulgarity of local Taiwanese people, including the way they talked, the way they dressed, their predilection for white socks with black shoes, for blue-on-white slippers, and their accents. The Taiwanese people's sense of inferiority and *waihengren*'s prejudice converges in the term *taike*. But, Wu Tien-chang's paintings of *taike* and the performative gestures of his figures, instead of saying << I do not want to be the one you would laugh at >>, or << I'm showing you what you would want me to change into >>, seem to be saying << here I am >>, << I'm not afraid of being looked at or laughed at >>, and << if you want to laugh at me, I'll give you more to look at and laugh at >>.

The << feminised >> gestures and the mixture of the cheapness, pretentiousness and gaudiness betray Wu Tien chang's sarcastic humour and love-hate sentiment. The feminised pose of the sailor with the erect genital organ, or the discreetly dressed young lady and the high-school girl with their hands covering their breasts, or the fashionable sing-song girls, taken from the Shanghai posters, wearing glamorous plastic sunglasses and shiny artificial glass jewels, with golden sequins on the frames, all suggest a highly exaggerated performativity coated with layers of fake-ness and kitsch. These kitsch objects are used in daily life in Taiwanese culture. Wu Tien-chang laboriously pasted them onto the canvases and added thick layers of shiny paint and funeral flowers on the



frames. In addition, the rococo salon settings, the pagoda and painted sailboat with colourful textile fringes, the glass diamonds pasted on the peacock's tail, the solid gold pendulum, the plastic sun-glasses, all reinforce the repetitive rhythm of fake-ness and flamboyance. This array of objects of fakeness and floridly displayed kitsch are objects of abjection, just as the shimmering gloss on the surface of the painted shiny frames convey a sense of nauseousness, and staged a black comedy that reflects the status of Taiwanese-ness.

The series *Home Sweet Home I-II* (1996) and *Worldly Life I-II* (1997) contain the motifs already introduced in the two series *Spring and Autumn Pavilion* (1993) and *Dream of Past Eva* (1997). The ping-pong ball that was stuffed into the mouth and the sunflower that covered the eyes in *Synthesised Damage* re-appear here in *Worldly Life* and in *Home Sweet Home*. Here, it is the teen-age boy, his mouth stuffed with the ping-pong ball, trotting along the road innocently and happily, and the mother ready to powder the baby with the puff, echoing the ping-pong ball motif. Political censorship is executed in a civil but unconscious mode, by family members, in the family setting.

What does it mean for Wu Tien-chang to be addressed as a *taike*, the subtle differentiation between *taike* and the *waishengren* reinforced by the distinction made by the language policy during the 1960s and 1970s? Why did he work on a series of paintings featuring vulgar and distasteful figures, framed with a thin film of oily gloss that gave him << goosebumps >>, (*jipi geda* 雞皮疙瘩) and made him feel nauseous<sup>27</sup>; and why did he decorate the paintings with cheap, plastic objects? Born in the northern harbour city of Keelung, with fishermen as his neighbours, the sight of dead or dying fish in the markets, the market place and the street corners wet with filthy oily water seems to be his primary impression of his childhood environment. The loud electronic band and strip girls at funerals, the bar girls associated with the navy of the US 7th Fleet in the streets of Keelung, the girls wearing fake jewellery and gaudy clothes, are also his childhood memories. Coming to Taipei to study in his teenage years, he was mocked as a *taike*, an outsider, because he was dressed like one, and he also felt like one. This label

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<sup>27</sup> Interview, Joyce C.H. Liu with Wu Tien-chang, April 1, 2007. / Wu Tien-chang repeated the same phrase and sentiment in a recent interview, on May 29, 2010 (to be published).



is like a stigma that he wears on his body and he was laughed at because of it. He said in one interview that, at that young age, he suffered a traumatic experience as a result of the << ethnic discrimination >> expressed in this phrase<sup>28</sup>.

Instead of exploding in anger, Wu Tien-chang allowed himself to take the feminised position of *taike*, depicting the changed scenes of familiarity, and translating and projecting his own sense of abjection onto the surface of the canvas, a technique of the *un-heimlich*, or the technique of << epidermisation >>.

Wu Tien-chang's technique of the *un-heimlich* and << epidermisation >>

We are brought back to the question of *ethos*, the familiar custom of the common abode, and the logic of *heim* that serves as the guiding principle of ethical considerations and value judgments. Our ethical and aesthetic as well as our political judgments are associated with the logic of *ethos*, our accustomed modes of thinking, the hierarchy of meaning making, networks of personal relations, our sense of duty based on the experience of free choice. What Wu Tien-chang has done in his works from the 1980s through 2000s is to present the *un-heimlich* legacy of the martial law government and the *un-heimlich* environment in which he grew up.

It is, then, a question of *Dasein*, the structure of our Being as summoned by the historical moment we live. Jean-Luc Nancy once suggested: “*Dasein* would be being obliged; its *Da* would not be a there but would be its summons by an order. Or the *there* would only be the *there* of the being summoned-there by the imperative”<sup>29</sup>. The unquestioned imperative of this order of *ethos* poses a problem. As Nancy put it, “If *ethos* means (whatever the etymological debate about it) *Heim*, a home, familiar place: the animal's lair, man's cavern or cave”, then what we are faced with is “the opening and the question of an *Unheimlich* ethos”<sup>30</sup>. The question to be asked is, then, the law that constitutes the mode of appearance and of *ethos*.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Nancy, J.-L., «Free voice of man», in *Re-treating the political*, Sparks, S. (ed.), pp. 32–54. London & New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.



The above problematic inspired the writing of this current essay in the beginning. But, through the process of my writing, I have re-directed my questions to a different path of thinking: How is the 'law' physically and emotionally experienced by those living in specific historical moments? What are the affective residues of the effect of the law? What are the images through which people are propelled to assume or to exclude? What are the images that people feel propelled to assume as their identities? What are the images that people feel instinctive repugnance? How are these emotional residues translated through visual images on the canvas? How do the images stage and perform the abject positions and ethnic borders experienced by the subject?

The banal objects and accessories, the *un-heimlich* nauseating sensation caused by the shiny frames and the surface of the cloths, to me, suggest a space of perpetration and complicity that has translated the untranslatable conditions of the past. We could borrow the concept introduced by Jean Baudrillard in his discussion of *The Trompe-L'oeil* that, on the space of the collaged objects, "the pleasure they procure is thus not the aesthetic one of a familiar reality, it is the acute and negative pleasure found in the abolition of the real... Only isolated objects, abandoned, ghostly in their ex-inscription of all action and all narrative, could retrace the haunting memory of a lost reality, something like a life anterior to the subject and its coming to consciousness"<sup>31</sup>. On the canvases created by Wu Tien-chang, I would like to suggest that some sort of *trompe-l'oeil* is going on. The background and the setting are only excuses for the dislocated objects, banal accessories, and masks to appear. Through his assemblage of accessories and their tactility, a pre-existent life and death is projected, the ghost of the past that haunts the emptiness of the stage. His assemblage of accessories and their tactility pushes a previously hidden life forward. The ghost of the past that haunts the artist now re-surfaced on the stage. It is rather like the sense of inferiority discussed by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* that was transplanted, through the surgical procedure of *epidermisation*, and became the visible stigma on the skin. Here, through Wu Tien-chang's work, this nauseating sensation of the skin is once again removed and exteriorised the oily frames and the banal accessories. We see in Wu's projects of 2000s

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<sup>31</sup> Baudrillard, J., «The Trompe-L'Oeil», in Bryson, N. (ed.), *Calligram: Essays in new art history from France*, pp. 53–62, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 54.

that techniques of the *un-heimlich* and epidermisation were transferred onto the surface of the clothes of the distorted figures and into their forced smiles. Cases in point are *Together Forever* (永協同心, 2001) and *In the Same Boat* (同舟共濟, 2002). The ambiguous joke on the state of togetherness is striking in these images.



Figure 16 (left). Wu Tianchang. *When We are Together* 2001

Figure 17 (right). Wu Tianchang. *Surreal Dream* 2002

Wu Tien-chang's translation of the *un-heimlich* in a way responds to the question raised by Rada Iveković in her article "On permanent translation", that is, the insufficiency of language, the inadequacy of the human being to itself, and every institution's inadequacy to its purpose<sup>32</sup>. Ivekovic's keen observation: «It is the state of being in translation oneself. And this is the cost of translation remaining faithful to life and retaining its gesture: it constantly avoids putting itself in a state of grace; that is to say, exception; that is to say, finitude»<sup>33</sup>.

### **Conclusion: Archivation, Mobilization, and Transposition: Double Cycle of Consumption and Alternative Archivation**

The double cycle of the consumption and production of objects I mentioned needs further elaboration.

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<sup>32</sup> Iveković, R., «De la traduction permanente. Nous sommes en traduction», *Transeuropéennes*, 22, 2002, pp. 121-145.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



Let us first think about the question of the primary cycle of the transformation of the consumption and production of things in life. To be more precise, my question here is why and in what ways human life is shaped, measured, calculated, regulated, and processed into various compartmentalized forms of life through the apparatus of the socially functional and utilitarian uses of things, bodies, and objects, and how and in what ways are human agents at the same time retroactively mass producing and conditioning an even more powerful mechanism of the uses of bodies, aided by remote forces of the global flow of capital.

What Xu demonstrates in his *Tobacco Project: Shanghai*, *Tobacco Project: 1<sup>st</sup> Class* and *The Phoenix Project* may be thought of as the forms of life that have been drawn and shaped through a process of rapid involution in post-socialist China. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the number of farmer-workers (農民工 nonmining) amounted to 268,940,000 at the highest, with a 2.4% increase rate from the previous year (<< 2013 Nian >>). The large number of migrant workers was sucked in and dispersed along with the speedy swirl of the emerging new status of China as the financial center, the world markets, and the world factory. The construction of the high-rise buildings that occupied the urban space in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and other major cities and the heavy traffic of commercial, informational, and financial activities attracted and up-rooted the farmer-workers from their hometowns. These internal migrant farmer-workers mostly could no longer go back to their former ways of life because they had sold up their farmlands and because they preferred higher salaries that they could earn through the construction projects in the big cities, even though they could never get settled, might not have regular income, could only inhabit in a tiny room with the entire family, and would always be marginalized in the cities. They could not even obtain labor contracts. As a result, they were forced to move from one construction site to another construction site<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Lyu, Tu, 呂途. *Zhongguo xingongren—Mishi yu jueqi* 中國新工人—迷失與崛起 (*Chinese New Workers: Lost and Re-emergent*), Beijing: Law Publisher, 2013 / Ngai, P. and Chan, J., «Global Capital, the State and Chinese Workers: The Foxconn Experience», *Modern China*, 38 (4), 2012, pp. 383-410 / Ngai, P. and Huilin, L., «Unfinished Proletarianization: Self, Anger and Class Action of the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Reform China», *Modern China*, 36 (5), 2010, pp. 493-519.



These displaced bodies are literally utilized in accordance with the huge increase of the demand for laborers because of the rapid growth of the infrastructure of transnational entrepreneurial networks and financial centers in China. These forms of life, caught up by the momentum of the global neoliberal flow of capital, have also been embodied by the compartmentalization of urban space —that is, the segregation of high-rise skyscrapers, on the one hand, and the ghetto areas of the laborers' villages, on the other, which is another demonstration of the aestheticization of the post-1989 neoliberal capitalist logic in China.

How do we consider the life of these mal-utilized migrant laborers? Why do they voluntarily accept or, in fact, desire such forms of life? They come to big cities to work at randomly chosen construction sites, displaced and dispersed in urban ghettos with no contracts and no protection from the law. These workers are no longer the farmers and laborers that co-habited in the people's communes who shared common beliefs and common life experiences, working for the common goal, but are isolated individuals who had been cut off from their hometowns and inserted into various laborer's villages in the margins of the big cities. We seem to see various metamorphoses of the camp, the hidden matrix of the bio-politics that functions as an apparatus of *dislocating localization*. Or as Agamben puts it: "The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical norms in a determinate space; rather, it contains within itself a *dislocating localization* that exceeds it and in which virtually every form of life and every norm can be captured"<sup>35</sup>.

The forms of life that are turned into forms of death are the stakes Agamben addressed in his *Homo Sacer* projects. The techniques of managing human life include everything from birth to death, the entry and exit of the territory, the crossing of the borders, preventive quarantine, protective custody, eugenics, citizenships, and so on. As Michel Foucault and Agamben have pointed out, the motor that triggers the apparatus of bio-politics is no longer the nexus connecting juridical rule with the techniques of subjectivation but the power of political economy at the center.

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<sup>35</sup> Agamben, G., *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. by Binetti V. and Casarino, C., Minneapolis: U of Minnesota publisher, 2000, p. 44.



Political economy here apparently does not merely refer to a system of rules or a science of knowledge but to a paradigm that was associated with administrative activities, including management, arrangement, dispositif, organization, and execution of the order of things in the household, as what *oikos-nomia* suggests<sup>36</sup>. *Oikos* designates private household space while *polis* refers to the public domain, and therefore, *oikos-nomia* should mean the arrangement of household affairs. But the line between the *oikos* and *polis* is a tricky question. Drawing on Erich Przywara's etymological studies, Carl Schmitt pointed out that in the Western context of *pneumatic logos*, *oikos* refers to the house of God. From the beginning of the patriarchal society, *oikos-nomia* has been in the realm of *polis* and has essentially been a political economy<sup>37</sup>. To this, Agamben adds the notion that economic theology, conceived as an "immanent ordering" of both divine and human life, was the root of modern bio-politics. The current triumph of economy and government over every aspect of social life is due to this tradition of economic theology<sup>38</sup>. Agamben's research shows that, in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, the *oikia* was defined as "a *polis* on a small and contracted scale" and the economy as "a contracted . . . *politeia*", while the *polis* was defined as "a large house [*oikos megas*]", and politics as "a [common] economy [*koinē tis oikonomia*]" . Community, therefore, was referred to as "the house of God" (*oikos theou*), and the messianic community was also conceived of in the mode of *oikonomia*<sup>39</sup> (emphasis in original).

The question here is: what are the << things >> and according to what orders are they arranged, administered, and distributed in the *oikos/polis* now that *oikos* and *polis* are inter-penetrated and overlaid with one another? In the practice of modern bio-politics, not only natural resources such as agricultural, fishery, mining, forestry, industrial, and commercial products are to be managed, reproduced, and circulated, but also human

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<sup>36</sup> Agamben, G., *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011, pp.17-18.

<sup>37</sup> Schmitt, C., *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2006, pp.336-345 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1950).

<sup>38</sup> Agamben, 2011, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, 2011, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.



physical, intellectual, and moral powers are to be controlled, guided and monitored so that they can be part of the reproduction machine. The power of human life turns out to be the productive forces of the State. The forms of human life, consequently, are shaped and engineered according to the rational and utilitarian goals of the State and have turned out to be the bodies and appendixes that are annexed to the social productive apparatus, as can be seen in the figures of the migrant workers at the construction sites that Xu reflected and critiqued through his artworks.

Through Wu Tien-chang's art, the controversy of *Heimlich* 'homely' and *heimish* 'native' is played upon, and the secrecy, untrustworthy, disagreeable, and unfamiliar elements of the native/home are brought to the surface on the canvas. The abjected conditions of life shared by Taiwanese people during the Martial Law Era, especially those born under the Japanese colonial rule and discriminated as a debased class, were produced and reproduced by the State. Unlike his contemporary Chen Chieh-jen, who staged the historical trauma through the digital images of self-mutilation, Wu Tien-chang staged his sense of the abject through the stylization of objects of fakeness and kitsch<sup>40</sup>. The sense of inferiority, abjection, and puzzlement experienced by the Taiwanese during the martial law era is externalized and staged through the technique of 'epidermisation', or the translation of *unheimlich*, whereby Wu Tien-chang repeatedly worked through and laid bare the abject on the canvas.

Through the artistic intervention by Xu Bing and Wu Tianchang, we can say that these artists' techniques of utilization of the raw objects in their artworks demonstrated diverse forms of archivation that documented the historical process of the colonial matrix of power. These used objects of consumption, displayed in an altered frame of archivation, restored their force of life and mobilized the affective dynamics among the audience. The force of past lives carried and transposed the viewers away from the here and now and immersed in a larger understanding.

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<sup>40</sup> For the discussion of Chen's images of self-mutilation in his staging of historical trauma, see Liu, J., C., H., «The Gaze of Revolt: Historic Iconography Perverted», in Ying-hsiung Chou, et al (eds.), *Cultural Dilemmas during Transitions: East Central Europe versus Taiwan Conference Warsaw 2000*, LIT Verlag Münster, 2004, pp.164-200.



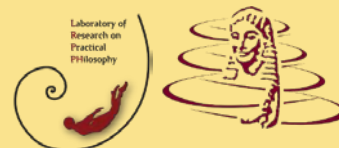
Concerning the objects, we can say that there are two cycles of the consumption and production of objects. The primary cycle of the consumption and production of things in life is the political economy in real history. This cycle of operation suggests why and how human life is shaped, measured, calculated, regulated, and processed into various compartmentalized forms of life through the apparatus of the socially functional and utilitarian uses of things, bodies, and objects, with a particular pattern of affective mode, and how and in what ways are human agents at the same time mass producing and reproducing an even more powerful mechanism of the uses of bodies, aided by remote forces of the global flow of capital.

The second cycle employed by the artists demonstrates the forms of life drawn and shaped in the rapid process of history. The coarse matters the artists collected, such as XU Bing and WU Tian-Chang, and transposed on their canvases or installation sites present a different logic, the archivation of the objects that expose the logic of the operation and re-activate the living experience behind the scenes. Through re-using and transposing the objects, XU, WU, and CHEN altered their functions, mobilized the forces within them, refreshed the social energy, and simultaneously challenged the oppressive operation of society in the act of artistic decolonization.

### Joyce C.H. Liu

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Joyce C.H. Liu is professor of cultural studies, critical theory, and political philosophy at the National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, Taiwan. Her research specialties include comparative literature, psychoanalysis, visual culture, Asian modernity, Taiwanese history of cultural mentality, and Chinese political philosophy. Recent topics encompass geopolitics, biopolitics, border politics, internal colonialism, unequal citizenship, decolonization of knowledge, and artistic interventions. After earning her Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1984, Liu returned to Taiwan, where she taught for over forty years. She chaired the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University and founded Taiwan's first Doctoral Institute of Comparative Literature. In 2001, she moved to National Chiao Tung University, establishing the Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies, which she directed for eleven years. Liu retired in 2021 and currently directs the International Center for Cultural Studies at her current university. She has authored seven books and over one hundred peer-reviewed articles. Her notable works include a four-part series on the cultural mentality of the Taiwan-China complex, with titles such as *Orphan, Goddess, And The Writing Of The Negative: The Performance Of Our Symptoms* (2000) / *The Perverted Heart: The Psychic Forms Of Modernity* (2004) / *The Topology Of Psyche: The Post-1895 Reconfiguration Of Ethics* (2011) / *One Divides Into Two: Philosophical Archaeology Of Modern Chinese Political Thought* (2020). Her most recent book, *The Topology of the History of Mentalities* (2022), synthesizes her research methodologies and explores the dialectical influence of political situations on contemporary



knowledge. Liu has held leadership roles in various academic organizations and co-founded initiatives like the "International Institute for Cultural Studies" and the "Inter-Asia Cultural Studies International Degree Program." She has led numerous transnational research projects addressing global issues of conflicts and injustice and has received multiple academic honors, including the Ministry of Science and Technology Outstanding Research Award. Over the years, Liu has supervised 30 doctoral dissertations and 62 master's theses with students from around the world.

Liu est une chercheuse en études culturelles, théorie critique et philosophie politique à l'Université nationale Yang Ming Chiao Tung. Ses spécialités de recherche incluent la littérature comparée, la psychanalyse, la culture visuelle, la modernité asiatique, l'histoire de la mentalité culturelle taïwanaise et la philosophie politique chinoise. Ses sujets récents englobent la géopolitique, la biopolitique, la politique des frontières, le colonialisme interne, la citoyenneté inégale, la décolonisation du savoir et les interventions artistiques. Après avoir obtenu son doctorat en littérature comparée à l'Université de l'Illinois à Urbana-Champaign en 1984, Liu est retournée à Taïwan, où elle a enseigné pendant plus de quarante ans. Elle a présidé le département d'anglais à l'Université catholique Fu Jen et fondé le premier institut doctoral de littérature comparée à Taïwan. En 2001, elle a rejoint l'Université nationale Chiao Tung, où elle a établi l'Institut de recherche sociale et d'études culturelles, qu'elle a dirigé pendant onze ans. Liu a pris sa retraite en 2021 et dirige actuellement le Centre international d'études culturelles de son université actuelle. Elle est l'auteure de sept livres et de plus d'une centaine d'articles évalués par des pairs. Ses œuvres notables incluent une série en quatre parties sur la mentalité culturelle du complexe Taïwan-Chine, avec des titres tels que *Orphelin, Déesse et L'Écriture du Négatif: La Performance de Nos Symptômes* (2000) / *Le Cœur Perversi: Les Formes Psychiques de la Modernité* (2004) / *La Topologie du Psyche: La Reconfiguration Éthique Post-1895* (2011) / *Un Divise en Deux: Archéologie Philosophique de la Pensée Politique Chinoise Moderne* (2020). Son dernier livre, *La Topologie de l'Histoire des Mentalités* (2022), synthétise ses méthodologies de recherche et explore l'influence dialectique des situations politiques sur le savoir contemporain. Liu a occupé des postes de direction dans diverses organisations académiques et cofondé des initiatives telles que l' "Institut International d'Études Culturelles" et le "Programme International de Diplôme en Études Culturelles Inter-Asiatiques". Elle a dirigé de nombreux projets de recherche transnationaux abordant des questions mondiales de conflits et d'injustice et a reçu plusieurs distinctions académiques, dont le Prix d'Excellence en Recherche du Ministère des Sciences et Technologies. Au fil des ans, Liu a supervisé 30 thèses doctorales et 62 mémoires de maîtrise.

Welcome to the Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Biennale of Practical Philosophy of 2024. Having integrated the experience of the previous editions, we understand that already, is slowly formed an intercultural community of researchers who are attracted by the question about the practical intensity of philosophy and its aspects, particularly from the point of view of its intersection with other fields, other activities and practices, other forms of thinking, praxis, expression.

The Biennales of Practical Philosophy aspire ab initio to be an original attempt, the establishment of a particular polyphonic philosophical event with intercultural, interdisciplinary character and progressively more open to the organization of experimental artistic acts and the development of philosophical and cultural practices in town. They attempt to be revealed as a pole of attraction for the research about the concept and praxis of Practical Philosophy, the ways in which this one is possible to be connected and interwoven with arts and different scientific fields, with the numerous and various practices and forms through which the philosophical condition is, often irregularly and strangely, transferred, moved, grafted, cultivated, transformed.

The Biennale is organized by the *Laboratory of Research in Practical Philosophy* (L.R.P.Ph.) of the University of the Aegean, and in the way of this very Laboratory, they are developed as a research project which perceives Practical Philosophy rather as a question and movement than as position and situation. A Laboratory which, as university structure, shares, in the Aegean Archipelago, the peculiarity of the aquatic, insular, peripheral, borderline, liminal environment and it highlights Practical Philosophy systematically, as an object-crossroad par excellence, an example of perpetual constitution, where the philosophical condition is folded back on itself and is considered as a continuous exercise of meeting with the difference and the praxis as challenge, experiment and an attempt to create a multimodal and unexpected intercultural, philosophical experience.

The International Biennale of Practical Philosophy brings together philosophers, academicians, researchers, artists, professionals, who will have the possibility to present and develop their particular approach, to converse and interact bringing the Practical Philosophy into the foreground, leading it to think again, persistently and with different ways, its limits, forms, acts, persons and spaces.

Thus the Practical Philosophy and its Biennale emerge as a utopian gesture...

Follow their movement!

***Prof. Elena Theodoropoulou***  
*Directress of the Laboratory of Research on Practical Philosophy*  
*Univ/ty of the Aegean, Chair of the Biennale*

