

LABOR, MARGINALIZATION, TAIWANIZATION: MAPPING THE EMBODIMENT OF THE BEING-WOMAN IN POST-MARTIAL TAIWAN THROUGH WU MALI'S "STORIES OF WOMEN FROM HSIN-CHUANG"

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This paper examines Wu Mali's (吳瑪俐) "Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang" (新莊女人的故事) art project within the socio-political framework of Taiwan during the so-called "Taiwanization" (本土化) period during the 1990s. Starting from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the analysis explores how Wu foregrounds the embodied experiences of marginalized women workers in Hsin-Chuang, a key-textile industry hub near Taipei City. By centering the narratives of these women, the project challenges traditional gender norms and exposes the exploitative labor conditions as well as critiques the gendered social structures and systemic inequalities faced by these workers during "Taiwanization." It is a nuanced project which addresses feminism in post-martial Taiwan, as well as intersects the issue of capitalism as a colonizing practice, and as an exploitative system of Taiwanese identity. All these elements converge, simultaneously, to depict a fragmented Taiwan which, precisely in the fracture of its rupture, finds the threads for its healing.

Keywords: Taiwan, Asian feminism, gender studies, post-capitalism, participatory art, socially engaged art

1. Preface

When I first decided to approach Taiwan as a researcher, I realized the complexity of addressing non-self histories from a (mis)situated perspective permeated by an unrelentingly Eurocentric, heteronormative, and macho-capitalist vision. Despite

efforts, navigating through the intricacies of non-Western panoramas must always be approached with meticulous care by Western researchers. Our reading is inevitably biased, defective, and often unconsciously—or, worse, deliberately—shaped by the historical presumptions we unwittingly carry with us.

It is imperative to mention these points, as they have been my primary concern and challenge throughout my research. Examining Taiwan from my Mediterranean perspective of socio-cultural constructions is fraught with complexity and risk. This is especially true when addressing feminism and subalternities, as it accentuates the distance between the subjects of the narrative (the active agents) and the narrator (the passive subject). Between these poles lies the intricate act of narrating. To narrate means first to observe and then interpret. The integration of the colonialist, patriarchal, and Western-centered gaze occurs within the process of understanding established between these two actions. This complexity is likely to be reflected in the following pages, despite my efforts to minimize it. I tried to approach the subject with the observant objectivity of a researcher who tries to allow sources to speak for themselves. As a result, this investigation has been conducted slowly and with great effort. Drawing upon historical, visual, and oral sources from contemporary Taiwan, this article aims to construct a partial chronicle of the intricate interplay among territory, identity, art, feminism, and patriarchy. These concepts converge within a physical space that has undergone a pursuit of reterritorialization over the past fifty years in Taiwan. Furthermore, they underpin the experiences of fragmented, fluid, and nomadic individuals who express an ongoing struggle to establish a rooted sense of belonging within their own territory.

Taiwan has often been discussed in the West from a specifically US-centric point of view due to the post-colonial influence that this country exercised on the island since the fall of Martial Law. The focus of this study has been primarily to explore, however, the voices of Taiwanese researchers, both “Hakka” (客家 *kejia*) and aboriginal, or at most emigrated in Western contexts.¹ Thus, most of the bibliography only collects Taiwanese voices which compose the specific story among bodies, identities, feminism, and art. It is a complex network emerging strongly throughout the last twenty years and as we will see, it is currently one of the most flourishing panoramas of the East Asian artistic context. This bibliographic choice is grounded in a clear decolonial and transfeminist methodological approach, which recognizes the oppressive features of today’s post-capitalist system affecting all non-white, non-heteronormative, and non-masculine communities. Within the constraints of my education, efforts have been made to avoid relying on

¹ The Hakka people are an ethnic group with Han Chinese ancestry, mainly concentrated in southern China, as well as in Taiwan and parts of Southeast Asia.

Asian narratives originating from whiteness. Instead, the narrative of the following pages has been constructed from Taiwanese sources, or at least from Asia. It is important to note, however, that this article still represents an incomplete draft of a broader research process on the condition of Taiwanese social groups during the period of "Taiwanization" (本土化 *bentuhua*).² Comprehensive field research has not yet been conducted to write these pages. Instead, it has been realized as an intensive archival effort to gather, catalog, and translate freely accessible sources addressing this issue, in order to provide an English-language text easily accessible to non-Sinophone readers. The voices, sought to be made visible, therefore take shape through the filter of other voices situated midway. This note is necessary for a proper understanding of the text that follows.

2. Introduction

The article endeavors to critically examine the social issues that emerged in Taiwan following the lifting of martial law, particularly delineating the nuanced circumstances of specific communities, especially women. This study is filtered through the lens of contemporary art, specifically through the work of the artist Wu Mali, an unwavering figure dedicated to the realm of social, community, and participatory art since the early 1990s. Wu Mali stands as a voice among many, positioned midway in the social hierarchy, empowering those without a voice to seize the opportunity. By using art as a medium of both self-expression and legitimization, the artistic process developed by this artist enables marginalized bodies to uncover new realms to inhabit, where they can enact alternative narratives alongside the traditionally established ones.

The article starts with a premise: post-martial Taiwan is built on the construction of a partial and incomplete national narrative. In its effort to create a sense of cohesive community through the phenomenon of "Taiwanization," the socio-cultural structure of the island fails to incorporate all layers of society into its emerging identity discourse. The result is an imperfect national narrative, where the colonizing and exclusionary characteristics of the previous Sinic values system still persist. In this context, Mali Wu's position represents a powerful agent for establishing new alternative narratives. Immersed in the hegemonic cultural context, the artist was able to infiltrate within the institutional fabric new counter-hegemonic discourses, capable of activating the invisible voices that composed 1990s Taiwan. This is the pivotal case of "Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang," a social art project carried by the artist in 1997 and the main theme of the following article. As we will observe,

² Although more generally indicated as "Taiwanization" in English, the Chinese term literally means "localization."

the project's questions around feminism, capitalism, and Taiwanese identity reveal the deep-seated injustices behind the idea of Taiwaneseeness, while simultaneously offering new potential pathways forward.

This article, therefore, follows a linear evolution of the concepts highlighted earlier. To begin with, it provides a brief introduction to the socio-cultural issue of "Taiwanization," founded on a resurgence of Taiwan studies motivated by the dual principles of "prioritizing Taiwan" (台灣優先 *Taiwan youxian*) and "being the master of one's own household" (當家作主 *dangjia zuozhu*). Through this historical-political overview, it becomes evident that the national narrative of "Taiwanization" is rooted in a specific notion of Taiwanese exclusivity. While aiming to acknowledge past oppression, it simultaneously oppresses and marginalizes other social groups. This leads us to examine more closely the issue of female bodies during the 1990s, using the examples highlighted by Wu Mali. Hsin-Chuang stands as a perfect example: it is a geo-historical juncture where the conflictual "Taiwanization" narrative can be best appreciated. Through Wu's art installation, the aim of this second part of the article is to delineate the nature of these silenced bodies, reflecting on their performative and political power following Judith Butler's theories. The juxtaposition of the condition of women in Hsin-Chuang with these theories reveals a landscape marked by exclusion and marginalization in relation to the values promoted by "Taiwanization." This further facilitates a reflection on the values of emerging Taiwanese masculine-capitalism, positioned at a midpoint between the American-centric capitalist system and the Confucian-Sinic heritage of the past.

The question that arises is, therefore, the following: Is it possible to make these bodies speak and be heard? In an effort to address this question, the final section delves into the effectiveness of Wu Mali's artistic project. It focuses on the emancipatory poetics of its aesthetic and on the infiltration of the oppressed bodies within the "Taiwanization" social stratification. This experiment marks a significant milestone for Taiwanese social art, whose paradigm has been vigorously carried forward starting from the 2000s onwards. The strength of today's Taiwanese feminism, along with the critical reevaluation of contemporary Taiwan's nationalist narrative, stems from these moments of tension, boldly highlighting the societal wound. As we will see, the 2000s present a progressively optimistic landscape, where marginalized groups patiently gain territory.

3. "Taiwanization": the post martial law socio-political background and the cultural turn

A discussion of the issue of female bodies and voices in post-martial Taiwan requires some knowledge of the country's recent history. Since the fall of the dictatorial era and its mainland reconquest aspirations, Taiwan has slowly sought

to redefine the boundaries of its identity, drawing from a diverse colonial and, notably, indigenous heritage as the foundation for establishing a collective history. As a temporal boundary, the history of the "New Taiwan" begins with the abolition of martial law in 1987, preceded by popular contestations and the gradual erosion of *Dangguo's* (黨國, "one-party system") hegemony. Following some brutal incidents—such as the "Kaohsiung Incident" (高雄事件 *Gaoxiong shijian*) in 1979³—as well as the death of President Chiang Kai-shek (蔣中正), the democratic transition commenced around the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, Taiwan transitioned into a multiparty republican system, ushering in new political identities and easing censorship. This period also saw a resurgence of international relations and significant economic growth, marked by rapid urbanization and modernization. In fact, the intensification of international relations allowed the island to experience a brief economic miracle, especially for industry, which would last until the early 2000s.

The political structure also underwent some changes. Surprisingly, the once-monolithic Kuomintang managed to realize a peaceful transition, retaining part of its hegemony and thus, its power as the primary political force in Taiwan's system. The party abandoned its efforts to sinicize the island, opening to the acceptance of a new Taiwanese identity. In this sense, the openness to the global and the rediscovery of the so-called "motherland" by the Taiwanese solidified the idea of a substantial difference between the island's inhabitants and those on the mainland. Globalization served as a conduit through which the distinctive multicultural identity of Taiwan could be validated. This polarization between the mainland and the island was the essential feature for the formation of this new Taiwanese identity, as can be observed in Kuomintang's President Lee Teng-Hui (李登輝) 1999 address: "All of us who grow up and live on this soil today are Taiwanese people, whether we are aborigines, descendants of aborigines or of the immigrants from the mainland who came over centuries ago. We have all made equal contributions to Taiwan's future. It is possible for each one of us, the 'new Taiwanese people,' to convert our love and affection for Taiwan into concrete actions in order to open up a grander horizon for its development. It is also our responsibility to establish a magnificent vista for our descendants" (Huang 1999, 92–93).

The foundation of this New Taiwan and the new Taiwanese society is built upon a socio-cultural program known as "Taiwanization." This was a significant process which led to the establishment of new postcolonial, multicultural, and post-Chinese perspectives among society. Temporally, its heyday can be situated in the 1990s, with evident traces extending into the early 2000s, driven

³ The Kaohsiung Incident was a clampdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, on December 10, 1979. It marked a significant moment during Taiwan's martial law period, due the government arrests of the main opposition leaders protesting for democracy.

by the definitive forces of globalization, industrialization, and a globally uncertain economic panorama. These factors continually reinforced the trend toward Taiwanese identity. It is crucial to emphasize that "Taiwanization" differs significantly from the democratization process unfolding in the country. As underscored by Bruce Jacobs—while both processes share close ties to Taiwan's political development—"Taiwanization" places greater emphasis on an identity related to Taiwan and its nationalism rather than being solely a matter of political democratization (Jacobs 2013, 570). Thus, the sense of Taiwaneseess emerged in response to the previously imposed concept of Chineseness, particularly as interactions with the mainland increased. It is essential to acknowledge the rejection and racism experienced by the Taiwanese population from the People's Republic of China during this period. Ethnic distinctions and mainland colonization ambitions caused a definitive rupture in socio-cultural relations, as we can observe in events like the 1994 "Qiandao Lake Incident" (千島湖事件 *Qiandao hu shijian*), in which twenty-four Taiwanese tourists were kidnapped and burned alive in southern China. The brutality of this incident and the indifference of the Communist government further exacerbated the growing divide between Taiwan and Mainland China that had been developing throughout the decade.

Alterity alone proved insufficient, however, for constructing a wholly autonomous and distinct national identity that separated itself entirely from the centuries-old Chinese tradition. The decisive factor was the construction of a new narrative for the country, one that embraced a seemingly multicultural and versatile discourse by exploring loosely defined cultural roots. "Taiwanization" revolved around two core principles highlighted before: "prioritizing Taiwan" and "being the master of one's own household." These principles served as complementary responses to the enduring influence of Chinese culture. Through these trends, it became possible to construct a new narrative of Taiwaneseess, rooted in the political and historical unity of the various cultural groups within its territory. The formation of these ideologies took place both in the social and cultural spheres, with the educational context serving as the most evident example. The Ministry of Education reform in 1994 played a pivotal role, modernizing the educational curriculum, promoting native Taiwanese languages, respecting traditions, and revising Taiwan's concept and evolution. The battle for Taiwan's individuality, particularly in language, literature, and education, engaged the entire academic community, leading to the gradual deconstruction of the old dominant Chinese mentality, with particular attention to the mainland's colonial and oppressive aspects. The principles of these cultural policies, articulated by Chang Bi-yu (張必瑜), were clear: "Taiwanese culture had little Chinese influence, Taiwanese literature had its own merits. Taiwan had its own history and tradition, and Taiwanese people were very different from the Chinese" (Chang 2009, 45).

The construction and preservation of this new discourse relied significantly on cultural policies, especially in delegating and decentralizing cultural power to more marginalized cities and counties, which encouraged the local population to promote their festivals and festivities, marking a significant shift in the country's cultural paradigm. The goal of these cultural initiatives was ultimately the narration of a Taiwanese identity founded on a rediscovery of folkloristic traditions, respect for the past, and a revision of the recent (and traumatic) colonial history. By granting full freedom to its citizens, "Taiwanization" sculpted the features of its identity one step at a time, continuously evolving and completing itself. As theorist Su Zhao-ying (蘇昭英) emphasized:

The awareness of art and culture has extended its scope from high-art exhibitions and performances to the landscape and environment, culture and history, and industry. The content of cultural construction had raised the simple satisfying life to the setting of community aesthetics and common ethics. The central cultural policy had shifted from the monopoly of the Chinese Cultural movement to the deeper and wider local community. The subjectivity of local culture emerged. In addition, the cultural map dominated by the central government and Taipei city had changed to multi-development at the local level. All these phenomena happened during the last two decades, 1980s and 1990s. (Su 2001, 1)

Not everything, however, was as it seemed. While it is accurate to assert that Lee's new Taiwanese canonical narrative depicts a story of marginal communities (the colonized Taiwanese people vs. the colonizer Mainland people), it is essential to emphasize that simultaneously these post-Chinese insights of the new Taiwanity also marginalize peripheries within peripheries. What is neglected is that the polarization between Chinese vs. Taiwanese creates a dominating and all-encompassing narrative that further marginalizes those who do not fit into its narrow framework. Despite a clear attempt to overturn old dominant values, what ensued was a mere shift in cultural hegemony that did not entirely ameliorate the complex social fabric characterizing Taiwan at the time. The much-desired freedom of the new Taiwanese identity continued to partially rely on the foundations of a post-Chinese culture heavily stratified socially. A profound paradox characterizes the cultural turn of the 1990s: in its attempt to deconstruct layer by layer the old Chinese hegemony, the new Taiwanese identity does not fully embrace its multiracial and multicultural nature.

Certain communities continue to be marginalized within this new hegemonic identity discourse. The narrative promoted by the new hegemony highlights the oppressed status of society (the Taiwanese people), but it fails to acknowledge that, in their state of oppression, the oppressed Taiwanese hegemony also use mechanisms of marginalization, despotism, and submissiveness against other social

strata which form their unity. Accepting a specific narrative meant relinquishing another. The pastiche of New Taiwaneseess, envisioned by Lee, does not place everyone on an equal footing; instead, it creates a jumble of identities. Despite the attempts made, Taiwanese society in the 1990s continued to be marked by clear social stratification: certain groups, such as the island's indigenous communities or women, still bore the burden of the veiled marginalization and oppression that "Taiwanization" has not been able to diminish.⁴ Despite small steps forward in recognizing the uniqueness of indigenous culture and the social condition of women, the unifying discourse of hegemonic Taiwanese identity revolves around a singular concept of an individual oppressed by the previous dictatorship. The lost identity therefore lies hidden within the folds of this dictatorial suffering; however, the individual who suffers and is martyred is neither female nor indigenous, but rather male and "Hakka."

This imperfect view of the Taiwanese identity's narrative not only allows us to understand this power dynamic, still bound to the previous Sino-patriarchal system, but also focuses on the condition of communities that have been systematically oppressed by past hegemony. These are individuals who have never been able to make their voices heard. The enthusiasm of democratic transition has empowered them to strongly assert their narrative. It is precisely during these years that "Taiwanization," propelled by political hegemony, is accompanied by the surge of various social movements. These movements are chiefly aimed at critiquing the existing contradictions within the national narrative while highlighting the circumstances of other social strata within the community. Particularly noteworthy for this article is the swift ascendancy of feminism in the region compared to the second wave of the 1970s. Feminism broadens its perspective in an intersectional paradigm, involving questioning of institutional channels. This resonance is distinctly felt across the island, notably within the realm of art practices. Contemporary art served as one of the conduits through which a critical interpretation of Taiwanese society in the 1990s is most effectively conveyed, particularly through the works of selected artists. This article aims to precisely focus on this tension present in "Taiwanization" through the specific example of Wu Mali's art installation in Hsin-Chuang in 1997, which raised the following questions: What about the status of women in the New Taiwan? What is their role in the "Taiwanization" process? What about their voices? Or using the same

⁴ This is not to criticize or negate the positive aspects of this socio-cultural process for Taiwanese society in the 1990s. Nor is it to adopt the stance of the "white savior," ready to point out the problems caused by non-white men and quick to forget their own. Taiwan has often suffered from violent processes of white colonization, let us not forget this. One should also recall the relentless pressure of Western culture that has violently influenced its contemporary society and the "Taiwanization" process itself.

artist's words from her 1999's artwork installation "Epitaph": "His/tory has been revised—the rioter may become the hero, how about her story?"

4. Re-mapping women's role during "Taiwanization": Wu Mali and the case of "Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang" (1997)

The 1990s marked a zenith for contemporary Taiwanese art. Thanks to the cultural promotion bolstered by "Taiwanization," a significant number of Taiwan-born artists chose to return to the island after studying abroad, bringing with them languages and expressions that lean towards a hybridization of the artistic scene. Among these examples is Wu Mali (1958), who remains one of the most prominent figures in post-War Taiwanese art. Her background, consistently focused on the social-political endeavors of feminism, environmentalism, and the rights of marginalized communities, has led to a series of social projects based on the idea of art as a tool for social change. Wu's artistic journey began with her education at Tamkang University, followed by her time in Austria and Germany, where she specialized in sculpture at the Düsseldorf Arts Academy. Returning to her native Taiwan in 1985, Wu found herself situated within the temporal and spatial confines of martial law's lingering shadow. During these formative years, Wu Mali's artistic vision still drew significantly from Western echoes of materialism and conceptualism, as evidenced by works such as "Time and Space" (1985), created to commemorate her initial return to Taiwan, and "Library," for which she was invited to the Venice Biennale in 1995. Despite their materiality, these pieces already embark on a profound exploration of gender issues, intricately examining them through the multifaceted prism of politics and power. As Sophie McIntyre has pointed out, during this early period, the artist developed a deep interest in post-structuralist theories concerning the dematerialization of the art object and aura. The influence of authors such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes is evident, from whom she inherits the concept of the "death of the author," as well as the understanding of hegemonic systems of power (McIntyre 2012, 245). Her art during these years does not aim at direct social change but rather highlights the cracks in the hegemonic power system and the fundamental injustices that compose it.

It is a skeptical and cynical art that would soon evolve towards a more defined social compromise in the 1990s. It was during this pivotal period that she started a profound introspection, pondering the role of artists within the societal and political context. Her poetics evolved, focusing on a persistence of motifs such as the condition of women, the effects of industrialization, and issues of global capitalism in contemporary Taiwan. The condition of women's bodies and voices will specifically become one of her main areas of interest, which she approaches with a less militant and more critical stance than her colleagues of

that time. Her reading, halfway between the personal and the political, allows her to observe that while most male artists remained entrenched in political discourse, gender issues were an inseparable facet of daily life, enhancing the binomial between the personal and the political, which always remains determinant in her social projects.

The turning point in her trajectory took place with her participation in the exhibition "*Lord of the Rim*" in Hsin-Chuang in 1997 (Chang 1998).⁵ Here she participated with an art installation clearly addressing the issue of Taiwanese identitarianism through the prism of women's voices as a memorial, protest, and remembrance. Her aim was not only to highlight the tension but to also shape an alternative national narrative to the hegemonic one. *Lord of the Rim: in Herself* was a group exhibition curated by Yuan-chien "Rita" Chang (張元茜) at the local Hsin-Chuang Cultural Center, in which, in addition to Wu Mali, the Taiwanese artists Hou Shur-tzy (侯淑姿), Maggie Hsu (徐洵蔚), the Korean artist Ahn Pil-yeon (안필연), the Japanese artist Shimada Yoshiko (嶋田美子), and the American artist Judy Chicago participated. This curatorial project aimed to give more institutional recognition to East Asian women artists, featuring a series of pieces that addressed themes such as gender relations and roles, poetics of bodies, and social performativity, deliberately connecting to a stereotyped "feminine" craft dimension, such as fiber art, sewing, and weaving techniques. As highlighted by Lu I-Ying (陸依穎), through the repeated appearance of feminine iconography, such as the uterus (Maggie Hsu), flowers (Wu Mali), scissors and mirrors (Ahn Pil-yeon), and even the placenta, or condoms (Shimada Yoshiko), these artists give voice to exclusive experiences of contemporary women, common across their diverse cultural backgrounds, thus reconstructing history (Lu 2015, 275). Despite the effort to discursively legitimize the project with the presence of international artists like Judy Chicago, as the critic Maggie Pai also states, the exhibition did not attract significant media attention, especially due to the liminality of the place chosen, Hsin-Chuang, with respect to the centralizing metropolis of Taipei (Pai 1998, 66).

The choice of Hsin-Chuang was not, however, coincidental. This small suburb, relatively close to Taipei, underwent major industrial modernization during "Taiwanization," which turned it into one of the most developed peripheries for the manufacturing sector. The town reinvented itself as the epicenter of the Taiwanese textile industry, attracting cheap labor from all over the island—especially from the south, more populated by the historically disadvantaged native communities. Despite a somewhat flourishing period during the early 1990s, the city gradually

⁵ The original Chinese title, "盆邊主人 – 自在自為," translates to "Master by the Basin – Free and Unrestrained."

lost its status as an industrial hub during the latter years of the same decade. The rapid establishment of mainland China with the “made in China” phenomenon accelerated the decline of Taiwan as the new epicenter of industrial production and, consequently, caused a gradual shift of the maneuvering from the island to the mainland (Chin Davidson 2019, 90). Indeed, the exponential growth of the textile industry only led to a regularization of widespread forms of labor precariousness, forcing traditional families to fragment their nucleus and structure. What occurred was that men, formerly workers in the Hsin-Chuang industry, were encouraged to leave for the mainland for higher income, whereas women had to adapt to a dual role of traditional housewife and precarious worker—replacing the men in the town factories.⁶ This process of social disparity intersects at once different fractures of interest to contemporary Taiwan and its social problems: traditional roles of men/women, their socioeconomic conditions, the postcolonizing pressure between Chinese heritage and nativism, and, especially, the development of a specific tension between the local vs. the peripheral. This capitalist urbanization process leads to socio-economic disjunctions in the territory, as observed in the case of Hsin-Chuang—quoting Jane Chin Davidson: “Industrialization in Taiwan and China are gendered ones, and, as expressed through their interpellated subjects of Chineseness, the political upheavals and the Confucian kinship tradition still haunt the relations of labor” (Chin Davidson 2020, 103). Within the phenomenon of Taiwan’s massive industrialization, one must not forget the fundamental role played by the Western world and the neocolonialist pressure exerted in the territory. The causes of the precariousness of the industry can be found in the articulated and entrenched presence of Western multinational corporations, whose ramifications into Eastern Asia are facilitated by the availability of cheap labor, including the women of Hsin-Chuang (Chien 1998, 128).

All of this background marks the starting point from which Wu Mali begins to weave her narrative of Hsin-Chuang. Eager to provide a voice for the suburb’s unseen, the artist began by interviewing those women to collect their memories and experiences. The project entailed a documentary compilation of visual, oral, written, and material testimonies of these women workers, aiming to re-signify their life experiences and, in the process, legitimize identity discourses about contemporary Taiwan. It is a nuanced project that not only addresses feminism in post-Martial Taiwan, but also intersects with capitalism as an environmental threat (ecofeminism), a colonizing practice (decolonialist thought), and an exploitative system of Taiwanese identity. In her visual presentation exhibited in 1997, Wu projected the oral testimonies of the women through video to express,

⁶ The 1990s statistics for the percentage of women aged fifteen and over in China’s (Taiwan included) labor force is 68 per cent, more than the numbers in many other developed nations (Song 2014).

in first-person, the mourning of the trauma experienced by them. The main wall, facing the entrance, serves as the welcoming gesture for the exhibition audience. On this surface, a video is projected, systematically alternating between fragments of factory work and Chinese texts capturing the testimonies of these women. The room is consequently filled with the sole sound of sewing machines, consistently evoking the memories of the women in the exhibition, reinterpreting the action not only as denunciation but also as catharsis, a space for encounter and collective healing. The symbolism between industrial labor and creative work becomes readily apparent, as the artist herself articulates: "When textile workers are sewing, the monotonous and repetitive sound of the machines resembles that of a typewriter. While they are weaving, it also seems as though they are writing. That's why I wrote the story of their lives on fabric" (Chen 2008).

The rest of the exhibition space, dark, diaphanous, and silent, serves as the literal canvas for these words repeated incessantly. Observing the other walls, the viewer realizes that they are adorned with selected flower patterns, embroidered onto a violet tapestry. As the artist explains: "I felt the women's lives, so interwoven in the textile industry, were re-woven in the cloth and their lives" (Pai 1998, 41). This interpretation of fabric as writing, of women's manual labor as creation, is inspired by the historical and only-known exclusive female script in the world: Nüshu (女書 *nüshu*) writing, found in Jiangyong, China. These text fragments represent a language exclusively devised for women, indecipherable symbols creating an alternative microcosm to patriarchal hegemonic narratives. Nüshu preserves matriarchal power, the script is passed down from one generation of women to another, with symbols transmitted orally from mothers to daughters. Wu Mali transformed the meaning of Nüshu and wrote women's biographies through the sewing needle to present the relationship between women and society: "Like Nüshu, the needles and threads are their desires, their realities, and their stories. These stories are indistinct, as if secretly concealed in the work. Although they are afraid of being recognized, they also seem to await and hope to be discovered" (Lu 2015, 280).

The concept of embodiment is therefore both evident and crucial in understanding this piece. The story recounted by the artist provides a well-defined overview of the condition of proletarian, immigrant, or native women during the period of "Taiwanization." The women of Hsin-Chuang are not just individuals; they are living territories, representing a space from which to challenge the exclusionary dynamics of "Taiwanization." In its democratic endeavor to construct a new hegemonic identity, the dominant system projects a fundamentally patriarchal framework where the man, perceived as the only conceivable gender, occupies the central role as the active agent. Conversely, woman, characterized as the passive agent and ontologically existing as the absence of the other gender,

is relegated to oblivion and a plural subalternity stratification (Chen 2021, 40). In this regard, the endeavor of “Taiwanization” bears a striking resemblance to the power systems elucidated by Foucault, which engender the very subjects they subsequently represent. In the case of women, it means they grow up under the social structure of patriarchy, accept the established gender order, and play the role of women according to the social norms of womanhood. The image of women is a patriarchal cultural fiction, and femininity is the result of socialization, born out of a male imagined worldview. Through its hyperregulated sphere, encompassing both the personal and political domains, the power system exercises measures of constraint, control, contingency, and prohibition that delimit the spectrum of actions undertaken by the individuals constituting it.

This forced repetition of bodies is a public strategy of control of the hegemony, which “Taiwanization” is also unable to evade. Instead, Taiwan during those years began to develop a unique post-capitalist approach, with nuances lying halfway between Western heteropatriarchy and neo-Confucian Sinic values. While it aimed to uplift the oppressed segments of society (the Taiwanese), it simultaneously continued to oppress categories that did not fit into the patriarchal centrality. In this context, it is essential to highlight the viewpoint of academic Yang Cui (楊翠), who underscores the significance of the Sinocentric tradition in shaping the role of women within Taiwanese history. In contrast to the matriarchal societies among the island’s native inhabitants, the colonial experience from the mainland has instilled a tradition emphasizing the tenets of Confucian ethics in the region. This also leads to a schematic construction of gender roles between “man” and “woman.” The prominence accorded to man as the dominant gender in society automatically relegates woman to a micro-social environment typified by the family, which is constraining and marginalizing in relation to the macro-social political-economic sphere. In this regard—akin to the case of the Catholic family, the role of woman is confined to performing household chores, encompassing not only child-rearing but also daily domestic tasks, sewing, tending to in-laws, cleaning, laundering, and engaging in household crafts, rendering the family nearly the focal point of their lives and the locus of their activities (Yang 1993, 10). Thus, gender roles are still preserved in their binary framework, reinforcing heteronormativity and excluding women from socio-political life, as observed even in legislative and bureaucracy cases. Acknowledging the legislative heritage on the island is crucial, as it serves as the primary superstructure through which hegemony wields its power. Simultaneously, it plays a pivotal role in shaping and defining the public identity of individuals.

Despite, however, an apparatus of laws oriented towards a German-based legal system favored by the Kuomintang, for much of the twentieth century, Taiwanese legislation was inspired by the post-imperial reminiscences of the Qing Code

(大清律例 *da Qing lǜlì*), the legislative system in place in the mainland Republic up until 1912. Although it is certain that the Qing Code was a system now obsolete and considered antiquated by political hegemony, one can simultaneously see how these laws are fundamentally built on the unequal relationship between men (husbands) and women (wives), as well as on the non-parity relations of race and ethnicity. This legislative code of neoconfucian tradition constitutes one of the several factors underlying the establishment of male hegemony in the territory, while stratifying subordinate individuals according to ethnicity, gender, race, and cultural origin. It is a code of laws openly sexist and racist, inspired by the ancient Tang Civil Code (唐律 *Tang lǜ*) used during the Tang dynasty on the mainland, which, even after deep revisions in contemporary times, continues to promote the idea of the man (the husband) as a respected elder, while the woman (the wife) is considered inferior. These codes clearly demonstrate the historical male dominance and the unequal legal relationship between husband and wife, evident in the increased penalties for criminal acts committed by women against men, compared to reduced penalties vice versa, for crimes such as violence, robbery, and homicide, among others.

This constitutes a symbiotic but irregular power relationship in which the individual, whether dominant, oppressed, or subaltern, is defined and produced in accordance with this structure. And thus their activity and performance. As Butler reminds us, “gender is the cultural meanings that the sexualized body accepts” (Butler 1990, 10). Hsin-Chuang women consequently determine and shape themselves through this systematic (and obligatory) repetition of the oppressive logics of hegemony. There is no other option for them but forced labor in the factory, whether it is to support their children, brothers, fathers, or husbands. They are always labor-power that spills over for the good of the man. In this regard, it is interesting to understand Hsin-Chuang women’s stories following Butler’s theories, which emphasize the determinant role of the performativity of bodies as a regulating element of gender roles and distinctions. By reiterating specific actions, bodies are signified and structured within defined hegemonic categories. Ergo, the women of Hsin-Chuang, through repeating choral actions framed within the idea of being-woman, do not understand another possible life beyond secular notions such as family care, forced labor for the support of siblings’ studies, and much more:

Most of them had left the farming villages that they once called home and came to the factories immediately after elementary school. These women worked day and night, spending the prime of their lives in the factories, in order to send money back home so that their brothers could continue their education. Later, many of them would marry men who worked at the same factories. In the 1990s, when these labor-intensive

industries began to move offshore, the men were first to be laid off, and the women were suddenly burdened with full responsibility for their families financial situations. (Wu 1998, 190)

This unjust power dynamic further underscores the centrality of men as the sole acceptable gender, while women are relegated to a non-gender status, shaped and molded by the dominant society, and compelled to conform to the standards imposed by the same hegemony. Inheriting this cultural, social, and legislative baggage from the Chinese colonial experience naturally leads to the formation of a fractured, uncertain, and fluctuating Taiwanese society. Despite minor advancements, this mentality persists, enduring through the martial law period and the subsequent years of "Taiwanization," further reinforced by the influence of Western capitalism, which operates on similar dynamics of heteropatriarchal control. It is within these fractures that a pervasive sense of progress in social rights begins to emerge. This gradual shift has facilitated the establishment of the feminist movement and its studies. Challenging the idea that women's history is limited to the codes of heteropatriarchal inheritance, it instead resides in the contemporary reflection of their marginalized condition. As Hai-ming Huang insightfully remarks, "[Wu Mali] reminds us that men have their history, but women's history is not written yet" (Huang 1998, 43).

Wu's project aims to unravel theories previously hypothesized by Butler. Thus, repression engenders the very object it seeks to reject. Butler argues that the patriarchal repressive mechanism is both prohibitive and generative, giving rise to the principles necessary for the emancipation of the subject it excludes. To transcend the oppressive logic of the dominant system, one must comprehend the intricate social stratification of marginalized subjects. In the case of Hsin-Chuang's women, this entails acknowledging their apparent societal role and their status as others in relation to the singular male gender. Consequently, individuals will not only recognize their oppressed condition but also become cognizant of the potential for subverting their circumstances: "If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its natural past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities" (Butler 1990, 119).

Reflecting on the nature of Hsin-Chuang's women, natural inquiries arise regarding how individuals can challenge imposed categories and the extent to which they can enact change. Contrary to initial assumptions, these women, as depicted by Wu Mali, are far more self-aware of their condition. The project gathers some striking testimonies:

"The truth is Hsin-chuang has cost me my life, my youth. I lost everything in the end."

"Hsin Chuang is a place where I lost part of myself, What was it? Alas, it was my innocent youth!"

"I've lived in Hsin Chuang for twenty some years, But never felt anything about it, I just want to leave as soon as possible."

"Now the time is no more, my husband and I broke up, and the children and the factory belong to him. After living in Hsin-Chuang for more than twenty years, it didn't make me feel anything, I just wanted to leave quickly. Hsin-Chuang left me with nothing, losing most of my life and youth."⁷

The crucial question is not so much whether these women can speak but, as posed by Wu Mali herself, "Who is listening to whose stories?" (Wu 2015, 187). The artist recognized that within a hypothetical pyramid of social injustices, there are individuals whose sufferings are so deeply layered that they remain silenced. There is not enough space, time, or attention given to them. Despite a hegemonic shift, the counter-narratives within the framework of Taiwan as home/nation persist in perpetuating a power dynamic that renders certain voices invisible and marginalized, particularly affecting women, as noted by social historian Chen Hsiang-chun (陳香君): "Taiwanese male victims have been rehabilitated as heroes-martyrs. Women, however, still remain invisible" (Chen 2005, 2).

Despite their condition of subalternity as women, immigrants, proletarians, or even indigenous people, the women of Hsin-Chuang find the necessary tools to amplify their voices in the parody of their gender performativity. During this process, the artist wisely chooses to step back and allow the collective bodies to take over, produce, and complete this collaborative project (Deepwell 1997, 49). The artist provides a platform, from her position of privilege, for the women of Hsin-Chuang to express their voices more loudly. It is important, however, to note that this voice has always been present. These bodies have not been passive during "Taiwanization"; they have been active agents who have spoken, performed, and thus shaped the narrative of this social, cultural, and economic movement. The tool of oral history enables these women to personally express their experiences rather than relying on someone else's narrative or being spoken for. Through this depersonalized approach by the artists, these identities are revealed, enhancing the personal/political dichotomy and offering the possibility to reconstruct a new Taiwanese identity starting from their perspective. Thus, the ultimate goal was not solely to focus on the overrepresentation of the masculine in "Taiwanization," but especially to understand and showcase women's role during these years. In this way, the women of Hsin-Chuang can not only speak for themselves, dignifying their subaltern positions, but also be listened to.

⁷ The quote is from a text appearing in an installation work *Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang* by Wu Mali, exhibited in *Lord of the Rim: in Herself or Himself?* exhibition, Hsin Chuang, Taiwan, 1997.

5. Conclusion

Hsin-Chuang's experience, along with the broader exhibition *Lord of the Rim*, demonstrates the intention to rewrite the narrative logic of "Taiwanization," aiming to include historically invisibilized collectives, such as women and natives, in its discourse. All these elements converge to depict a fragmented Taiwan that, precisely in its rupture, finds the threads for healing. The need to "find its place in the world" drives artists to rethink Taiwan not solely based on its present merits, but also on the structural problems that continue to shape it (Chien 2004, 271). This is what scholar Shih Shu-mei (史書美) describes as "vernacular cosmopolitanism," the dialectical ability to produce interventions that communicate from the periphery to the center, rather than emerging chaotically from the center and absorbing parallel narratives (Shih 2007, 175). This tendency has been developing capillarily since the 1990s, especially within socio-cultural initiatives. As Victoria Lu (陸蓉之) points out: "The awakening of female consciousness in Taiwan has been a gradual process. Initially concentrated in the area surrounding Taipei, its influence gradually seeped into the male chauvinist south of the country" (Lu 2002, 40).

Over those years, several associations emerged in defense of women's rights, based on artistic and historical narratives. The women's movement in the 1990s was mostly composed of young female workers, each with their own growing experiences and backgrounds, and a stronger and more clearly identifiable subjectivity. This is exemplified by the Women's Awakening Association (婦女新知基金會 *Funü xinzhī jījinhui*), formally established in 1982 to raise feminist voices, as well as the Taiwanese Feminist Scholars Association (台灣女性學學會 *Taiwan nüxing xue xuehui*), founded in 1993 by the same artist. Equally significant is the birth of The Women Artists Association of Taipei (台灣女性藝術協會 *Taiwan nüxing yishu xiehui*), initiated by Jun T. Lai (賴純純), Wu Mali, and others during the 1990s, along with a series of parallel and subsequent projects to Hsin-Chuang that delve further into the role of women and possible forms of social subversion. After the 1997 experience, particularly, the Taipei artist perceives the bias of her project, whose only effect is to expose the fracture. But there is no possibility of healing the wound only by pointing it out: "In 1997 I interviewed female workers in clothing factories and wove their stories into a work entitled 'Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang.' My exhibition was well received, but it did not provide any real help to these female workers. I was confronted with the ethical question: what is the goal of so-called 'critical art' or 'political art' in general? Is it to catalyze change by focusing the public's attention on some social issue?" (Bo 2016, 155).

As Wu's career progressed, she became increasingly known for her approach to participatory art and community engagement. Her projects moved beyond the confines of traditional art mediums, offering the possibility of genuine integration

within the marginalized communities she addressed. Thus, the priority became to create new safe spaces where narratives essential for social change could be independently and effectively woven. As she states: "This kind of hidden 'visionary realm' is an alternative world apart from Taiwan's patriarchal home/nation values, a world that she has created as a woman" (Chen 2008). The new spaces emerging from this effort are characterized by their hybrid and innovative nature. Overcoming the equivalence of localism with identity, Wu transcends the Taiwanese-identitarian paradigm. Instead, she seeks new transnational and transfeminist approaches in which there is no univocal concept of identity or community. A clear example of these new more activist poetics that go beyond simply denouncing facts is the project "Awake in Your Skin: Bed Sheets of Soul" (從妳的皮膚裡甦醒 — 心靈被單 2001). This project was part of the larger Textile Playing Workshop (玩布工作坊 2000–2004), commissioned by the Taipei Awakening Association (婦女新知基金會 *Funü xinzhi jijinhui*). Through the parody of a repeated activity of the performativity of the female universe, i.e., bed care, the artist invited the workshop participants to create a space for social exchange. The sewing action was translated as the second objective of the workshop, made invisible by the main purpose: the sharing of common experiences, of being-woman, of actions, roles, and pre-assigned bodies to deal with.

They told their stories through the highly traditional craft of needlework, allowing art to become a life-transforming agent. They did not intend to teach artistry, but hoped to use this opportunity to interest the participants in and engage them in social affairs.

[...] One of the participants was a full-time housewife. Previously, when her husband suddenly called to inform her that he could not come home for dinner because of some engagement at work, she would become irritated, and the couple argued a great deal. After she started attending the fabric workshops, instead of getting angry, she felt happy that her husband was not coming home for dinner, because she did not need to stop her craftwork. The point is, her own change startled her. She brought this up in the workshop to discuss with other women. In one way or another, the women in the fabric workshops rediscovered their own needs, their own purposes in life, and their own values. The process was rich in details and cannot be summed up by theories. (Bo 2016, 155)

The artist's strategy is to combat the patriarchal system by re-signifying the very conditions it imposes on women's bodies and actions. Fragility and precariousness are thus the weapons used to create new possible interstices, seeking social practices centered on solidarity and community. Community caring blurs the distinction between the public and the private, allowing communities to reclaim the spaces and realities taken away by patriarchy. If the establishment fails to

acknowledge this conflict, the only option is to engage with it to make it visible and relevant to everyone. Only in this way can "Taiwanization" and the modern conception of Taiwanese identity become a multiform body that goes beyond its exclusivity, understanding the central role of each and every woman of Hsin-Chuang as an active, formative, and determining agent for her emancipation as an independent territory, people, and nation. People without territory have no voice. From here arises the importance of knowing how to listen to subalternity and, in the process, knowing how to carve out for New Taiwan a physical and collective space within the world.

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