

Crafting Locality in the Global Village – Culture Workers in a Taiwanese Region

*Paper prepared for the “Remapping Taiwan” Conference
UCLA, October 12-15, 2000*

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Preface

“Grassroots community organizations have now been developing around the country, working to explore and preserve the history, culture, geography and ecology of their localities. These are all part of Taiwan culture, whether they are local cultures, mass cultures or high cultures. Due to special historical and geographical factors, Taiwan possesses a wealth of diversified cultural elements...We must open our hearts with tolerance and respect, so that our diverse ethnic groups and different regional cultures communicate with each other, and so that Taiwan’s local cultures connect with the cultures of Chinese-speaking communities and other world cultures, and create a new milieu of ‘a cultural Taiwan in a modern century.’”¹

In this speech given at his inaugural ceremony, president Chen Shui-Bian highlights the two most compelling and ubiquitous themes in the lexicon of Taiwanese-ness today – *bentu hua* (indigenization) and *quanqiou hua* (globalization). Grassroots culture workers, acclaimed by Chen, operate at the junctures of global/local linkage, magnifying the specificity of the local within the global logic of cultural difference. Even in the cases when the local society emerges as “a source of national identity, against the cosmopolitanism of urban centers,”² the construction of the local still has to be comprehended in the face of transnational capitalism and postmodern discourse of difference. This is a “greater paradox of the global-local nexus,” as Caren Kaplan points out. “The local appears as the primary site of resistance to globalization through the construction of temporalized narratives of identity (new histories, re-discovered

¹ From “Taiwan Stands Up: Toward the Dawn of a Rising Era” delivered by Chen Shui-Bian as the 10th Presidential Inaugural Speech, May 20, 2000.

² Arif Dirlik “Global in the Local,” in Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press 1996), p. 24.

genealogies, imagined geographies, etc.), yet that very site prepares the ground for appropriation, nativism, and exclusions.”³

I-lan County is a best example to illustrate the process wherein local-level culture workers endeavor to construct a bundle of identities through the complex configuration of the global/local nexus. As many scholars have noted, a prevailing sense of cultural crisis emerged in many localities of Taiwan in the late 1980s, in which the notion that culture, in particular native or folk cultures, as needing to be “preserved” or “developed” became widely acknowledged. In this collective search for “native Taiwan” many places have been identified as reservoirs of the authentic, each conserving different aspects of the kaleidoscopic Taiwanese culture. Yet, very few if any have utilized the past as thoroughly as I-lan. Since the early 1990s, the I-lan county government has striven to build its distinctive locality with the cooperation of urban planners and culture workers. Through a decade of place-making, I-lan has become reputed as “the most nativist county of Taiwan.” Its vision of regional planning, moreover, prefigures the built environment of a Taiwanese nationalist aesthetics. Chen Chi-nan, the famous advocate of community revitalization, says I-lan “has an enduring sense of place in this becoming-placeless Taiwan.”⁴ To fulfill the otherwise unattainable dream of building an authentic place, he even relocated to I-lan from Taipei after resigning the position of deputy director of the Committee of Cultural Affairs in 1997 to continue his unfinished community projects.⁵

Chen's celebration of the distinctive locality of I-lan is shared by mass media, cultural workers, and the I-lan county government itself. “The I-lan experience” is seen as the exemplar for cultural construction by local governments” in Taiwan’s cultural discourse.⁶ It represents a rare case in which local government successfully initiates and coordinates a place-making movement. This exceptional process, it should be noted, is only made possible by the distinctive regional politics of the county where the opposition party has enjoyed seventeen years of political power.

Culture has long been an ideological battleground for political parties in Taiwan.

³ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p.160.

⁴ Chen Gengyao *Wenhua Yilan You Xikun* (Taipei: Yuan Liu Publisher, 1998) p.3.

⁵ Chen became the executive director of Yang Shan Cultural Foundation in I-lan in September 1997, but resigned in April (?) 1998 as the new county magistrate had different focus than culture.

Exposing the extensive and forceful cultural maneuvers of the ruling party, Winckler (1994) writes, “the extraordinary success of Nationalist cultural policy in shaping Taiwan's postwar cultural development is another sort of ‘miracle.’”⁷ Ironically the “Ilan miracle,” created in opposition to the cultural ideology of the KMT party-state, is based on similar maneuvers in which a strong-willed county government implements a “direct cultural policy”⁸ through vigorous political initiatives to produce and transform the cultural consciousness of the locale. The politico-cultural maneuver that the Ilan government makes to territorialize its local administration is no different than the geo-political project of the nation-state in grounding its nationhood in a specific space.⁹ In other words, I-lan’s cultural project coincides with Taiwan’s nation-building process, and thus critics see its central coordination by local government as a localized version of state-centrism.¹⁰ Yet it is exactly because of this parallelism that I-lan's cultural experience becomes so highly acclaimed in the late 1990s. Toward the end of the Lee Teng-hui regime, the symbolic implication of I-lan had changed from being the haven of political rebellion to the representative of the Taiwanese native culture. The cultural implementation of the I-lan government attracts national and international attention, and successfully cultivates a sentiment of localism complexly linked with representations of Taiwanese nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

I-lan County; Geography and History

The county of I-lan is located in the northeastern corner of Taiwan, about 50 miles from Taipei. Steep mountains, which extend into the Pacific Ocean, separate the county from the Taipei Basin and contain the flatland of the county, known as the Lanyang Plain. The mountains are a major factor that postponed the county's development. While the superhighways built in the 1980s quickly incorporated many west-coast counties into urban centers, I-lan, the "back-of-the-mountain area" was left out. Its connection to Taipei City relies on a railway and two winding roads all dating back to Japanese period.

⁶ Chen Gengyao, p.23.

⁷ Edwin A. Winckler “Cultural Policy on Postwar Taiwan” in Stevan Harrell and Huang Chun-chieh eds., *Cultural Change in Postwar Taiwan* (Westview Press, 1994) p. 22.

⁸ Winckler (1994) defines direct cultural policy as "cultural management or cultural programs."

⁹ For a thorough analysis of the spatial technology of nation-making, see Sarah Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood *Remaking the Nation* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁰ Huang Guozhen *Wenhua zhengce, rentong zhengzhi yu diyu shijian* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Taipei, The National Taiwan University, 1998) calls Ilan county government as "local state apparatus."

The lack of modern, rapid transportation system prevents I-lan from being transformed into another suburban area of the Taipei metropolis, as was the fate of other west-coast counties within the same distance from the Taipei proper. Many workers have to move to cities, leaving their family behind, and only returning home during weekends. The population of the I-lan County remains stable for decades, a notable statistic considering Taiwan's rapid population growth in the postwar era.

While other rural counties also share the above problems such as transportation difficulties and the depopulation of wage earners, I-lan is exceptional for its unique history of local politics. The county people elected the first non-KMT county magistrate in 1981; in the subsequent two decades the KMT have never won any of the county magistrate elections. This long period of opposition party governance became a legend of the democratic movement within the authoritarian party state, and won for I-lan the name "Mecca of democracy."

Despite its fame, the uneasy relation between the county government and the KMT at the central level delays development of I-lan's infrastructure. The county relies mostly on an agricultural economy and does not have sufficient tax income to support itself. Therefore, like other agricultural areas, I-lan depends to a large extent on subsidies from the central government to fund its construction expenditure. The financial dependency of the periphery has been a crucial factor by which the KMT retains its centralized power in Taiwan. I-lan's "political rebellion" then sabotages its opportunity to obtain governmental funding.¹¹

The financial dependency and the complex political struggle force the I-lan county government to seek alternatives for invigorating the local economy and consolidating its power. Culture thus comes into play. Cultural tourism is planned as a major source of county income; a project of cultural revitalization that directly challenges the KMT's cultural policy further consolidates the political legitimacy of the county government. The amount of attention that the I-lan government has paid to the revitalization of

¹¹ One famous case illustrating the uneasy struggle between I-lan and the central government is the road project of the Taipei-Ilan express highway. The road construction was temporally suspended by the Administrative Yuan in 1989 because the I-lan government rejected an investment project of the Sixth Naphtha Cracker proposed by the Taiwan Plastic Corporation [correct name?] in Lize Industrial Park and defied the development plan drawn by the central government. The suspension of the road project was viewed as a "punishment" for political disobedience.

vernacular culture coincides with the postmodern nostalgic praxis of post-martial law Taiwanese society. Mass media and Taiwan-consciousness boosters depict I-lan as a symbolic site where authentic Taiwanese essence is saved from the insensitive developmentalism of the KMT. After 1994, many of I-lan's place making strategies have been adopted by other counties, and even adopted by the central government to boost the collective consciousness of Taiwan as a unique *national place*.

The Spiritual Homeland of Taiwanese People

In 1993, I-lan County Government published an illustrated book entitled *I-lan: The Spiritual Homeland of the Taiwanese People* as part of its self-promotion effort. Edited by a renowned journalist Yang Xianhong, this book is composed of annotated photos and poetic depictions of the county landscape and folk life. In addition to celebrating the place, the book aspires to educate a wider crowd. In the conclusion the editors state their hope that readers will be caught and inspired by the place of I-lan. They declare, "the objective of our county policies is to preserve a clean land where we will build a haven for the Taiwanese people to nourish their souls and embrace the beauty of Mother Nature."¹² They believe that "the dream of I-lan county is exactly the dream of the Taiwanese people; the trajectory of the county parallels to the direction of Taiwan's path."

The book *I-lan* is only one of many examples that illustrate the conscious place-making process of the I-lan county government, a project that involves urban planners, cultural workers, and idealistic administrative officials. The ultimate goal is to build a model for alternative development. In the process, I-lan as a place is attributed multiple levels of symbolic meaning; it becomes the remedy for public nostalgia in the contemporary frenzied search for "Taiwanese essence," a microcosm of "Taiwan's cultural and natural environment,"¹³ and a model for a "green" politics.¹⁴ Although the place-making process begins with the revitalization of folk culture, it does not remain reified in the frame of traditional culture, as with other projects of historical reclamation. Rather, future-oriented rhetoric is often adopted, in which a selected past is set up as a fixed point of reference against which one could measure the present deficiency, as an

¹² I-lan County Government, *I-lan: The Spiritual Homeland of the Taiwanese People*, 1993, p.9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁴ I-lan County Teachers' Association, *Dongshan He (Tung Shan River)*, 1993.

elemental step toward envisioning a utopian national future.¹⁵

Although the book *I-lan* takes a geographical determinist view by stating that the distinctive characteristics of the people are shaped by its geographical “distinctiveness,” and that I-lan natives “value their native place more than any other Taiwanese,” we learn from Stuart Hall and many other scholars that this seemingly solid and unquestionable local identity only emerges through interplays of “difference,” in an incessant “process of formation.”¹⁶ “[It] has to be told...narrated,”¹⁷ and performed.

Performing Identities on the Global Stage

“Over the past half century, our country ...has transformed into a pluralized, highly educational industrial and commercial society. The world is now about to enter the new century. The...ventures of Taiwanese people in the fields of culture and arts now need systematic integration. International cultural exchanges and export promotion bring international attention into the country. It elevates our national morale as well as Taiwan’s status in the international community.”¹⁸

This above speech was given by the then chairwoman of the Council for Cultural Affairs at the opening ceremony of the first I-lan International Folklore and Folkgame Festival in 1996. This is the most important cultural and tourist event for I-lan County, the “best identity card for I-lan to locate itself within the global cultural realm.”¹⁹ Held in every summer, the I-lan county government devotes a major portion of cultural budget and human resource to the Festival. When I worked in the I-lan Cultural Center in 1997, the head assigned his best staff members to form a work team in festival organization.

In May of 1998, I was appointed by the I-lan County Cultural Center in a student interpreter-training program for the International Folklore and Folkgame Festival to be held that summer. My job was to quiz the college students, who would become interpreters and tour guides for the foreign troops attending the festival, their understanding of the county’s “cultural accomplishments.” These students were all born

¹⁵ This idea is inspired by Jennifer Robertson *The Native and Newcomer* (University of California Press, 1991), p. 5.

¹⁶ Stuart Hall “Old and New Identities,” in Anthony D. King ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.45.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.38.

¹⁸ Helen Chen-Chi Lin “Towards a new era for local culture,” in *1996 I-lan International Folklore and Folkgame Festival*, p.3.

¹⁹ 1997 I-lan International Children’s Folklore and Folkgame Festival, I-lan County Government, p.5.

in I-lan County, but went to university elsewhere because there is no university in the county. My questions covered topics of historical preservation, architectural movement, community revivals, recreational sites, and so on. The test result was not great. Most young people could name only few cultural symbols of the county despite the county government's painstaking effort in the past five years to boost its local specialty.

When I reported this disappointing result to officials in County Cultural Center, they said that they didn't expect a high performance in that regard. Instead, they wanted to use the opportunity to educate young students about the cultural development of their county. "Those kids should improve their appreciation of the county government's efforts to create a new culture. They also have to know where the best places are in I-lan to show to the foreigners. Only then will they not be embarrassed should the foreign visitors ask them to show our culture." Based at the guideline, the training program would entail factual memorization of the various cultural projects exerted in recent years.

The officially-stated goal of the festival is to build I-lan into the "Children's dreamland," where the children of the world would meet and play together every year and "obtain the international friendship and cosmopolitanism."²⁰ The county magistrate You declares at a press conference that he wants to "build dreams for the children and create their sweet childhood memories."²¹ "Children" symbolize future. There is a universal saying that "children are the future owners of our country." By building I-lan into a Children's dreamland, I-lan county government implies that I-lan is the future of the nation; the tradition I-lan creates today would become the memories of the future generations.

In order to boost further cultural tourism, I-lan county government coordinated the "Year One of I-lan's International Tourism" in 1997. The idea was to combine the international children's festival with township festivals, most of which were agricultural-related. Various townships holding particular festivals at coordinated time slots throughout the year ensured that a year-round cultural calendar would be composed, according to which the tourist would come to I-lan at different time and enjoy a variety of

²⁰ The United Daily, 7/4/1997, 14th section.

²¹ Taiwan xinsheng bao, 7/4/1997, 15th section.

activities.²²

This model for international cultural tourism borrows from other renowned international festivals. The Edinburg Festival is one of its major models. I was asked to translate some documents from a brochure provided by Edinburg Festival Committee so the cultural office could use them to convince the new magistrate the importance of cultural festival in economic and political respects. One critical issue that the work team encounters is how to represent and market Ilan's local culture on a globalized stage. They attempt to display a combination of nativism and globalism through the festive activities. The Festival's proposal states that the festival will serve as the center for the county's tourism, surrounded and accompanied by various community events and package tours designed to entertain urban visitors with rustic, authentically rural atmosphere.

According to the plan of 1996, there were two predominant themes -- international folk games and children's folk dances. The festival collected games and toys from 37 countries. Ten troops from nine countries were invited to perform their folklore dancing. This was the first time when Taiwan's folk games and folklore dancing were juxtaposed with other countries, rather than being reduced to a regional variation of China.

The scale of the festival was expanded in 1997, when 14 troops from 12 countries participated. In addition to the exhibitions and dance performances, an exhibition named "So Far, So Near" was set up to display an abridged version of the cultural geographical data of each participant country. The display is meant to "educate the visitors about the concept of the global village."²³ Yet the most significant meaning of it is that Taiwan becomes the host of this global event, standing at an equivalent status with other nation-states.

The festival was a profitable experience. In 1996 there were some 196,000 tickets sold, NT\$1,900,0000 plus surplus.²⁴ In 1997, 284,101 tickets were sold, the income was NT\$72,000,000 plus.²⁵ These numbers do not include the profits of related service industries. Encouraged by the financial success, the county government then decided to

²² Chen Gengyao, p.365.

²³ Ibid, pp. 284-5.

²⁴ Ibid., p 275.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 286.

make the festival a regular annual event, and thus part of the “new cultural tradition of I-lan.”²⁶ A Folkgame museum collecting games from Taiwan and other countries was also planned, which would eventually become the basis for an international discipline of folklore studies.

As Taiwan’s de facto national status is not recognized by most countries in the world, it is difficult for Taiwan to participate in any international event. The festival and subsequent “International Rowing Competition” thus increase Taiwan’s visibility. An editorial, *The China Times*, wrote, “when the foreign rowing players wandered among the green mountains and waters of I-lan... Taiwan thus entered into their mental map of global politics... Sports could become a successful diplomatic interaction.”²⁷ As the County Magistrate You declares, the festival helps I-lan to obtain its “cultural identity card” in the global era. In other words, the native cultures that I-lan has so earnestly promoted would become the base for Taiwan to differentiate itself in the world.

Wilson and Dissanayake describe the “fractal terrain” at end of the century as “ a new world-space of cultural production and national representation which is simultaneously becoming more globalized (unified around dynamics of capitalistic moving across borders) and more localized (fragmented into contestatory enclaves of difference, coalition, and resistance).”²⁸ In this context, postmodern culture-workers become the symbolic engineers and critical consciousness of global capital. I-lan represents “what Stuart Hall calls a more ‘tricky version of the local’ which operates within, and has been thoroughly reshaped by ‘the global’ and operates largely within its logic.”²⁹ Culture workers of I-lan seek to construct the concreteness of a place-bound identity, which has been threatened by capitalism and the Chinese nationalism, through various place-making tactics. Yet as Harvey warns us, “such attachments to ‘place-bound identity’ may begin as oppositional movements but ... they also become part of the ‘very

²⁶ Ibid., p.291.

²⁷ China Times, 9/18/1996.

²⁸ Wilson and Dissanayake “Global/Local” p.1.

²⁹ Ibid., p.5.

fragmentation which a mobile capitalism and flexible accumulation can feed upon.”³⁰

³⁰ Kaplan p.151. Also compare Jonathan Friedman “Being in the World: Globalization and Localization” in Mike Featherstone ed. *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*,(London ed by Mike Featherstone.