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Translating Collective Memory: Perspectives on Taiwanese identity in the art of Chen Chieh-jen and Wu Tien-chang

This paper will address the phenomenon of artistic engagement with history, past and collective memory in Taiwanese contemporary art as a means of dealing with the question of Taiwanese identity. Even though this is a recurring strategy in the works of many artists, in this preliminary research I intend to focus on two prominent figures in Taiwanese contemporary art, Chen Chieh-jen (陈界仁) and Wu Tien-chang (呉天章). The two artists selected have had long careers and evolved in terms of style, medium and aesthetics. Nevertheless, they are consistent in their engagement with the past, history and memory and the continuing discussion on issues of identity. While this paper is unable to fully represent the multifaceted identity of the Taiwanese artists, it aims to unravel the ways in which some key issues concerning Taiwanese identity are translated through these two rich artistic perspectives.

Over the past fifty years, history and memory have gained traction in academic discourse, and concepts of collective, social and cultural memory have become central in both sociology and cultural history. The concept of collective memory was initially introduced by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs introduced the idea that memory is a social structure, something which is acquired, recalled, recognized and localized in society. The framework of collective memory or social memory is therefore a result, sum and combination of individual members or multiple members of a society (Halbwachs, 1992:38-39). As Halbwachs’ theory of social memory explains, “our conceptions of the past are affected by mental images we employ to solve present problems” (Halbwachs, 1992:34), meaning the past is continuously reconstructed and reshaped in light of present conditions and concerns. In the same way, when artists consciously reconstruct the past they actively engage with issues of the present. Exploring collective memory is a means of understanding an identity that
unites a certain social group. For a set of recollections to prevail over another, they must prove powerful enough to motivate consensus among the many members of the social group (Confino, 1997:1390). Taking into account Halbwachs’ argument, this consent outlines how a group wishes to be ‘remembered’, or in other words how it wishes to present itself in the present through the prism of its past.

In this case, the work of art historian Aby Warburg is particularly insightful, as he dealt extensively with the concept of collective memory in art. For Warburg, all human products, especially artworks, “were expressions of human memory transmitted through symbols of ancient times” (Confino, 1997:1390). His approach to art history is an interdisciplinary one, which considers the wide context in which the artwork was created, while acknowledging the peculiarity of each individual work (Confino, 1997:1391). Following Warburg’s method, I will analyze artworks through the social, cultural and political context of their creation. In this respect, the artworks of Chen Chieh-jen and Wu Tien-chang require an understanding of several time frames, of the present, the time of creation as well as the past, which is referenced in the artworks. It is important to note that Warburg regarded artistic engagements with collective memory to be unconscious mnemonic energy that possesses an artist (Gombrich, 1986:241). With Chen and Wu the situation is more complex. These are conscious artistic choices, yet at the same time artists often cannot fully understand or control how their work is received and interpreted.

Another aspect of the scholarly discourse is dedicated to defining the relation between history and memory. The relationship between history and memory can be described as an evolving one. Since the very conceptions and definitions of history and memory have been subjected to change, there exists a need for continuous evaluation of how these two interact and coincide. In broad lines, this relationship can be characterized in a few stages: a traditional or pre-modern view where memory and history can be understood as synonymous (Burke, 1997:43-44), a modern view where history and memory stand in opposition and a post-modern view in which they are complementary and intertwining (Rusu, 2013:281). Still none of these characterizations provide complete explanations, and when implemented demand further scrutiny and evaluation on a case to case basis. In the artworks of Chen Chieh-jen and Wu Tien-chang this is further problematized, since a clear cut distinction
cannot be drawn between elements of history and memory in their respective artworks. Artists are also not bound by such systemization or preconceived categorization, so one must account for a certain spontaneity that channels collective memory into an artwork. Different artworks evoke the past by simultaneously combining elements of history and collective memory in various degrees. These artworks gain in complexity and nuance by merging personal and public memories. My analysis will aim to map how different elements function in artworks, as well as their effect and purpose.

Throughout history Taiwan has been culturally influenced by many foreign entities. The islands aboriginal population initially came under foreign control by the Dutch (in the south) and Spanish (in the north) in the 17th century. In 1661, Ming Dynasty loyalist Koxinga defeated the Dutch making Taiwan a Ming affiliated territory. Between the 17th and 19th century there were large influxes of Han Chinese immigrants settling in Taiwan, mainly from Fujian province. At the end of the 19th century Taiwan was colonized by the Japanese, the colonial rule which lasted until the end of World War II (WWII). Subsequently, Chiang Kai-Shek lost control of Mainland China to Communist troops led by Mao Zedong, and fled to Taiwan, where he established the Republic of China (ROC). The Kuomintang (KMT) government enforced Martial Law (1949-1987) in the aftermath of the violent February 28 Incident. Martial Law, imposed on the population for over three decades, was lifted only in 1987. During KMT’s rule, the ROC lost its membership in the United Nations, when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) overtook China’s seat. While internally Taiwan went through a process of democratization, its international status remains problematic and uncertain. Historical circumstances destabilized the concept of sovereignty in Taiwan, creating over time multiple and even overlapping identities.

From the 17th century onward, Taiwan has been under foreign rule, its official historical narratives were dictated by foreign forces, and for many social groups, collective memories hold stories of colonization, trauma and oppression. Ruling bodies manipulate, repress or alter histories and collective memories to legitimize and strengthen their power in the present (Burke, 1997:58). In totalitarian regimes, this is often accomplished through blunt tactics, involving violence and falsification. In democratic regimes, the situation becomes more convoluted; it is a state of struggle since multiple groups attempt to use the past to advocate and promote their particular
agendas and interests (Rusu, 2013:264). The social anthropologist, Paul Connerton (2008:69) explains that states, governments, and ruling parties take actions to make societies forget in two different ways - repressive erasure and prescriptive forgetting. Repressive erasure is brutal and violent mechanisms implemented by the state most likely for the purpose of denying a historical rupture or causing a historical break. Still, it is important to note that repressive erasure is not always violent or even apparent (Connerton, 2008:60). Prescriptive forgetting is also perpetrated by the state, but it differs in that all parties believe that it is in their interest to forget. These acts of suppression are meant to maintain cohesion and unity within a society, out of concern that painful events from the past will hurt a society’s ability to function and create irreparable harm and division (Connerton, 2008:61-62). As was noted, collective memories are not static, they are subjected to change. For example, prescriptive forgetting can be obstructed if one group no longer wishes to consent to forgetting. On the other hand, repressive erasure even if stopped can lead to a state of humiliating silence, a desire to disassociate with events linked to shame, pain and humiliation (Connerton, 2008:67-68). All these distinctions come into play in Taiwanese collective memory and they are expressed in the artworks of Chen Chieh-jen and Wu Tien-chang.

The cultural historian, Peter Burke (1997) points out the importance of preserving records of the past as a way of combating repression and erasure of histories and memories. Historians can act as agents of resistance by challenging single narratives, myths and pointing out weaknesses of grand narratives (Burke, 1997:59). Similarly, I would argue that artists too are agents of resistance, even though they fulfill this function in different ways than historians. Firstly, they work in different mediums - artists work in the visual sphere and historians in the textual sphere. Secondly, while artists are not bound to the same rules as historians, they have the ability to create objects of inquiry, which shed light on phenomena beyond art history. Chen Chieh-jen and Wu Tien-chang exemplify this in their artworks. They do not conform to conventional narratives; rather they translate their critical perspectives on collective memory and history to a visual medium.

When contemplating these issues, I was particularly influenced by the work W.J.T. Mitchell, who is best known for his contributions to art history, visual culture and
media theory. In Picture Theory (1994), Mitchell coins the term “pictorial turn”, a new phase in which the picture gains intellectual centrality by becoming a principal theoretical object that can be applicable to various disciplines of human sciences. The pictorial turn requires a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis. It is “a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality” (Mitchell, 1994:16). Mitchell (1994) also identifies precursors that explain the emergence of the pictorial turn: a growing interest in visuality in multiple fields of human science, as well as a growing presence of pictures in our lives, a result of developments of video, cybernetic technologies and electronic reproduction of images. Pictures are special objects, because of the special relationship they have with us, the viewers. This relationship can be defined as a “double consciousness” (Mitchell, 2005:7). On the one hand, we are aware that pictures are not real and that they are merely objects like any other. On the other hand, pictures have a kind of mystical component, one that holds a certain power over us, that cannot be completely rationalized or deciphered (Mitchell, 2005:7-9). This mystical component of pictures in a pre-modern context can be attributed to idolatry, fetishism and totemism. However, in the modern context it is reconfigured and equally affective; for instance, it is what makes an advertising image potent (Mitchell, 1996:73). Ultimately, what makes pictures- whether created for commercial, spiritual or aesthetical purposes- intriguing objects of inquiry is their ability to absorb or transfix the viewer. This does not eliminate interpretation as a tool, but opens up new avenues of exploring issues through the unique picture-viewer relationship (Mitchell, 2005:36, 49-50). In this spirit, the analyzed artworks translate the Taiwanese collective experiences to bring attention to questions concerning Taiwanese society and identity.

Chen Chieh-jen and Wu Tien-chang belong to a generation of artists that grew up during the Martial Law Period, and experienced the transition to a democratic regime in the late 1980s and 1990s. Hence, their works symbolically carry a historical burden particularly significant to their generation. Living through these transitions puts questions of national, cultural and social identities in the forefront, and artists expressed strong reactions to these issues. Questions of Taiwanese identity and Taiwanese local consciousness preoccupied the artistic discursive field and these culminated in exhibitions such as The 1996 Taipei Biennial: the Quest for Identity and
the series of 2-28 Commemorative Exhibitions in The Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) (Liu, 2007). Chen and Wu established themselves in this environment, making their artworks vital parts of the discourse. They bring forward these concerns, combining their personal experiences with wider social questions. In their artwork, albeit in different ways, both artists channel official and unofficial histories as well as collective memories to present alternative narratives and marginalized identities that create a fuller picture of Taiwanese culture and society.

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Chen Chieh-jen was born in 1960 in Taoyuan, Taiwan. Growing up in the outskirts of Taipei during the Martial Law period, his neighborhood was a microcosm of many collective traumas and pains that plague Taiwanese society. In fact, Chen himself presents his artistic creations through a map of his old neighborhood. Chen’s family resided in a village area set up for low ranked officers. In his close vicinity, there were: factories that produced bullets to support the Vietnam War, a sanatorium where KMT held prisoners captured during the Korean War, an industrial park with laborers, and aboriginal people who came to the city in search of work. The small area shows the history of the Korean and Vietnam War, the Cold War, the Martial Law Period, and also Taiwan being a manufacturing force, a world factory (Chen, C., 2016, pers. comm. 13 June). Deeply affected by the experience of Martial Law, he attempts to unpack the impacts of this past on Taiwanese contemporary society. This illustrates how personal memories interplay with broader themes of collective memory and past in his work. According to Chen:

“Taiwan's historical and political situation of long-term domination and placement under the overlapping sovereignty of different nations has resulted in the complete disintegration of the people's spirit. Taiwanese society has been repeatedly forced to become one with historical amnesia and have lost the ability to imagine and reflect on the future from the context of past.” (Chen, 2015: 29)

Therefore, evoking collective memories is means through which one understands contemporary issues and identity, since the causes are rooted in Taiwanese history.

**Imagining History**

In the earlier stages of his career Chen created a series of digitally manipulated photographs *Revolt in the Soul & Body 1990-1999*. The artist directly engaged with the past by using historical photographs from 1900-1950 that depicted scenes of human horror and violence. In the process of digital manipulation, Chen enhances the grotesque visions by further deforming already tortured figures. Additionally, he

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2 This was presented to me in an interview with Chen Chieh-jen. It was also used during a lecture he gave as part of the 16th NCCU Artist in Residence Program.

incorporates himself in the photographs. He is a spectator, torturer or victim, and in some cases he simultaneously plays multiple roles. By inserting himself in the photographs, he symbolically becomes complicit in acts of torture and violence. For example, in *Genealogy of the Self* Chen inserts himself to the crowd on the left side of the photo. The photograph depicts *lingchi*, a form of torture in imperial China also known as ‘death by a thousand cuts’. It is based on a 1905 photograph, which appeared in George Batallie’s book “Tears of Eros”. The tortured victim seems to be in a state of trance while looking upward to the skies. In contrast, the facilitators and spectators look downward focused on the raw flesh and the act of torture. Through these imaginary historical reconstructions, one understands how violence is perpetuated and reproduced in collective memory. The artist is the link between the past and present, his gaze is dual: on the one hand he positions himself as a part of the system, on the other he serves as a messenger presenting a reality that is evaded (Liu, 2000: 180). It is a warning against prescriptive forgetting, if one does not face or reflect on each individuals role in a collective cycle of violence, the cycle will be internalized and repeated.

Chen persisted in his exploration and interpretation of the historic lingchi photograph in the video installation, *Lingchi- Echoes of a Historical Photograph* (2002). The video installation brings the photo to life, imagining the ritualistic torture and the Western photographer gazing at the spectacle. The protagonist is a martyr figure pictured smiling faintly through his suffering in a dazed like state of transcendence. Chen also connects this state of mind to the Buddhist concept of *parināma*:

“This victim of *lingchi* has no way of escaping; he is bound, dismembered, photographed, force fed opium, and in a daze. Seemingly incapable of taking any action whatsoever, he uses a subtle gesture—a smile—and the image fixing capacity of the camera held by the French soldier, a representative figure of colonizing force, to create intense confusion for subsequent viewers of the photo. This confusion has transformed the victim's smile into an image that has continued to dialog with viewers long after it was photographed, and long after the victim was executed by dismemberment. Under these extreme and impossible conditions, the victim

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4 Examples include *A Way Going to an Insane City* and *The Image of Identical Twins*
performed an active gesture that cannot be eradicated by death or time.” (Chen, 2002)

The geometric shape of two circles is a motif in the video, the circular wounds of the tortured protagonist correspond to the circle lenses of the camera. When the wounds are exposed, the camera focuses into the wounds and opens a realm to the past, to a series of places related to historic events. The Beijing Old Summer Palace, destroyed on two occasions, by the British and French troops in 1860 and the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900; a human experimentation unit operated by the Japanese in the Second Sino-Japanese War and WWII; a Taiwanese political prisoner during the Martial Law era; a contaminated site in Taiwan abandoned by transnational corporations and a deserted Taiwanese factory (Chen, 2002). While this information is not available to the viewer, the impression of destruction and abandonment is clear. What does it mean to connect between these different locations and events from various points of history? The artist asks viewers to evaluate these events in the framework of the traditional act of Chinese torture, a form of institutional violence implemented in imperial China. Hence, what ties colonial oppression, crimes of war, government persecution and neoliberal policies together are forms of violence inflicted on the people. In this way, the protagonist is a symbolic vessel carrying collective memories of suffering and pain. In following works, Chen further untangles these memories from a political and economic perspective.

**History Obscured by Neoliberalism**

*Lingchi* is in a lot of ways a precursor of things to come, showing elements that will grow more prevalent in future works. Chen’s video installations are intricate composites of realistic and dreamlike elements, sometimes resulting in enigmatic narratives and imagery. After *Lingchi*, he moved toward particular stories relevant to marginalized communities and cases of social injustice. At the center of these works is criticism of a neoliberal logic supported by government policies and their devastating impacts on communities. By his own admission, the artist identifies with these communities (Chen, C. 2016, pers. comm. 13 June). In his art, Chen strives to represent identities of marginalized communities that are overlooked in history and contemporary society. Chen’s artworks are built on extensive research and fieldwork. He enters communities, devotes time to familiarize himself with the environment, forms personal connections with community members, and maintains prolonged
relationships before beginning the actual process of creation. This extends beyond a conventional relationship. Chen recognized their skills and abilities, composing his team of amateurs and unemployed workers.

Factory (2003), the story of unemployed female workers of Lien Fu garment factory is emblematic of the condition of workers crushed by neoliberal policies across the globe. From the 1950’s Taiwan went through a process of industrialization, which reached its peak in the 1960s. This marked the establishment of Taiwan as a world factory, having an export-oriented economy dependent on labor intensive industries. In the second half of the 1980’s, a variety of factors led to an adoption of neoliberal policies, such as opening Taiwan’s markets, privatizations and deregulations of international trade. With the 1990s rise of globalization, many industries left Taiwan in favor of cheaper labor abroad. As a result, a large numbers of factories were closed and masses of workers lost their jobs. In the same way, the women of Lien Fu factory were left unemployed after the factory closed in 1996. To make matters worse, investors were able to maintain ownership while dodging payments of pensions, wages and severance pay. The female workers mounted protests employing aggressive tactics, including blocking highways, occupying train stations and surrounding public officials. Even though initially they received media and political attention, ultimately the protest didn’t bear fruit and no one was held accountable for their situation.

When the film was made six years after the factory closed, the women were still protesting but were very aware of the hopelessness of their situation (Chen, C. 2016, pers. comm. 13 June). For the purpose of the film the women return to the old garment factory, an abandoned site full of unused and broken equipment. Factory is a silent slow-paced film that thoughtfully draws the viewer into the life and struggle experienced by this group of women. In a wistful sequence, two women hold up a garment, a product of their labor. Reminiscent of Lingchi the camera moves toward the garment and transitions to archival footage, a 1960s government made film that depicts the flourishing days of Taiwanese factories. The film goes back and forth between past and present, emphasizing the passage of time, thirty years of hard work. There is a stark contrast between the factory in its glory days (the daily work routine, the worker dorms) and its present state, the women working on their sewing machines
in the abandoned space. The camera focuses on the women working, a close up of a woman trying to thread a needle allows one to appreciate the pedantic, delicate qualities of their labor. Many symbolic items appear, signifiers of the working day, such as the work clock, the tea thermos, the electric fan. In the latter parts of Factory the women make order in the trashed factory, cleaning and lining up chairs. It is a setting of an empty assembly with a red and white megaphone on the table, symbolizing the failed protest.

The sentiment is of melancholy and sadness, the passage of time marked on faces of women forgotten by history. It is an indictment of a heartless neoliberal logic that places profits above lives of workers. Factory touches upon different modes of remembering and forgetting. The story of the Lien Fu garment factory can be qualified as prescriptive forgetting. The collective memories of workers and low class struggles receive no official recognition, and ultimately are overlooked and ignored by the majority of society. The choice of making the film silent was due to the workers request to not speak in the movie. Is this a form humiliating silence, a wish to disassociate oneself from the heartbreak and painful memory? Possibly, but I would argue that it is another stage of challenging prescriptive forgetting. While the silence is filled with sadness, it is also dignified. After years of protest, the women no longer wish to shout or speak so they chose another form of expression.

Military Court and Prison (2007-2008) is a fictional story of a political prisoner waiting for his release, the clock stopped five minute before the official end of Martial Law. It is based on a facility used by the KMT to incarcerate political dissidents during Martial Law. In 2002 the military court and prison was registered as a historic site and in 2007 officially opened as the Jing-Mei Human Rights Memorial and Cultural Park (Chen, 2008). The storyline, vague and convoluted, has references to the facilities past as a court and prison, and its present as a museum. The young political prisoner walks through the prison searching for writing utensils. As the film progresses performativity overpowers cohesion, and the piece unveils itself as theatre or an art performance. A powerful sequence depicts the prisoners pushing a dwelling like structure. The camera focuses on the hands pushing, which simultaneously evoke a sense of physical exertion and futility as the pushing seems infinite and hopeless. Nearing the end of the film, a demolition vehicle appears headed toward the prisoners
who are protecting the dwelling structure with their bodies. At the very end, the young protagonist hands out newspapers and pens to all the prisoners. The newspapers are employment ads, and in the margins the participants write their true identities indicating that the performance is over. They are unemployed laborers, temporary workers, freelance workers, union members, foreign spouses etc. When the identities are revealed, the performance prompts a discussion on the impacts of globalization and neoliberal policies, exploitation of workers, outsourcing of jobs etc. Moreover, the films’ setting is not a military prison, but an abandoned factory. In this context, when the demolition truck faces the prisoners, the audience point of view is from behind the truck, placing them in the position of neoliberalism (Chen, C. 2016, pers. comm.13 June).

Military Court and Prison echoes in a more explicit way the ideas expressed in Lingchi. A connection is established between overt violence facilitated by the KMT government against political dissidents, and neoliberal economic policies also facilitated by governments of both major parties (KMT and DPP), a different form of violence toward local workers. The military court and prison is a physical representation of institutional violence and oppression exercised by the government during the Martial Law period. The stories of political dissidents, however, represent only a small part of this experience. Chen’s interest is to understand the world outside the prison, a whole society in an invisible prison brainwashed by nearly forty years of propaganda (Chen,C.J, 2016, pers. comm.13 June). One must ask how is this violence perpetuated and how does it impact Taiwanese society and identity? Chen identifies a reincarnation of institutional violence in neoliberal policies, in discrimination against spouses from Mainland China. His art exposes these mechanisms by employing collective memory in order to advance a more just, equal society.

His latest work, Realm of Reverberations (2014) provides more insight. The subject is Losheng Sanatorium, established during the Japanese colonial period. This was an enclosed compound that forcibly quarantined leprosy patients. From its inception, Losheng was a site of trauma: residents were indefinitely denied freedom of movement, prohibited from getting married and sterilized against their will. When the KMT came to power, they overtook the facility but largely enforced the policies established by the Japanese. In 1961 the policies became more lax, but the stigma and
discrimination made social reintegration increasingly difficult. In 1994, government bodies decided to tear down Losheng in order to build a Metro maintenance depot. For the residents, Losheng contained painful memories, but at the same time it was the only home they had. The governments’ intent to destroy Losheng prompted a social movement and organization of several groups that rallied around residents and called for the preservation of the site. However in 2008, police removed the residents and supporters from the area, quickly turning Losheng to a demolition site (Chen, 2014).

*Realm of Reverberations* contains four separate parts. The stories explain the faith of Losheng, they follow an old resident, a social activist working with the Losheng Preservation movement, a hospice nurse who was in Mainland China during the Cultural Revolution and a fictional prisoner traveling through time. *Realm of Reverberations* threads beautiful imagery to form an imaginative composite that leaves the viewer with a sense of sorrow and melancholy. It is a devastating violent disconnect. As Halbwachs explains the spatial framework plays an important role in collective memory. In order to recollect we must place ourselves in some sort of related spatial context, “we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is in effect preserved by your physical surrounding” (Halbwachs, 1950: 7). For the residents of Losheng, there is no alternative spatial framework as their whole lives were reduced to one space. It is not only the displaced residents that were stripped away from their home, it is also all the residents that died in the walls of the sanatorium and were cremated in Losheng. Chen creates a setting presenting all the photos of patients that died, when passing through them one cannot help but think of a graveyard. Through these symbolic reconstructions of collective memory *Realm of Reverberations* becomes a visual monument of sorts to the story of Losheng Sanatorium.

The destruction of Losheng is an act of repressive erasure. The states’ decision with regard to Losheng was maintained through governments led by both major parties, KMT and DPP. The destruction of Losheng can be understood as a combination of two factors, a desire to dislocate Losheng from collective memory and an emphasis on modernization and development. By building a Metro depot in its place, Losheng’s dark past is replaced with a structure which represents modernity and progress. For
over 70 years Losheng Sanatorium was a space, which exemplified how mechanisms of violence are perpetuated: from its establishment in the Japanese colonial period through the years of the KMT regime, its demolition and the aftermath of it to those who were fighting for its preservation.
Wu Tien-Chang was born in 1956 in the harbor city of Keelung. He graduated from the Fine Arts Department of the Chinese Culture University in 1980, where he was trained as a painter. From the initial stages of his career, Wu made history and identity the focus of his work. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Wu made his mark with large-scale oil paintings which addressed the theme of communal suffering by engaging with historic instances of violence and conflict (Chen, H., 2015:45).

**Engaging with Historical Narratives**

*Homage to the Unknown Heroes (The February 28th Incident)* (1992) and *Olive Drab Hunting* (1989) addressed the February 28th Incident and the June 4th Incident respectively. The artworks, painted in a Neo-expressionist style show acts of violence, visions of human massacre and horror. *Homage to the Unknown Heroes* depicts the heavy figure of a fallen hero against a condensed background of mourning eyes, faces and figures. The anonymous hero, a symbolic representation of the February 28th Incident victims is escorted by mourning figures, a collective commemorating the fallen. The heroes open wound is bleeding as the February 28th Incident remains a gaping wound, an unresolved episode in Taiwanese collective memory. The painting elicits a powerful visceral reaction through a concise composition, a dramatic color scheme of grays and blacks contrasted with splashes of red, and heavy, thick brush strokes that create a low-relief effect. *Olive Drab Hunting* depicts a chaotic scene of violence and massacre, the soldier attacking with a bayonet surrounded by detached limbs, decapitated heads, screaming figures floating in space. The soldier is a figure detached from humanity. His head cut out of the frame and his figure drawn from the back juxtapose the terror and horror projected by the victims. Stylistically similar, both paintings are early examples of Wu’s affinity to texture, which is a prominent feature of his work through different phases and mediums. Despite the fact that no clear reference exists, these works can be placed in a broader tradition of anti-war art such as Goya’s *The Third of May* (1808) or Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937).

Even though each piece stands in its own right, symmetry can be drawn between the pieces as well as between the historical events. While overall, Wu’s work placed more emphasis on Taiwanese historical experiences, he examines the concept of identity through the historical and political relationship of China and Taiwan (Chen, H., 2015:57). This line of thought is illustrated in the series *Four eras* (1990),
portraying four leaders that shaped Chinese and Taiwanese modern histories, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiao Ping, Chiang Kai-Shek, and Chiang Ching-Kuo. In these portraits the artist draws inspiration from Chinese tradition, creating imperial like portraits and seating the figures in postures reminiscent of ancestral paintings (Chen, H.,2015:53). While Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-Shek claimed to liberate the people from imperial rule, they and their successors drew from that tradition to establish themselves as absolute leaders, modern day emperors. Their garments become a space where the histories of their regimes unfold into collective memories of violence and oppression. The images on the garments allude to historical events such as the February 28 Incident, the Cultural Revolution, the Formosa Incident, the June 4th Incident etc. Taiwan and Mainland China, adversary regimes that demonized each other share collective experiences of state brutality. Wu explains the historical parallels of the Chinese and Taiwanese experience:

“They all functioned almost like the evil nemesis in each other’s imaginations. For instance, Chang Kai-Shek’s days in Shanghai nearly intersected with Mao Zedong’s days in Changsha. The Chongqing era intersected with the Yan’an era. Their Cultural Revolution took place during our post-February 28 period. Deng Xiaoping came to power at the same time as Chiang Ching-kuo. I used physiognomy to express the different eras of rule, the different personalities of rule. Mao Zedong’s reign was founded on Red Terror, and Chiang Kai-shek’s on White Terror” (Chen,H.,2015:52-53).

This symmetry critically evaluates power structures, how a leader manipulates the masses to gain and retain full control of the people. The leaders in the portraits are somewhat reminiscent of totems. Their hands, hard and wooden like symbolize the iron grips of their rule, their god like status and an all-encompassing hegemony over the people. The individual growing up or living under these regimes, now faces these leaders in an unfamiliar context. This means to face the image of your leader critically rather than to bow down in obedience, to face the past and to deal with the atrocities committed under their rule. As Taiwan enters a new political stage, Wu reflects on the historical developments of Taiwan and China, and exposes the danger of the power structure of this kind of absolute rule. By challenging this mechanism and critically evaluating these leaderships, a potential exists to be free of these demigods. Following
Halbwachs principle of remembering that the past is reconstructed in light of the present, *Four Eras* reconstructs the past not only to release suppressed memories of suffering. Besides critically evaluating past, the series reflects on the society that this past constructed and what Taiwanese society can become in the post-Martial Law period.

**Shifting to a Local Consciousness**

In the beginning of the 1990s Wu moved to another phase in his creation, a shift evident in both subject and style. Wu decided to distance himself from direct engagement with politics and key historical events. By his own characterization his early work took a straightforward approach, therefore it was quickly exhausted (Wu, T., 2016, pers. comm., 19 July). Instead, he turns toward a local perspective, a collective Taiwanese subconscious intertwined with his personal memories and experiences. *Until We Meet Again! Spring and Autumn Pavilion* (1994), *Spring Night Dream I* (1994) and *Intimate Family II* (1996) are representative of this phase. The artworks delve into the past to unravel the complex tensions and conflicts of Taiwanese society. Wu asserts a strong local point of view in order to create a distinctive Taiwanese aesthetic representative of a Taiwanese native culture. Wu’s new subjects belong to another time, they are memories linked to the Martial Law period, and possibly the Japanese colonial period. The works are inspired by old photographs, and even more so by the function of photography. Photography captures a moment that dies, but in the form of a photograph the memory lasts forever (Wu, T., 2016, pers. comm., 19 July). Visually, the paintings created are influenced by Taiwanese visual culture of the 1950s and 1960s: old salon photographs, movie posters and advertisements (Liu, 2007). Wu wraps his figures in an aura of nostalgia but destabilizes the scenes by injecting them with unsettling elements: the feminized figure of the sailor with a visible bulge in his trousers, a flashy songstress or an incestuous scene.

Many of these elements directly relate to memories of Wu’s childhood and adolescence. His fascination with sailors for example, goes back to his days as a child in Keelung, where U.S ships docked their boats during the Korean and Vietnam War. The cheery, bulky sailors, who came to Keelung to relax and vacation, left a mixture of impressions. He remembers them as friendly and very lustful, frequenting bars and
brothels (Chen, H., 2015: 19-21). The sailor in Until We Meet Again! Spring and Autumn Pavilion is localized. He is in Taiwanese uniform at the backdrop of the Spring and Autumn Pavilion in the southern city of Kaohsiung, home to the Taiwanese navy base. The sailor’s figure, slender and feminine accentuates the bulge, the idea of lust and hidden desire. His eyes are hidden under a velvet mask. For Wu, the eyes represent sense and stability and by covering them dark and perverted parts of the soul are unleashed (Wu, T., 2016, pers. comm., 19 July). As the title implies, he is saying goodbye, setting out to sea and possibly not coming back. The photograph immortalizes the moment and maybe even the man. The romantic scene of a sailor with a guitar, his emotional goodbye is contrasted by his unleashed desire. These coexisting elements create ambiguity and a perpetual sense of tension.

This relates to a fundamental principle in Wu Tien-chang’s art and aesthetic. He inspects the idea of boundaries and extremes, of life and death, beauty and ugliness, pleasure and repulsion. The artist often explains this fascination through the analogy of the butterfly and the moth. Why do two similar creatures provoke very different emotions in people? What separates the moth from the butterfly is a thin coat of dust. Through this one can understand why people are attracted to one and repelled by the other (Wu, T., 2016, pers. comm., 19 July). Meaning, what appeals to the artists is finding the thin line between polarizing emotions and playing up this inner tension. In this manner, these artworks embody the border between nostalgia and trauma, drawing the viewer into a complex dialogue about Taiwanese collective memory and past.

During the Martial Law period, the KMT rule generated a social and ethnic divide between Mainland Chinese, who immigrated to Taiwan with KMT’s retreat post World War II, and local Taiwanese, mainly aboriginal people and Han Chinese from earlier migration waves. In establishing the KMT regime, the local Taiwanese population experienced a violent break from Japanese rule, culture and policies, which culminated in the February 28 Incident. Under the slogan “We are all Chinese”, KMT’s forcefully implemented strict language, educational and cultural policies. Nevertheless, local Taiwanese were still looked down upon and marginalized. They were regarded as a sub-culture and on an institutional level, local culture and dialects were rejected (Wanek, 2002: 173-174, 176-177).
Wu Tien-chang, ethnically Taiwanese experienced similar sentiments and was labeled *Tai-ke* (台客), a derogatory term used by Mainland Chinese to label local Taiwanese. The term was mainly used to belittle local Taiwanese, deeming them vulgar, kitschy and unsophisticated (Chen, H., 2015:36). His 1990s artworks, categorized as mixed media, uniquely combine photographs and oil paintings with fabrics, rhinestones and artificial flowers. The decorated frames become an integral part of the artwork, in *Spring Night Dream I* and *Intimate Family II* they are made out of artificial flowers, the kind often used in funerals or weddings. The artist uses glitters, rhinestones and materials like fake leather and velvet to emphasize details in the paintings, such as the singers’ masks, the pagoda floors and animals eyes. Imitations of cheap décor inspired by local flavors, gaudiness and kitsch epitomize the *Tai-ke* spirit, putting forward a new alternative aesthetic, which expresses local Taiwanese culture. Through his aesthetic Wu proudly asserts himself as a representative of a culture previously ridiculed and excluded. Thus, the term *Tai-ke* is proudly reclaimed and used as a source of expressive power (Chen, H., 2015: 36-37; Liu, 2007). This style however expressed something more profound, an artificial element that defines Taiwanese culture. Wu explains that Taiwan is surrounded by artificial elements, and these need to be understood in the historical context of Taiwan’s colonization by foreign rules:

“All foreign powers wanted to exploit its resources, and because they couldn’t do it one fell swoop, this kind of “surrogate culture” took shape. It’s related to exploiting the land and not bothering to establish a long-lasting identity. There are no long lasting plans... There’s no feeling that a such and such thing needs to be enduring. In Taiwan’s scenic areas, we often see concrete decorated to look like bamboo. It’s phony. (...)This is Taiwan’s long-term visual habits and visual habits become the collective subconsciousness.” (Chen, H., 2015:37).

Taiwan’s ‘surrogate-culture’ becomes engrained in collective memory, as the visual habit uncovers consequences of social and historical realities. In the case of Taiwan, continuous foreign rule prevented an independent development of an authentic local culture. At the same time, the changes of foreign powers engrained adaptability and temporality that became an essential characteristic of Taiwanese culture and society.
Specifically, in the 1960s it is linked to the process of industrialization, Taiwan’s history as a manufacturing country and a world factory. Speed, efficiency and functionality were valued over quality (Wu, T., 2016, pers. comm., 19 July). Wu dramatized this environment of flashy neon lights, artificial flowers, bar girls covered in fake jewels to express his local background and identity. Collective memory proves to be an effective means for channeling and establishing a Taiwanese consciousness. Intriguingly, these artworks expose a paradox of the artificial, through the phony and fake elements the artist exposes an authentic truth about Taiwanese society and culture.

**An Understated Approach to Identity**

In the 2000s, Wu once again transitioned in style and medium, turning to digital photography. Wu became fascinated with technology and employed software manipulation to capture the perfect image. The artworks carry a strong aesthetic statement and visual impact, making their connection to questions of Taiwanese identity less transparent. *Our Hearts Beat as One* (2001) and *One Good Deed a Day* (2007) are tableau vivants, meticulously staged and highly stylized scenes. *Our Hearts Beat as One* shows heavily made up clownish figures with broad smiles riding a bicycle in gaudy clothes and accessories. At first glance, the bright colors, broad smiles and kitschy clothes seem to show a light-hearted humorous scene. However, upon closer inspection one notices the riders are missing limbs, legs and arms. The perfect pose and exaggerated smile cannot disguise a darkness that is underneath the surface, a hidden trauma. Like in his artworks of the 1990s, Wu plays with the idea of borders and extremes.

*One Good Deed a Day* (2007) goes further by heavily manipulating the bodies of the models. Intrigued by the idea of extremes, Wu became interested in various human deformities such as down-syndrome, developmental delay or dwarfism. Through digital modification the bodies were manipulated to appear abnormal (Chen, H., 2015:111). The overall spectacle mixes the bizarre, surreal and disturbing. Two boy scouts dressed in shiny metallic uniforms hold up a gurney carrying a stout patient, who is sitting up with a wounded arm. The garish costumes, excessive make up, grimacing faces, and fake studio background suggest a staged show, a theatre performance. From an aesthetic point of view, Wu develops some of the principal
characteristics of his 1990s aesthetic. He translates his Taiwanese local style to
photography through the artificial backdrops, gaudy accessories and colorful clothes.
His use of texture remains a significant feature of his work, from his expressive brush
strokes in the 1980s, his imaginative use of materials in his mixed media period, to
the 2000s where he carefully designs props and costumes.

At the center of these artworks is a conflict, the happy faces covered by many layers
of makeup serve as masks. The masks not only hide the figures true face, but the
expressions ignore human injury and disturbing disfigurements. This indicates an
unstable identity. Like with figures in the artworks of the 1990s that have their eyes
masked, here too lies a sense of uncertainty. In many ways, this can reflect instability
in the concept of Taiwanese identity. Whether this reflects past trauma experienced
during the Martial Law period, or a lack of clarity stemming from Taiwan’s unstable
international status;\(^5\) it is revealing deep collective wounds which prevent the
individual from feeling whole.

From 2010, Wu began making video art, this change led to the artists’ rejection of
technology. In Beloved (2013) and Farewell, Spring and Autumn Pavilion (2015), all
stage elements from props to costumes were handmade. These works also deal with
Taiwanese collective memory and identity in a more subtle, ambiguous way. In these
artworks a new component is introduced, a latex max. Latex serves a second skin. On
first glance, these works can be linked to desire and sexuality, but when they are more
carefully unpacked themes of collective memory and national identity resurface (Wu,
T., 2016, pers. comm., 19 July). The latex mask can conceal ones identity or allow
someone to transform their identity. This is symbolic of the Taiwanese situation, with
no international recognition even its name is a source of contention. The PRC regards
Taiwan as a part of China in contrast with the local population who view the island as
Taiwan, but on occasion diplomatic strategies require Taiwan to use the name ROC
(Wu, T., 2016, pers. comm., 19 July). The skin, a principal sex organ carries through
touch memories of the suppressed and forgotten pleasures and traumas. In Beloved on
the backdrop of an old Taiwanese pop song, the female protagonist symbolically

\(^5\) Professor Andrew Pai of NTNU opened this train of thought for me, specifically referring to the
question of overlapping identity. Do people in Taiwan see themselves as Chinese or Taiwanese, or
possibly the answer is not simple and one cannot make a clear choice.
changes identities while posing for the camera. The sentimental atmosphere evokes nostalgia, yet the latex skin holds more than pleasures, also containing traumatic memories of Taiwanese modern history.

His latest work *Farewell, Spring and Autumn Pavilion* (2015) is a video installation made especially for his Venice Biennale exhibition *Never Say Goodbye*. The video relates to the earlier *Until We Meet Again! Spring and Autumn Pavilion*, which was presented in the 1997 Venice Biennale. Here, the sailor in the photograph comes to life. The video is marked by nostalgia; set to a soundtrack of a Taiwanese 1950s pop song “Farewell Harbor City!” the audience bids farewell to the wandering protagonist. Along the path the navy man transform to a wandering sailor and lastly to a battle pilot. The journey takes the viewer through the important landmarks of the Cold War: from the navy base of southern Kaohsiung, passing by stone tablets that mark Cold War confrontation with the PRC to the air base in Taoyuan and finally ending at the monument of the Black Cat Squadron (Wu, 2016). The protagonist walks through Taiwanese collective memory of the Martial Law period and the Cold War yet his journey is stagnant because of the ongoing instability of Taiwanese identity. For Wu Tien-chang the ultimate goal is Taiwanese autonomy and in his latest artwork he bids farewell to Taiwan’s past, saying goodbye to all foreign forces that once occupied the island (Wu, T., 2016, pers. comm., 19 July).

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6 During 1961–1974 Black Cat Squadron flew U-2 surveillance plane over the PRC. For more see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Cat_Squadron
Conclusion
In my analysis I demonstrated how Taiwanese collective memory can be translated into a visual medium, specifically into artworks. For Wu Tien-chang and Chen Chieh-jen the use of collective memory is an artistic strategy to address broader issues relevant to Taiwanese society and identity. The choice of two very different artists was purposeful as it gives a sense of the wide possibilities this topic holds. Chen Shun-chu, Mei Dean-E, Yang Mao-lin, to name a few, are other notable artists that can fall under this category. Similarly, the next generation of artists offers a fresh perspective on Taiwanese identity, but these important questions go beyond the scope of this research.

In order to establish an effective comparison between Wu and Chen, some key points of similarity need to be reiterated. Firstly, as mentioned both belong to a generation that grew up in the Martial Law era, a fact that has had an unequivocal influence on them as artists. This is possibly a reason why many of their works do not only draw on collective memory, but also personal memory. Secondly, throughout their careers the artists engaged with the past, but this has not hindered their artistic evolution. In the early stages of their careers the approach to social memory and history was straightforward. In Wu’s case, it was easy to identify crucial historic events and narratives, while Chen based Revolt in the Soul & Body on digital manipulation of historic photographs. As their careers progressed the engagement with the past becomes much more complex and nuanced.

From the 1990s Wu focuses on cultural and social consciousness. He uses the past and collective memory to assist in developing a strong local aesthetic that exemplifies Taiwanese identity, one that embodies the island marine culture and distinguishes Taiwan from Mainland China. This of course mirrors the political sphere, Taiwan’s contested international status and the goal of Taiwanese autonomy. In my opinion the most significant concept in Wu’s art is the idea of ‘surrogate culture’ which creates a visual habit that steeps into Taiwanese collective consciousness. Throughout history Taiwan absorbed different cultural influences from the various foreign powers that resided on the island, and the combination of these assisted in forming a unique Taiwanese sensibility and identity. Chen’s artworks are different in that the focus is on socio-economic and political conditions and how these affect local communities.
Rather than focusing on the issue of Taiwanese sovereignty, he is more interested in understanding the social implications of this situation. To understand these implication one must realize how they are rooted in Taiwanese consciousness. He works with local marginalized communities and through his art he gives representation to their collective memories, identities and imaginations.

In terms of collective memory both deal with social trauma that stems from foreign rule and colonization. For Wu especially it is specifically the oppression during the Martial Law period, and reclaiming a local culture and aesthetic that was suppressed and marginalized. He deals with clear instances of repressive erasure, some instances of external violence like the February 28 Incident and others of internal violence in the form of disparaging labels like Tai-ke. For Chen the social trauma extends from collective memory into the present, and his works reflect this cycle of violence. Because Chen works with specific groups and communities, often ignored not only by the state but also by society; the lines between repressive erasure and prescriptive forgetting become blurred.

I argued that like historians, artists also have the ability to serve as agents of resistance. Wu Tien-chang artworks bring forward a Taiwanese aesthetic that represents a local culture and flavor. In this way, he represents a culture, previously excluded under the KMT regime, the marine culture of his hometown Keelung and more broadly the island culture of native Taiwanese. Chen Chieh-jen artworks are deeply tied to social activism. His projects based on collaborations with marginalized groups represent their identities and histories, which are rarely included in historical narratives or even public life. With regards to method, Chen relies on field work, research and community building with social groups. In contrast, Wu constructs elaborate settings with handmade props and accessories that resemble magic shows. Nevertheless, they both prove effective in their ability to challenge and broaden perspectives on Taiwanese identity.
Bibliography


Artworks:


Wu Tien-chang. 1990. Four Era’s. Oil on Canvas 310x360cm (each). [*The Era of Mao Zedong* 310x400].

