

## Introduction: Taiwan in Visual Culture and Transmedia Representations

Laura Jo-Han Wen

Taiwan studies has developed to challenge extant discussions of nationalism, postcolonial hierarchies, and East Asian modernity in academia and beyond. Yun-hung Lin, as the Guest Editor of the [previous Special Topic](#) of *Taiwan Lit*, introduced the institutionalization of Taiwan literature in Taiwan's higher education. Lin emphasized that Taiwan literature does not only study Taiwan and local literary matters. Instead, over the past twenty-five years, Taiwan literature has thrived and become a discipline that interrogates ossified presumptions and Chinese cultural essentialism in East Asian Studies. The discipline has the potential—and according to Lin, should acknowledge one of its missions as such—to grow from its roots in nativist realism and further engage in transnational inquiries.

As an island that experiences waves of immigration, colonization, and sociopolitical change, Taiwan is a node intersected by the forces of power, technology, and ideas that travel beyond national borders, and thus transnationalism plays a significant role in Taiwan studies. As early as the 1930s, intellectuals in literary circles had engaged in heated debates on what language—Taiwanese, vernacular Chinese, or even Japanese (given the colonial context at that time)—should be chosen to use in writing the literature of Taiwan. The debates exemplify the contesting, transnational cultural experiences prerequisite to the Taiwanese identity. Transnationalism is traditionally understood as an interrogative framework to observe cultural phenomena across

LAURA JO-HAN WEN (溫若含) is Assistant Professor of Chinese Studies at Randolph-Macon College where she teaches courses on film, literature, popular culture, and Mandarin Chinese. She received her Ph.D. in Asian Languages and Cultures with a minor in Transdisciplinary Study of Visual Cultures from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research primarily focuses on early cinema, media archaeology, and the visual representations of historical memories. She is at work on her manuscript: “The Intermedial Screen: Cinema and Media Culture in Colonial Taiwan, 1895 – 1945.”

national borders and beyond. Although considering how transnationalism challenges nationalist ideologies remains an imperative inquiry, Taiwan studies stands to benefit from a transnational perspective that observes the often-imbalanced power relations and cultural forces in specific historical-political circumstances.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the transnational culture and practice we witness here should not merely be viewed as a reflection of what has been able to travel across national borders. More importantly, they should be considered as instances of the ways in which dominating sociopolitical forces evoke concurrent cultural representations. The expansion of empires before the mid-twentieth century, the Cold War, the more recent global capitalism, and waves of immigration all have played influential roles in shaping and reshaping the transnational character of Taiwanese culture.

While literature and history have been two foundational cores, it is crucial to also acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of Taiwan studies, and how the new media environment inspires future discussions. This Special Topic focuses on visual culture and transmedia representations to inspect the ways in which images are made to signify identities and cultural discourses. The fascination with visual and media studies, besides setting eyes on contemporary popular culture, demonstrates a position to challenge the traditional privileging of text over image in intellectual exchanges—a tendency that potentially stems from what Robert Stam describes as class prejudice, iconophobia (related to the supposition that images are more deceptive than expressive), logophilia (related to the view that written words are preeminent over other visual signs), and anti-corporeality.<sup>2</sup> Essays selected in this Special Topic address how the study of images exhibits and empowers cultural identities and memories about Taiwan that were historically underrepresented or concealed.

The first two essays in this collection explore the visual representations of indigenous communities and new immigrants in contemporary Taiwanese media. Referred to in Mandarin as *yuanzhumin* (original resident) and *xinzhumin* (new resident), respectively, the former represents the earliest generations and the latter the most recent ones to set roots on the island, while both groups have experienced social marginalization and discrimination in historically Sinocentric Taiwan. Eliana Ritts' essay introduces how a Taiwan Indigenous Television (TITV) program, *Kakudan Time Machine*, decolonizes television production by visually reversing traditional power dynamics in archaeological sites, as the producer *Elreng Ladhoola* often positions an indigenous community member at the center on screen as a core knowledge holder and non-indigenous researchers standing nearby as learners of indigenous culture. Ritts notes in her essay that “Kakudan” means cultural relations in the Paiwan language and “Time Machine,” the second part of the program's title, conveys the idea of “traveling back through time in order to move forward.” The TV program is itself a time machine, a potential channel to take both the

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the transnational as a means of observing power relations and cultural forces, see Yiman Wang, “The ‘Transnational’ as Methodology: Transnationalizing Chinese Film Studies through the Example of The Love Parade and Its Chinese Remakes,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2.1: 9–21, and Jeremy E. Taylor, “Rethinking Transnationalism,” *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas: The Amoy-Dialect Film Industry in Cold War Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 1–18.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Stam, “Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation,” in R. Stam and A. Raengo, eds., *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 5–7.

onscreen participants and the out-of-screen spectators on an archaeologist trip to revitalize neglected community and culture, which is facilitated by the producer's carefully scripted visual narratives. Hsin-Chin Evelyn Hsieh's essay explores a similar tactic to empower ethnic minorities through visual media. Hsieh focuses on how filmmakers build narratives in documentaries to intervene in social stereotypes and problematic national policies toward the new immigrants, especially those who first arrive in Taiwan as *waiji xinniàng* (foreign brides) through transnational marriages. The migrant women featured in Hsieh's analyses often serve multiple roles. They are at once a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and worker in a foreign county, whose experiences largely reveal Taiwan's multilayered structure of discrimination against non-Mandarin speakers from Southeast Asia in disadvantaged financial and marriage situations. Yet besides being a medium to visually present life experiences and challenges, TV programs and films can also take some steps further to revise public misconceptions and inspire sociopolitical changes. Both Ritts' and Hsieh's essays include case studies on multicultural and multiethnic interactions. Ritts discusses how a *Kakudan* episode in 2020 portrays a non-indigenous artist's practice of creating pigments that represent indigenous cultural heritage. Hsieh's section on *The Immortal's Play* (2016) analyzes the backstage and frontstage roles that a Vietnamese immigrant takes on to be a professional Taiwanese opera performer in her family's troupe. Both essays examine the visual strategies utilized onscreen to defy Sinocentric narratives, and in the meantime how public images are recreated to collectively stand for a multiethnic and multicultural Taiwanese identity.

The next two essays view the politics of identity through another aspect of visual cultural representation: the film and television adaptations of historical narratives, especially the narratives reconstructed by those who do not have firsthand experience of the history. Calling it the "secondhand memory" that one must contend with, Yun-Yuan Chen explores how Taiwan's postwar generations revised literary stories from the Japanese colonial era for television programs. Then, Zhuoyi Wang investigates the ways in which a Mao-era film, *Soul of the Sea* (1957), constructed images of Taiwan and the Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers for audiences in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Colonial generations are represented by directors without colonial experience, and Taiwanese images are depicted by scriptwriters without Taiwan experience. In both cases, the producers are required to work with unfamiliar historical materials and develop their own interpretations of the history, and yet their secondhand experience with the history is less an individual choice and more a result of preconditioned political circumstances, as connections to prewar Japanese-speaking generations were generally discouraged during the postwar decades before the lift of Martial Law in Taiwan, while affinities to the KMT and Taiwanese communities would have been highly problematic in the PRC during the Cold War. Both Chen and Wang argue in their essays that these adaptations do not result in an oversimplification of historical narratives, but instead they epitomize the tensions and complexities of contemporary politics, identities, and collective memories. In Chen's discussion of Ya-Li Huang's *Le Moulin* (2015), he states, "The seemingly perfect scene constructions and historical narratives on the silver screen are indeed the highly unstable meta-image of simulacrum that translates and negotiates between the past and the present, similar to how memories are constructed." Wang in his essay underscores the PRC

screenwriters' ambiguous portrayals of Taiwan, KMT soldiers, and the Hollywood influences in *Soul of the Sea*—should these images be counterrevolutionary or revolutionary, enemies or compatriots, or “they” or “us” in Maoist China? Wang compares the screenwriters' version and the actual film to discuss the contradictions in the visual representation of imagined identities and contesting ideologies. Instead of examining whether the adaptations are faithful to the “original sources,” Chen's and Wang's essays focus further on how dominant sociopolitical forces dictate, alter, and problematize the creation of the original text, and how the adaptations evoke multidirectional understandings of historiography and reinvent cultural identities in transmedia representations.

Image-making is not merely a process of ideological mystification and demystification.<sup>3</sup> In this collection Ritts and Hsieh prove how the production of media images empowers multiethnic heritages, and Chen and Wang demonstrate how screen adaptations convey multifaceted interpretations of historical memory. As final remarks, Tsen-Chu Hsu's essay on handmade films considers cinema not only a medium of ideological tensions but also a dedicated form of art, the art to memorialize and materialize the experiments of optical projections and the perceptions of the human eye. As a film artist, Hsu colors and paints on photographic film to refashion the old medium into new spectacles in the contemporary multimedia environment, where images and the visual modality are prioritized in self-expression, social communication, and storytelling. Hsu identifies with the camera-less method of filmmaking: instead of using cameras to capture moving images for the screen, her motion picture is created by handmade art on photographic film and projected through a variety of optical installations. For instance, “[Fallen Leaves Return to Film](#)” (2016) shows the processed hand-tinted images of fallen leaves from Hsu's hometown through the 16mm film. The film can be appreciated at different speeds via the viewer's chosen projector. While onscreen it shows shifting scenes of colored leaves that symbolize the idea of homecoming and cycles of life, the viewers in the exhibition room simultaneously witness and participate in the process of film projection. Hsu's artworks inquire into the issue of film ecology and media archaeology, which reinvestigate the intermedial practices of old and new media and the roles that machines and human agencies play in creating the projection of moving images. Her workshops further transform the theoretical inquiry to hands-on practice in local communities. Altogether, this Special Topic showcases a glimpse of thought on and practice of Taiwan's kaleidoscopic visual culture and transmedia representation, which would not have been possible without the five contributors' essays and the generous support of Dr. Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, Dr. Ming-Huei Wang, and Dr. David Fruchter. My most sincere gratitude goes to them.

<sup>3</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, “The commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification.” W. J. T. Mitchell, “What Is an Image?” *New Literary History* 15.3 (1984), 503–504.