

On the fostering of a national identity: Retrospective and discussion of the National Palace Museum's two major international loan exhibitions in 2003

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Abstract

In January 2003, the NPM's exhibition *The Birth of Taiwan: Formosa in the Seventeenth Century* features hundreds of artifacts on loan from over thirty-six public and private collections around the world, delivering a statement made by the museum that an authentic vista of Taiwan on its name Formosa emerged in the 17th century. Following this, in July the Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn (KAH) borrowed objects from the collection of the NPM for a loan exhibition in Germany entitled *Treasures of the Sons of Heaven*, however, it was an event of a political adventure from the point of view the Taiwanese government resolving the issue of its national identity on an international stage.

While the NPM actively devotes itself to orienting its management toward a more pluralistic view of culture, this article intends to debate who takes the tools, or who uses the tools of NPM's exhibitions as an incubator of national identity (of Taiwan) as Taiwanese society evolves, and as the direction of the government changes in recent years.

Keywords: National Palace Museum (Taipei), loan exhibition, national identity, museum politics, Taiwanese subjectivity

Foreword

In 2003, the Director of the National Palace Museum (NPM) in Taipei, Tu Cheng-sheng, said on the occasion of the special exhibition *Ilha Formosa-The Emergence of Taiwan on the World Scene in the 17th Century* (hereinafter referred to as *Formosa*), “At last, the Palace Museum holds an exhibition that focuses on the history and culture of Taiwan!” (Tu, 2004) And later, in his opening speech for the Palace Museum’s travel exhibit in Germany *Treasures of the Sons of Heaven: The Imperial Collection from the National Palace Museum, Taipei* (hereinafter: *Treasures*), Tu would act as an advocate for “treasuring Taiwan,” while the domestic media’s extensive coverage of the First Lady Wu Shu-chen’s visit to Europe under that very motto almost completely overshadowed reports on the content and reception of the exhibition abroad.

Before I will try to analyze how those two exhibitions may or may not have furthered the fostering of a national identity, I first want to explain the term “national identity” in this context. For our practical purposes, it refers to identification with some kind of Taiwanese subjectivity. The following chart (spanning the forty years from its opening in Taipei since today, 1965-2006) gives a compressed overview of how the Museum, its politics always strongly affected by the fact that it is

in essence the custodian of Chinese imperial court collections, evolved from its early and straightforward role as a guardian of traditional culture to adopt more diverse functions and methods of operating in accordance with changing government policies and cultural outlooks.

Since the 2000 presidential election that saw the island's first democratic transition of power, hard-to-define ideological “drift-currents” have come to dominate politics and society. In this environment, government and opposition parties have become gridlocked in a “zero-sum” stalemate. Still there can be no doubt that the government's attempts to build a sense of community and build a genuinely Taiwanese national identity have not been entirely futile. In accordance with this policy, numerous colleges and universities have set up departments and graduate institutes for Taiwanese Studies since the year 2000. And beginning in 2006, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has made it a requirement that elementary school and junior high textbooks, as well as the contents of the basic competence test for junior high school students, feature at least 50% of material relating to Taiwan's society and living environment. At the same time, the MOE has launched the national “Window on Taiwan” program to educate the population about the island's culture and history. At the local level,

<i>Establishing a Tradition (1965-1982)</i>		<i>Growth and Transformation (1982-2006)</i>	
Dir. Chiang Fu-ts'ung (1965-1982)		Dir. Ch'in Hsiao-yi (1982-2000)	Dir. Tu Cheng-sheng (2000-2004) Dir. Shih Shou-chien (2004-2006) Dir. Lin Mun-lee (2006-)
Cultural Developments	1970s: The government pushes the Movement for the Restoration of Chinese Culture. 1980s: Writers and critics advocate a nativist, socially responsible literature (“Return to Native Roots Movement”).	After the lifting of martial law in 1987, the formal cessation of the state of war with China in 1991 and the oil crisis of the mid-1990s, the government engineered constitutional change and actively pursued a policy of “nativization.”	After the transition of power from the KMT to the DPP in 2000, the government stressed the nation's sovereign status and focused on forging a stronger Taiwanese identity within the population. This trend also became a major force behind the gradual transformation of the NPM.

The NPM's development (against the backdrop of the nation's cultural and political developments) between 1965 and 2006

the program encourages community colleges to offer courses such as “Getting to Know Your Hometown,” “Taiwanese Literature Appreciation” or “Introduction to Taiwan’s History.” The spirit of the program is also reflected in the Taiwan Anthology for Youth-Literature Delectus, a volume in a series planned and designed by the MOE and published by the National Institute for Compilation and Translation. It contains a poem titled “The Whale’s Declaration” in which the whale serves as a metaphor for Taiwan’s unbreakable spirit in the face of threats and bullying from more powerful nations. The poem only fully reveals its beauty and objective when read aloud in the Min Nan dialect (Taiwanese) and is accompanied by an illustration showing a 17th century Dutch map of Formosa.

Against this sociopolitical backdrop, this paper looks back on the NPM’s two major international loan exhibitions in the year 2003 to discuss how their message and content conformed with the government’s policy of “localization,” and made the NPM a medium and carrier of the attempt to generate a Taiwanese national identity. In the following I will first approach the subject by examining the concept of “The Birth of Taiwan” as propounded at the Formosa exhibition.

1. The birth of Taiwan: Implications of the Formosa exhibition

It was Dr. Robin Ruizendaal who first came up with the idea for a special exhibition that would center around the history of Formosa and its emergence on the international stage. In his conception, the exhibit’s point of departure was the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), or Dutch East India Company, and the show was to feature maps and all kinds of other artifacts and documents from the Dutch colonies all over Asia to give a comprehensive overview of the Netherlands’ trade empire in the 17th

century. In 2000, Ruizendaal’s proposition found the support of the then director of the NPM, Tu Cheng-sheng. But in order to better match the NPM’s objective of making this an exhibition about “the birth of Taiwan”, it was decided that a large number of artifacts from local collections would be added. At the same time, the focus of the show was shifted more to 17th century Taiwan. In short, the final concept of the Formosa exhibition (with 359 objects on loan from 38 domestic and international museums) was the result of Tu taking Ruizendaal’s original blueprint to enrich and broaden the project’s scope and put the spotlight on the island itself.

Assuming the role of historic interpreter, Tu Cheng-sheng personally wrote an accompanying booklet called *The Birth of Taiwan* to acquaint visitors with the exhibition’s historical perspective. Eager to create a new image for the NPM, and to educate the population about the 17th century’s importance as a turning point in the island’s development, Tu did his best to instill a sense of nation in his readers:

I will not deny that this concept [of nation] arises largely from practical necessities. I like to believe, though, that it also carries significant academic value and, as a theory, will stand the test of time. What this Formosa exhibition wants to do is encourage visitors to ask themselves “Who are we? Where do we come from, and where are we headed? What kind of nation is this we are living in?” ... Formosa wants to establish a new historical perspective among the people of Taiwan. In this sense, it is an enlightenment campaign. (Tu, 2004, p. 135)

Beginning on Nov 20, 2002, well before the start of the exhibition, the MOE sponsored a series of ten teachers’ in-service education workshops (held in north, central, south and east Taiwan) with the goal to raise awareness and understanding of the island’s history among the nation’s teachers. To supply the workshops with material, more than 20

thousand copies of Tu's introductory booklet *The Birth of Taiwan- Formosa in the seventeenth Century* had already been ordered long before the exhibition's opening. At the same time, the NPM recruited 100 volunteers who underwent special training to serve as exhibition guides. Taiwan's cabinet, the Executive Yuan, furthermore arranged special tours for public servants and teachers allowing them to visit the exhibition. It was an unprecedented example for a museum assuming such an active role as the population's educator about the nation's history. In addition, the media did their part to advertise and promote the exhibition on a grand scale, and all this furor led some to point out that the NPM was functioning as a mere instrument of government policy and seemed unduly anxious to endorse and advance the administration's narrow "national consciousness" agenda. Some even spoke of a hijacking of Taiwanese identity for political purposes, and the rationale and academic integrity of the entire exhibition were openly questioned.

Among the fiercest critics were aboriginal representatives who lodged strong protests against the notion advanced by the NPM that the "birth" of Taiwan happened in the 17th century. They called public attention to the historical fact, in their opinion neglected by the exhibit, that their ancestors had already lived on the island long before any other immigrants came to Taiwan, and accused the NPM of failing to include sufficient artifacts documenting aboriginal life and history on the island. In their view, this led to a lack of authenticity in the representation of this part of Taiwan's past, and misdirected the visitors' gaze to the perception of a larger picture in which the unequal distribution of power between the Han Chinese and the aborigines, and ensuing injustices, were virtually absent. Taiwanese researcher Hsu Koun-min, expert for aboriginal studies, points out:

The title "The Birth of Taiwan" alone was enough to trigger strong objections from aboriginal groups, who declared that the Palace Museum's exhibition was approaching the subject matter from an angle that combined Dutch imperialism and colonialism with Han Chinese chauvinist and hegemonic notions while completely ignoring the important role that the indigenous peoples have played in Taiwan's history. (Hsu, 2005, p. 104)

So it was not only the NPM's obvious attempt to utilize the exhibition and its academic backbone to promote the ideas of "national consciousness" and "Taiwanese subjectivity" that became the object of severe and unexpected criticism and led to doubts about the whole project's scholarly integrity-much more, aboriginal representatives focused on the exhibition's lack of a sufficiently broad perspective, in particular with regard to the question who 17th century Taiwan "belonged to", i.e. how to adequately define Taiwanese subjectivity back then. In short, cracks had appeared in the exhibition's rationale, and its concept appeared no longer tenable.

When looking at the controversy and agitation raised by the NPM's discourse, in particular the protests from aboriginal side, it is good to remember the words of Michael Foucault who said that in any society, discourse is generated by a limited number of forces who control, select, organize and distribute the topics that dominate the public's perception. As a result, the discourse is imposed upon everybody and everything in what can only be described a violent process. In other words, "might is right". And from this viewpoint it is interesting to observe that not only was the NPM's discourse not weakened by the many protestations and objections from indigenous peoples' representatives, but it actually gathered momentum when the MOE decided to continue its financial support for the project,

and to once more shift the exhibition's spotlight to Tainan, where the show attracted 230,000 visitors under the title "Ilha Formosa: The Rediscovery of Zeelandia" . Now the discourse had reached southern Taiwan.

2. Treasures and treasuring Taiwan: The nation as cultural custodian

After the *Formosa* exhibition, the NPM still felt the need to give a loud and clear voice to Taiwan and its status as a nation, and another international loan exhibition in cooperation with the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn (hereinafter KAH) proved the perfect venue for Taiwan's government to get involved in affairs and matters pertinent to the show, this time shifting the focus of the discourse outside Taiwan's borders. With the stage now set abroad, and the gaze of an even bigger audience on the show, the potential for promoting recognition of Taiwan as a nation was of course even larger.

The *Treasures* exhibition had much in common with its predecessors, the 1996 NPM Splendors of Imperial China loan show in the United States and the 1998 loan exhibition *Memoire d'Empire* in France: all emphasized the glory and splendor of the Chinese imperial courts to put the spotlight firmly on China's art and history, its longstanding cultural tradition. As for the name of the German exhibition, the NPM eventually agreed to the KAH's preferred title *Treasures of the Sons of Heaven*, which was borrowed from the carved inscription on an emerald jade imperial seal given to Qing dynasty emperor Qianlong on his 70th birthday. This title was felt to adequately reflect what the German organizer of the show, Dr. Toyka-Fuong, expressed in the following words on occasion of the *Treasures* exhibition's pre-opening press conference in Berlin, "the true nature of Chinese emperors through the ages as art lovers, patrons and

collectors." After the exhibition's inauguration in Berlin, the *Berliner Zeitung* thus wrote, "If someone manages not to be deeply moved by the many artifacts from the collections of Chinese emperors, now on show in the Altes Museum ("Old Museum"), that person has probably lost the ability to be touched by anything at all." All these are clear indications that the lasting appeal of the NPM's imperial collections lies in the stunning, awe-inspiring quality of their artistic and cultural artifacts. This is why these collections were shown at loan exhibition in the US and Europe three times, and were always wildly popular with Western audiences.

Even so, it took KAH director Dr. Wenzel Jacob roughly ten years of untiring efforts and negotiations with the NPM to bring about the *Treasures* exhibition. As early as February 1993, Jacob approached the ROC Trade and Cultural Office in Germany to express his hopes of hosting a loan exhibition in Bonn with artifacts from the NPM. Jacob made an official trip to Taiwan to meet in person with then NPM director Ch'in Hsiao-yi to discuss in great length and depth basic details of the project such as its general theme and aesthetics, matters of insurance (of the artifacts), exhibition venues and plans for a future reciprocal loan exhibition of German artifacts in Taiwan. The key factor in the negotiations was the revision of the language of Article 2, Section 20 of the "Law on the Preservation of Foreign Cultural Possessions," which finally guaranteed the safe return of objects loaned from the NPM. After that matter had been settled, it was agreed during the tenure of Tu Cheng-sheng that a wide variety of artifacts (400 objects in total) would travel to Germany, including antiquities, paintings, calligraphies, tapestries, embroideries and rare books and prints.

Of course, for Tu Cheng-sheng this loan exhibition came as quite a challenge. Under

previous directors, the NPM as custodian of Chinese imperial court collections (and thus a guardian of traditional Chinese culture) had neither been willing nor able to shed its strongly political aura and symbolism. But since the 2000 presidential election, the nation's pendulum of identity and self-image was clearly swinging away from China and towards Taiwan. It soon became obvious that Tu, who had taken over from Ch'in Hsiao-yi in the same year, would interpret his duties and position in ways quite different from his predecessor. The loan exhibition in Germany was a perfect opportunity to assert his new style. Probably the most important matter in this context was the idea of a new name for the NPM—so far, it had been known internationally as the “National Palace Museum, Taipei.” Yet now Tu intended to change that to “National Palace Museum, Taiwan.” The next thing Tu turned his attention to was the idea of the NPM as a custodian of “civilization” in general. In his speech at the *Treasures* exhibition's opening ceremony at the Old Museum, Berlin, Tu expounded on the theme of “The Hallmarks of a Civilized Nation,” opening with a few remarks on the German adventurers who in the 17th century had come to Taiwan as employees of the Dutch East India Company, and then continuing to make his main point:

The priceless objects shown in “Treasures of the Sons of Heaven” were adequately preserved and protected for more than fifty years in Taiwan, while at the same time being thoroughly studied and researched. This “Taiwan factor” should not be entirely forgotten in this exhibition. ... In our world today, the careful preservation of works of art and historical relics has already become one of the hallmarks of civilized nations. These treasures from Taiwan's National Palace Museum, then, are also a crucial indicator of our nation's civilization. ... (Tu, 2004, pp. 268-9)

While Tu was enlightening his audience about the deeper meaning of the

conservation of cultural relics, Taiwan's First Lady was also traveling in Europe, pleading for respect and appreciation of Taiwan under the motto “Treasuring Taiwan” . Without the slightest doubt, she was making good use of the fact that the Treasures exhibition had put Taiwan (which is not often the case) somewhat in the spotlight of Germany's and even global media. Therefore, both events were seen as a successful demonstration of Taiwan's spirit on the international stage. (Huang, 2004)

3. Examining the Role of Museums in the 21st Century

No museum is a “pure land” existing in a political vacuum, and “exhibition is by its very nature an interpretive act.” (L. Roberts, 1992) It is therefore not very surprising that museum exhibits frequently tend to have a strong political or official and authoritative flavor, and the *Formosa* exhibition with its interpretive tag line “The Birth of Taiwan” is a case in point. In the same way, knowledge is always an interpretation of reality, which means that anyone expounding a theory or dominating a discourse is foisting certain values and implications on the knowledge he is presenting or asserting, and those values and implications then become part and parcel of his interpretation of the world. It follows that when the then director of the NPM in his Berlin opening speech for Treasures stressed that this loan exhibition “is the most historical cultural exchange between Taiwan and Germany of the last five decades,” and adroitly linked the event with the First Lady's visiting tour of Europe with its connected motto “Treasuring Taiwan, Befriending in Culture,” he had already firmly shifted the Treasures exhibition's focus and significance on *Taiwan*, making this a hallmark event—and a milestone in realizing the government's policy, pursued since 2000, of affording Taiwan with more visibility on the international stage (“Let Taiwan Be Seen in the World”).

The question is, is this really the NPM's true role, scope and mission for the 21st century? If one agrees with R. P. Assogba's assessment that "a national heritage is a nation's umbilical cord" (Prosler, 1996), it may indeed seem reasonable that the NPM as custodian of Chinese imperial court collections can only develop a deeper affiliation with Taiwan by "rectifying its name", i.e. renaming itself. Yet opponents of such a move feel that the words "Palace Museum" have already acquired the status of a cultural brand with a huge potential, and that the NPM should therefore be managed and operated as a business in its own right without being drawn into the ongoing controversy about Taiwan's national identity. These diametrically opposed positions on the issue of a name change also provide a glimpse at the numerous challenges that the NPM, after decades of relatively stable development on the island, has to deal with in recent years—challenges that are always manifestations of society's constantly evolving trends and opinions.

One cannot deny, though, that many have already discarded the concept and attitude of a "nation's umbilical cord", and are gradually adopting A. Appadurai's notion of "global scapes" which are advancing a rapid deterritorialization, thus precipitating the disappearance of clear-cut cultural boundaries between different peoples and nations. In other words, the traditional view is becoming discredited that saw individuals as closely and permanently connected members of one specific ethnic group that would in turn completely and irrevocably determine their identity. It is being replaced by a more flexible concept of mobile and interacting socio-cultural groups that transcend national boundaries and create ethnoscares that are marked by greater permeability and wider vision. With this in mind, it might not be such a bad idea for the NPM to embrace the spirit of "old is new" which has gained much

currency lately, and actively seek ways of letting its audiences understand and appreciate the beauty of its classical collections. Making it possible for all the people on this island to enjoy the treasures guarded in this "national" museum: maybe that is the most urgent mission and objective the NPM should strive to achieve in the 21st century.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked back on the NPM's two major international loan exhibitions in 2003 with the purpose of showing how the NPM's then director utilized his position to shape the exhibits' content and discourse. First, in the role of "historic interpreter", he firmly placed the *Formosa* exhibition in the context of "the birth of Taiwan", and then proceeded to spare no effort in imbuing the Palace Museum's imperial court collections with a new meaning by emphasizing the fact that they have been preserved and cared for in Taiwan for the past half century—in effect turning the *Treasures* exhibition into a tool for enabling the rest of the world to gain a better knowledge of Taiwanese subjectivity and identity.

But in the end, what really counts is not so much an exhibition's content or discourse, but what the visitors actually experience as they walk past the exhibits and immerse themselves in the venue's atmosphere and environment. This is to say that no matter what perspective or language or interpretive approach the museum uses to present an exhibition to its visitors, it is still up to the audience to make sense of it all, to decide what it all means. Therefore L. Roberts is of the opinion that museums should teach their audiences "how to view" an exhibition with their own eyes, and should empower audiences by making their "view" count. In other words, she is calling for a "legitimization of audience views". From this

angle, the NPM might learn something from the attitudes of Western audiences towards the collection of national treasures on display during the Palace Museum's loan exhibitions in the US and Europe: in general, visitors in the West viewed the exhibits from a purely aesthetic point of view, appreciating them as works of art and cultural artifacts. This is the kind of attitude the NPM may want to cultivate in its domestic audiences as well.

Put differently, for the longest part of its history the NPM simply continued the traditional routine of conventional museums, with the concept of “teaching facts” as its paramount guideline and discourse. But when facing Taiwan's changing socio-cultural environment of today, there would seem to be a strong incentive for the NPM to reconsider its approach and try to figure out how it may transcend its established functions-and discontinue its role as a political instrument whose priceless imperial court collections are largely utilized for the fostering of a national identity. The Palace Museum should allow its collections to “communicate” with visitors

on a more intimate and direct level, making them more attractive to generation-e-audiences already satiated with constant optical and visual stimulation. It are these new audiences that require more help in developing their “skill of perception” to see the NPM collections in a new light. Once that is achieved, they may become competent museumgoers able to arrive at their own judgments and interpretations, and enjoying museum exhibitions as “free-choice-of-learning” environments. And the most important spin-off of that could be that Taiwan's younger generations, almost imperceptibly united by their shared experience and knowledge of the Palace Museum's art and artifacts collections, might gradually grow into a socio-cultural group characterized by a significant amount of intersubjectivity. And that would allow the NPM, this national museum, to gain the status and function of an educator, an “incubator” teaching the nation's people to become truly sovereign and independent citizens.

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About the author

Over the past five years (2001-2006), as the Chief Registrar of the National Palace Museum, Ms. Tseng Chen Yuan¹ has overseen the operations of many outgoing and incoming exhibitions. Among the major projects she has worked on, *The Birth of Taiwan: Formosa in the Seventeenth Century* (2003), which consisted of works of art borrowed from 36 local and overseas museums, and *Treasures of the Sons of Heaven* (2003-4), were two of the most notable incoming and outgoing loan exhibitions in recent years.

Previously, Ms. Tseng Chen Yuan was the chief of the Exhibition Division at the National Palace Museum (1999-2000) and played a key role in broadening the horizons of audiences and furthering the development of museum education. Between 1986 and 1998, she was in charge of the Gallery of Recent Art at the National Palace Museum. Through her work at the Gallery's series, "Creating from Tradition," which served as an important venue for exhibiting contemporary art the National Palace Museum, she acquired invaluable curatorial experience

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