Tongue-Tied Taiwan: Linguistic Diversity and Imagined Identities at the Crossroads of Colonial East Asia

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A history of repeated colonization and foreign occupation created in Taiwan a severe language gap spanning three generations, and left its people in an anxious search for the island’s “linguistic” and “national” identity. Taiwanese speakers of indigenous Austronesian languages and Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Hakka have historically endured the imposition of two different national languages: Japanese since 1895 and Mandarin since 1945. In this project, I draw on anthropological perspectives and media analysis to understand the ideologies and symbols vested upon different languages and codes that still circulate within different media today. My research primarily investigates an autoethnographic report on a family history, several museum and gallery exhibits, as well as two different documentaries, all centered on Hokkien speakers in Taiwan. I argue that a future generation's narrative construction of an authentic Taiwanese identity must be rooted in the island's past and present reality of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Taiwan, Oral History, Colonial Education, Language Diversity, National Identity
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Introduction

An Island of Codes

Taiwanese speakers of indigenous Austronesian languages and Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Hakka have historically endured the imposition of two different national languages: Japanese since 1895 and Mandarin since 1945. This history of repeated colonization and foreign occupation effectively created in Taiwan a severe language gap spanning three generations.

For example, I was born into a family where my grandparents speak Hokkien and Japanese, my parents speak Hokkien and Mandarin Chinese, while their children speak Mandarin Chinese and English. Whereas other Taiwanese households may find Hakka or Austronesian languages standing in for Hokkien, the general trend remains the same: today’s youngest generation of Mandarin speakers, though fluently wielding the prestigious tongues of political and academic engagements, find themselves cut off from their grandparents in the absence of a mediator.

Beyond the immediate breakdown of generational continuity and the disruption of a comprehensible personal and family history, this linguistic gap across each generation produces fundamental challenges to defining a clear and pristine Taiwanese culture. On the one hand, the language barriers prevent different generations from conversing with each other and from
sharing a sense of cultural belonging; on the other, different linguistic identities also became rallying points which members of any generation may mobilize around and further politicize.

Three languages today stand in the forefront: 1) Hokkien, the majority settler language brought over to the island as early as the 1600’s, 2) Mandarin, the current “National Language” institutionalized by the island’s current condition as the Republic of China, and 3) English, the globally established language now taught in every public elementary school—and in which this paper is written—even recently proposed by a senator to be implemented as the island’s “official language.” However, what draws my attention is the oft forgotten fourth language that simmers beneath the surface: 4) Japanese, Taiwan’s first “National Language” enforced under Shōwa’s vision of an imperial Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Subsequent governments have built their linguistic reforms and language policies upon this untreated colonial trauma of Japanese language education, unwittingly creating a ticking time-bomb waiting to implode. Ideologies operate best in the subconscious (Hebdigde, *Subcultures*), and although the Chinese Nationalists have destroyed most of the architecture built under Japanese rule throughout a process dubbed “De-Japanification,” the mind-grooves (à la Sapir) etched into a people’s consciousness from colonial education cannot be so easily effaced through material symbolisms alone. If anything, the outright suppression of a culture only increases the identification towards that system of symbols, like steam trapped in a kettle sealed-shut. I argue that a lingering idolization as well as a resurging nostalgia towards Japanese culture are effectively disrupting any attempt to unite the Taiwanese population under any singular political position regarding nationhood and cultural belonging.
This incapability to convene for a conversation on national identity is obviously not created uniquely along linguistic lines and generational divides. Indigenous populations have chronically been excluded from the national conversation by Han settlers, and new immigrants from Southeast Asia are still being dismissed as second-class citizens. However, even the Han settlers themselves, the very people in positions of power, could not agree on the identity and representation of Taiwan to an international audience. A curiosity presents itself in the face of democracy: this body of publicly elected government representatives could not decide what it means to be a person born and raised in Taiwan, to have Taiwan remain as the only land you’ve ever set foot on, to live and die in Taiwan without ever being given alternatives. My project is then focused on this group of confused majority, ethnically Han Chinese settlers who lived through a century of Japanese colonization and Chinese Nationalist governance, and continue to this day to struggle for a coherent idea of nationhood and a collectively imagined identity.

Languages play a central role in this ability to communally engage in the national discourse, in employing and deciphering the symbolic meanings that constitute any representation of an idea, let alone an entire nation. Languages are more than simple packages of message that we ferry across to one another to facilitate communication. They are the very vehicles for ideologies, potential vessels of political sabotage that hollows out a people’s identity from within.

In this project, I look at depictions of language in several texts across different media, including a film exhibit featured in the Taipei Biennial 2016 titled “Re-Re-Positioning the Present,” an interview-based documentary Dear Taiwan (2011), and an autoethnographic report on a family history, all centered on Hokkien speaking settlers in Taiwan. I argue that the
Taiwanese populace’s anxious search for a “national identity” is in part fueled by an unstable linguistic landscape and an unreconciled past, strife with linguistic conflict as instrumentalized by colonial education and re-education. Furthermore, I posit that future generations’ narrative construction of an authentic Taiwanese identity must be rooted in the island’s reality of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Ironically, during my research, it was through my prior engagements and activism in the queer community that facilitated my understanding of Taiwan’s current situation. Because queerness is not inherited, members of the community often could not rely on their birth families for life lessons and love, turning instead towards elders in the community with whom they establish kinship relations despite the absence of any connections by blood. This system of inheritance and transmission of knowledge was, however, destroyed by the global AIDS epidemic. The chasm created by the literal gap of human lives is comparable to generational disconnect experienced in Taiwan. Because of repeated language reforms and revisions of history, any attempt to reach into the past hits a dead end, and yields blank. There is a fear amongst the island against accumulating any cultural belonging or symbolic meaning, precisely due to a haunting history of established traditions and lifelong accomplishments continuously failing the translation of political regimes, and consequently razed to the ground. The older generations of my family subject themselves to self-imposed censorship and silence, unavailable for meaningful inquiries into my past and genealogy. These experiences speak to the importance in kinship relations not only as a support network for social and economic struggles, but more importantly a source of identity and belonging. Home is never simply a place, but the people inhabiting it as well.
As I progressed through this project, I continued to encounter troubles in writing on a single thread. The project was originally intended to be focused solely on Japanese colonization in Taiwan and its lingering ramifications today. I struggled with the fact that I cannot extract or disentangle the trauma, nostalgia, and misidentification with the Japanese from the history of successive political regimes. I had originally intended to skirt Taiwan’s relationship with China in my discussion to avoid such a sensitive and emotionally exhausting topic, as well as attempt to destabilize, if not dispel, commonplace impressions of Taiwan amongst international forums today as simply a Chinese province gone rogue, or as an exiled government and its people foolishly clinging onto an impossible dream of war and conquer that belongs in a bygone era. However, the more I attempt to understand Taiwan’s bizarre and collective affection towards the Japanese colonists, the more it seems to be a reactionary and complex coping mechanism to emotionally contain the violent dictatorship installed by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) when they took over after Showa Japan. It seems, unfortunately, that any discussion about the island of Taiwan simply cannot escape discussions of “China,” in all of its different versions and iterations in history, especially when the landmass today known commonly as “China” still has thousand of missiles pointed at and ready to fire into the island. Contextualized as such, an affinity towards the Japanese (and the American, though not discussed in this paper) appear now rather as a futile attempt to escape the immense gravity of influence located across the Taiwanese strait that continuously works to pull others in.

In this project, I begin with the modern history of Taiwan narrated through the changing linguistic landscape of Taiwan, brought forth by colonial interests and imperial greed. Chapter 2
explores my memories of religious practices in my family, drawing out the relationship between a spoken tongue and spiritual beliefs in attempt to uncover an oft forgotten aspect of Hokkien’s position in a predominantly Mandarin world. Chapter 3 documents the images and narratives I have come across throughout my research, most particularly interested in a documentary whose producer fabricated a fake identity to make sense of the very real history her film is recounting. Chapter 4 recounts how mothertongues can serve as a source of creativity, and how language diversity can open up pluralistic imaginations of the future.

In the end, the more I try to study identity and belonging in Taiwan, the more I am confronted by the impossibility to identify, organize, and sort out political positions across ethnic and generational divides. There is no map, there are no lines. People are scattered without a single frontier. It is either that this fundamental irreducibility of 23 million political sentiments stands true or that my own history is clouding my vision, rendering the landscape illegible. The following essays are a reflection of this confusion that I cannot seem to reconcile, a collection of personal anecdotes read through a stubborn desire to categorize them. I could not bring myself to offer a conclusion to this project, but in its place I leave an example of what a tentative solution to my dilemma could look like, a window into potential futures and alternate timelines.
Chapter 1: The Changing Names of Home

— Fluidity, Confusion, and Violence in Taiwan’s Linguistic Landscape

The Formosans had not involved themselves in the wars between the Ming Empire and the Qing Empire, nor had the Dutch. Therefore, the first thing that everyone discussed in the meeting was which side would win the war, the Han people or the Dutch? Li Jia burst into laughter, saying that there was nothing to be discussed. The Dutch had been fleeting, so one knew that Koxinga and the Han people would win. There were already some Han people cheering for victory. Even the children of Wu Zui Xu looked happy and cheerful, too. Then, someone asked whether people from the Madou District were going to help either of the two sides in the war. Another said that since the Han people had the advantage, it was only natural to help them. Then, another person said the Dutch might get reinforcement in a short period of time and turn the table around. They should observe the situation for a while! Yet, another said that Zheng Chenggong [Koxinga] said to the Dutch that this land belonged to his father, and that he was asking it back. However, this land had been ours before the Dutch came. How could it have belonged to the Han people? Why helping Zheng Chenggong? At that moment, all were silent and kept looking at each other.

- A Tale of Three Tribes in Dutch Formosa (2012), CHEN Yao-Chang

The 1660s marked a turbulent time for the island of Taiwan—then still known as Ilha Formosa, or Portuguese for “beautiful island”—caught between the political transfer of the Chinese Empire from the Han-controlled Ming to the Manchurian-led Qing. In the setting of the story quoted above, the last remaining Ming dissidents had failed to prevent the establishment of the Qing, and now turned to take over Taiwan’s southern ports from the Dutch merchants.

A Tale of Three Tribes identifies three distinct communities then present on the island: 1) the “Formosans,” or indigenous Austronesians holding this war meeting, 2) the Han people, often Chinese pirates and farmhand-turned-settlers that came mostly from southern China, and 3) the Dutch, seafaring businessmen yearning for a share in the Chinese trade. With a stroke of
irony, the indigenous people squabble over which colonial force they should support, unable to assert dominance, control, and ownership over their ancestral land.

This wild array of interests and power, captured merely during one slice of time throughout Taiwan’s arduous colonial history, already paints an idea of the sheer immensity of cross-cultural contacts and political drama that transpired on this subtropical island.

The following chapter seeks to recollect the history of Taiwan by looking at major events of conflict and political transitions. Taiwan finds itself always at the border—be it within or without—of East Asian empires. Its political history and international predicaments today are direct products of global webs of conflict and entanglements of imperial interests, most visibly reflected in how the island’s name and its people’s conception of home have changed over time. By situating Taiwan in greater global contexts and then transitioning into contemporary lived experiences, I argue that Taiwan’s current anxiety and loss regarding an authentic identity is in part produced by the island’s unstable linguistic landscape for the past 400 years.

Since the island’s emergence from the ocean depths and its eventual separation from the Asian landmass by rising ocean levels, prehistoric migrations have led many living things to the island, including human beings. The oldest surviving cultures of the island belong to the Austronesian Taiwanese tribes who first emerged 6000 years ago, now commonly referred as indigenous peoples of Taiwan. Their languages and traditions have significantly diversified as they scattered throughout the island, and although the Taiwanese government today officially recognizes 16 tribes only, the total count of distinctly self-identified tribes can easily double that number. I remember, from textbooks in elementary school, some lasting bodies of famous political power such as the Kingdom of Middag (大肚王國).
Despite common misconceptions, the Kingdom of Middag was no Roman Empire that spanned the entire island. Middag occupied merely a modest section along the western coast, constituted by an alliance of more than two dozen different tribes and villages, each speaking a different Austronesian or Formosan language, rather an empire of direct top-down subjugation. (Zhou 25) For comparison, the “people from Madou district” mentioned above in *A Tale of Three Tribes* was a different and separate group of Austronesians with distinct territories, language, and culture. Yet another tribe, the Taivoan, is considered by some as the source of Taiwan’s eventually sinicized name.

Concurrently, foreign entities have already begun embarking along the western coast of the island. Taiwan emerged on the maps of international seafarers as a hub of trade and transaction, especially between Chinese and Japanese merchants, pirates, and warlords, who cultivated a penchant for sugarcane and deerskin. Austronesian Taiwanese would barter these goods for other tools and materials, thereby maintaining stable relationships with such foreigners. (Shepherd 38) By the time the Dutch arrived at today’s Tainan in 1626, elaborate commercial networks and practices have already been established on the island; the Dutch were no pioneers. Yet their arrival nonetheless marked the beginning of Taiwan’s colonial history.

The Dutch who set down base on Taiwan were not convoys or representatives of their nation state, but rather employees of the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, hereafter VOC). In the early 17th century, pushed by economic interests to compete against Spain and Portugal merchants in their monopoly on Oriental spices—and propelled by a Protestant zeal against the Catholic Iberia (and perhaps also the perceived threat of Muslim-encroachment)—the VOC attempted to establish contact with Chinese merchants in the
Ming Empire’s southern islands. Defeated by the Portuguese at Macao and the denied by the Ming at Penghu, the Dutch had to retreat further away from the Chinese coastline to the island *Ilha Formosa*, or “beautiful island,” so dubbed by the Portuguese when they first sailed past its shores a century ago. Although the VOC were not official diplomats, their monetary prowess led them to be vested with state-like powers such as the capacity to raise fleets of armed vessels and to establish oversea colonies. The Dutch government thus benefited from the economic capitals brought in by VOC without bearing responsibility for the war and exploitation wrecked in their wake. As was the case with the Kingdom of Middag, the Dutch did not conquer and occupy the entire island of Taiwan, but merely established settlements and cities that comprise of present day Tainan. Their colonial project was driven by profit and religious fervor rather than conquest and expansion (though violence and control were certainly not absent from the picture).

Granted, in their colonial enterprise, the Dutch did bring one significant change to Formosa. Propelled by efforts to promote trade relations with the indigenous people and to convert the local population to christianity, the Dutch missionaries studied Austronesian Taiwanese languages extensively, especially the language of Siraya, then commonly spoken by the plains tribes. Through transcribing and translating the local tongues, the Dutch inadvertently introduced the Latin alphabet to the Austronesian peoples. So successful was this development of the Sirayan language that decades later, contractual leases signed between the Qing government and the Taiwanese could still be found written in Siraya with Latin letters. (Adelaar 9) Even though Siraya eventually disappeared from the island, the incorporation of Western alphabets into indigenous culture and society (and Christianity along with it) remain lasting marks that testify the significance of foreign influences in the changing face of Taiwan.
As the Dutch colony eventually stabilized, and the indigenous people proved less willing to cooperate and till the lands than is strictly profitable, the Dutch hired and transported more Chinese laborers from southern provinces of Guangzhou (the Hakkas) and Fujian (the Hokkiens) to farm and cultivate the sugarcane fields. The news of rising immigrant population in Taiwan drew more and more Chinese settlers to the island, until it finally triggered a crucial turn of events for the Taiwanese population. Koxinga, also known as Zheng Chenggong, the son of a Chinese pirate-merchant-warlord, drove out VOC from their colony in 1662.

The triumph of Koxinga, though widely celebrated in Taiwan today, lasted but a couple of decades. While he established what he called the Empire of Dongning on top of the previous Dutch Colony, Koxinga was soon vanquished by the Qing Empire in 1683, ending his rule in southern Taiwan. The Qing, fearing that the island may become a rebellion base for future dissidents, decided to officially bring Taiwan under its fold. The island was for the first time on written record named as Taiwan, possibly derived from the name of an indigenous tribe Taivoan (大武壟) on the western part of the island, and also from Qing records of “big circle” (dayuan, 大員).

In order to bolster the fact that the island is now part of the great Chinese Empire, the imperial court order the establishment of Imperial Examination (keju) institutions on Taiwan. The keju, a nationally standardized test, intimately intertwines academic merit with political advancements, and promises governing positions to anyone who could succeed in the exam. There establishments taking root in Taiwan materializes the literal inscription of Chinese language, culture, philosophy, and values into the island. However, there was a catch. Due to Taiwan’s peripheral status, examinees of the keju system believed that they would have an easier
time passing in Taiwan than elsewhere in the densely populated and thus highly competitive mainland. This incentive alone prompted many youths to travel to the island for a shot at academic success, which would automatically translate into privileged positions in local governments and even the Qing imperial court.

This influx of Southern Chinese settlers in search of better economic and political opportunities established a major wave of Hakka- and Hokkien-speaking people who will soon intermingle with the Formosan plains tribes and emerge as the majority ethnic and linguistic communities of Taiwan. The following two hundred years of Qing control successfully instilled a sense of Chinese identity into the island, as well as the beginning of a belief of entitlement and primordial connection to the land for the Han-Chinese settlers along the coastlines. Unlike the Dutch who came for profit and Koxinga who regarded Taiwan as a temporary base, the Han settlers are here to stay. For the first time, Han people considered Taiwan as their home.

At the same time, the political landscape of East Asia was dramatically changing at the hands of Occidental Imperial interference. While Commodore Matthew Perry forced an end to Meiji Japan’s seclusion policy, prompting Western technology to penetrate into mainland Japan, an alliance of the British and French empires had similarly humiliated the Qing dynasty in the Second Opium War, leaving the two Asian nations in shock and in desperate need to redeem their political dignity. Unresolved tension soon catalyzed into the Sino-Japanese War, which erupted under the pretext of a fight over trading rights with Joseon-era Korea.

April 17th, 1985, the Qing Empire admitted defeat to the militarily Westernized Japan, and ceded over three pieces of territory to the Meiji government, amongst them: Taiwan. Nearly
two hundred years of Chinese rule has now ended. The island entered a new phase of its history: Japanese colonization.

It might now be worthy to note that at this point in history, Japanese writing still consisted largely of Chinese characters, a cultural borrowing since the Tang dynasty, prevalent particularly in poetry and official registers of legislative writing. The characters would of course be read in Japanese, yet it is not dissimilar to how the Chinese language itself functions, where each province practices different pronunciations of a common written text. This situation is known as diglossia, where a language maintains distinct systems for the spoken and written versions of itself. Although the entire Empire circulated one singular, shared, standard script of Chinese characters, the sheer size of the Empire almost necessitates the fact that each province would have their own language or “dialect” with which to read the writing.

What are widely known today as “dialects” of Chinese are in fact mutually unintelligible codes that also commonly differed in grammatical structures and vocabulary. Furthermore, today’s Taiwanese Hokkien and Taiwanese Hakka are merely subcategories of Min and Hakka that are on par with other provincial languages such as Yue (Cantonese), Wu (Shanghainese), and Mandarin (Pekinese), all of them mutually incomprehensible in oral speech. In this regard, one might easily confuse Japanese as simply another “dialect” of Chinese.

The Japanese certainly took advantage of this commonality in writing characters to implement government and policies in Taiwan. In fact, Taiwanese historian Liao Ping Hui writes:

“Japanese colonizers in Taiwan often invoked their common cultural roots, highlighting the fact that the Japanese and the Taiwanese shared the same language and ethnicity. As a result, not only did Taiwanese identities—cultural, ethnic, and national—waver between Chinese and Japanese, but the mixed reactions to the Japanese colonial legacy
continue to be evident in local politics as well as in cultural production[.]” (Liao 2, emphasis mine)

As Liao describes, the Japanese rulers consciously drew from the ostensible similarities they had with Taiwan’s previous rulers to legitimize their takeover. One might then question why the Japanese bothers to pay so much attention to Taiwan at all. Pragmatically, what Taiwan offered to Japan was a geographically strategic stronghold that provides access to Southeast Asia. Yet symbolically, Taiwan also represents Japan’s very first colonial project, whose success may elevate Japan’s status as a nation, to extract Japan from the subclass of Asian states and enter the higher ranks of Occidental Empires.

Much like the Qing Empire (and any sensible colonizers), the Japanese government established civic laws and implemented numerous language policies to concretize their ideological claims and to legitimize their rule of Taiwan. Amongst the most significant was the introduction of Japanese as the island’s *kokugo* (国語), or national language. Though classical Chinese had been the common written language throughout the Chinese Empire for millennia, it was rather thought of as something passed through the bloodline of the people, thus tied to culture and ethnicity, and not necessarily linked to the notion of state or nation. The label of a national language carries a completely different weight; it is a conspicuous shift of alliance from kinship to kingship, a constant reminder of foreign conquest and defeat.

Proliferating language schools eventually disseminated across the island, raising a generation of ethnically-Han Taiwanese children who had the capacity to participate in public education with the Japanese students. By the beginning of WWII, the Japanese Rule in Taiwan further encouraged citizens to change their own names in the census from its original language into Japanese, symbolically renouncing a past heritage and donning a new identity, and indirectly
enforcing loyalty amongst military forces recruited from Taiwan. Unfortunately, this generation did not survive for long. August 15, 1945, Emperor Hirohito announced defeat of Japan over national radio. Defeated in WWII, Shōwa Japan relinquished control over Taiwan, and the island was subsequently handed over by the approval of United Nations to the then governing party of China: the Nationalist Chinese Party (a.k.a. Kuomintang, hereafter KMT).

The unruly administration established by the KMT immediately exploded into unprecedented bloodshed. Disillusionment amongst the Taiwanese population over the corrupt rule of the new government soon developed into resentment towards mainland Chinese immigrants who recently arrived on the island with the KMT. An extreme language disparity became apparent: local dialects of Hokkien and Hakka could not be understood by the Mandarin-speaking KMT. Furthermore, an entire generation of intellectuals and elites brought up in Japanese were instantly dismissed by the Mandarin-speaking KMT government and derailed by Chinese newcomers as traitors and cowards, brainwashed and enslaved by the Japanese Empire. Meanwhile, uneducated farmhands and fishermen from China were promoted as mayors, generals, and directors of educational institutions without any necessary qualification apart from family ties with the KMT and the ability to speak Mandarin. Tension erupted into what would later be known as the February 28th Incident, when Taipei policemen confronted an old peddler woman illegally selling cigarettes in a park, and accidentally shot and killed a spectator at the scene. What followed the next day were mass protests on the streets of Taipei against the intolerable treatment of local Taiwanese population and horrendous corruption of the government. Armed policemen arrived at the scene, and emptied their guns into the crowd. The following days, violent attacks broke out throughout the island: Taiwanese people sought out
mainland Chinese immigrants, whoever did not speak Hokkien nor Japanese, and brutally beat them without discrimination.

The KMT dispatched ships and ships of military troops from mainland China to suppress “rebellious uprisings” in Taiwan; upon disembarking, and under the impression that the island is infested with violent mobs and independentists, soldiers shot civilians on sight, swept across the island, and executed any Hokkien and/or Japanese speakers who could be suspicious of rebellious intent. An entire generation of doctors, lawyers, authors, intellectuals and artists all evaporated, disappeared into thin air. Thus began an era of White Terror, a military dictatorship where the KMT transformed the mindset and worldview of an entire people through force and language reforms.

When my mother described the linguistic environment she grew up in, it was without nostalgia or remorse, but simply recollecting pieces of the past. Born immediately after the February 28 incident, my parents’ generation was thus surveilled under the Chinese Nationalist Party’s most suppressive atmospheres; in attempt to eradicate any Japanese influences on the island after fifty years of colonial rule, no one was allowed to speak or write in Japanese, and in order to unite the “Chinese” people as one nation, all indigenous languages and regional Taiwanese dialects were forbidden in public. Children caught speaking Hokkien and Hakka at school were fined with money and forced to wear wooden sign boards on their necks that says “I do not speak dialects,” until they in turn can catch other children slipping into their mother tongues at school. The KMT has effectively established a Foucauldian panopticon, where the surveilled subjects themselves became the very instruments of surveillance.
And thus, despite my parents’ childhood in southern farmlands and villages that spoke Taiwanese Hokkien amongst themselves, they became bilingual by necessity under a government controlled by Mandarin speakers. I was brought up thus in one of many Taiwanese households where the grandparents speak Taiwanese Hokkien and Japanese, the parents speak Taiwanese Hokkien and Mandarin, and the children speak only Mandarin.

When I moved to Shanghai at 10 years old, I realized for the first time that my Mandarin was considered accented, deviant, and improper; it was an accent that emerged when the Chinese Nationalist Party forcefully transitioned Hokkien-speaking communities to Mandarin. Without knowing it, I had spoken a tongue wherein lived the shadows of my ancestors. And yet after 8 years in Shanghai, even that was lost.

Today, this question of a national language continues to plague the Taiwanese psyche, in search of an identity and culture that they could claim as their own. The happy coincidence where the French living in France speaks French unfortunately does not apply to this island: Taiwanese, a language that nowadays largely refers to Taiwanese Hokkien, is disappearing rapidly from the island. The dominant and national language of the island is replaced by a language internationally known as Chinese, which represents not only the spoken code but evokes also a geographical place and a nostalgic history that has overtime become a site of unresolved conflict and trauma. The dissonance and dis-identification with Chinese compounded by the disuse and unfamiliarity with Taiwanese in effect assail residents of the island from both sides, torn by the perceived necessity to choose one side. And yet, perhaps we might open further discussions in asking, if the very fluidity and multilingualism of the island could not be part and parcel of an authentic Taiwanese identity.
Chapter 2: Translators of the Spirit

—Language and Religion Beyond the Present and Living

“It is because you do not know the subject enough. When clapping the hands, the gods will guide us to be closer to them. To sincerely pray to the gods is to reach the state of unity with the gods. Ancient worshipping ceremony represents this ideal of unity. This is how the ceremony begins. The unity of religion and politics is the foundation of the imperial politics. Our team members get to learn about the Japanese spirit from the clapping ritual, and try hard to experience it. Taiwanese youths rarely get to have this kind of experience in the past.”

“Right!”

“True! I did not know there is such a method to train imperial subjects.”

“Not a method. It is a path we must take.”

--The Volunteer (1941), CHOU Chin-Po

Japanese Shintoism features abundant rituals that have come to be viewed generally in Japan as more a cultural practice rather than organized religious beliefs. It is valued for its ability to mobilize people on special holidays and its capacity to instill in its practitioners a sense of shared identity through synchronized actions and prayers that unroll during the rituals, such as, in the above quote, the clapping of hands. In a colonial context, it is the perfect tool to indoctrinate colonized subjects with ideologies of divine unity, particularly in regards to nationhood. I remember that the museum I used to intern for in Taipei had one of their buildings located in a camphor factory complex that operated during the Japanese era. In the central courtyard, there was a small mound of earth, upon which used to stand a shintoist shrine for the factory workers until it was destroyed by the Chinese Nationalists. In Tainan, far from the Nationalists in the
north, a shintoist shrine still stands today, preserved in its original state atop the roof of the first ever department store in Taiwan, built by the Japanese. The proliferation of such religious sites parallels the fate of the Japanese language; the Chinese Nationalists eradicated usage of the Japanese language as eagerly as they did architectural artifacts, and the remaining shrine atop the department store—dedicated in plain air to animist spirits now long forgotten—is but one example of the empty shells from an generation’s memory of cultural unity and assimilation.

Religion, in this state, functions more than a system of values, or a set of divine laws that dictate the appropriate moral behaviors, but indeed roots itself in the very material and mechanical aspects of everyday life, around which a people could organize and habituate their lives. Ironically, none of my grandparents were swept off by shintoism in their time. My father’s parents came from devote Protestant families, while my mother’s parents were pious Buddhists who erected altar tables for bodhisattvas in lieu of China’s common practice of ancestral icons. In addition, all four of them practice their religions in Taiwanese Hokkien. The few memories I retained from my childhood include saying grace with my paternal grandmother before a meal, and praying for safety from Gautama Buddha before leaving for school with my maternal grandfather. Yet the presence of Hokkien in my life seems to falter and stop outside of my grandparents’ households, and beyond their religion’s sphere of influence. The following chapter seeks to make sense of Hokkien’s enduring religious function in my life as a non-speaker, as well as its relegation to a private, spiritual sphere for older generations in my family.

The only times my parents spoke to me in Hokkien unprompted were in the presence of religious sites and during ritual ceremonies. I remember the temple by my childhood home, a small local establishment that houses miniature idols of thọo-tē-kong, the Lord of the Soil and
the Ground\textsuperscript{1}. I remember passing by it every night when my mother takes me home from my grandparents place, imitating her gestures as she performs small prayers and bows before moving on our way. I would be talking in Mandarin about things that happened in pre-K or what we were reading in the English academy, all the way until we reached the night market where vendors hollered in Hokkien, before rounding the corner of a small alleyway to meet the temple, the burnt smell of incense mingling in the air with the sweetness of peanut powder and the bitterness of grass jelly. My mother would explain to me in Hokkien how to join the palms of my hands, how to close my eyes, how to bow my head. I would learn how to ask for protection in Hokkien, to be later repeated in front of Buddhist shrines, christian tombs, and ancestral altars; it will remain the only prayer I know to this day.

Just as a language can be invested with intellectual ideologies, it can also be imbued with intimate emotions, private, and individual, and visceral. To my family and many others, Hokkien is inexplicably tied to their religious and spiritual beliefs, the tongue which conducts the prayers before leaving for work, the enthused gratitude during ritual sacrifices, the whispers in a moment of weakness. Such religious functions being bound to a single tongue is clearly emblematic of the language’s significance in an environment as linguistically diverse as Taiwan. Religion, after all, plays an undeniable role in most if all human societies. American anthropologist Clifford Geertz indeed argues that religion acts beyond a simple mean to fill in the gaps where science fails to explain the cosmos, but also serves as a tool to maintain social order. From “Religion as a Cultural System,” a chapter in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz writes:

\textsuperscript{1} Transcribed in Mandarin as 土地公 (*Tudigong*), the pronunciations in Taiwanese Hokkien may also vary depending on the region of the island, a common variation being thó-ti-kong. A Taoist/folk deity representing the ground and soil, his followers provide offerings and prayers on a regular basis in exchange for success and protection over all endeavors carried out on a particular piece of land (土地).
“Whether one sees [belief systems] as synoptic formulations of the character of reality or as templates for producing reality with such a character seems largely arbitrary, a matter of which aspect, the model of or model for, one wants for the moment to bring into focus.” (Geertz 95. Original emphasis.)

Here, Geertz offers us a seemingly paradoxical way to look at the relationship between religion and reality: either as 1) a synthesis of people’s understanding of the world, that is to say, a people’s attempt to rationalize and systematically categorize each and every phenomenon that occurs in this world, seemingly unprompted by human thought or action; or 2) indeed the very matrix and prototype of reality based upon which a people will attempt to structure and organize their everyday experiences. For not only do religious systems lay claims to solving problems, they often also create them, producing the sins and virtues upon which practitioners fixtate and revolve.

Geertz goes on to posit that in viewing religion as a mechanism for social control, its function appears to be staving off the constant and imminent threat of chaos, to keep at bay a potential breakdown of social order. Namely, that religion must persistently make attempts to cope with the “bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox,” which present themselves as “radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can […] orient ourselves effectively within it.” (Geertz 100)

Looking at my family’s language practices across various forms of ancestor worship, it hits me with realization that their stubborn usage of Hokkien in religious practices belie a reliance on traditions and tongues passed down from their ancestors to understand a largely unaddressed trauma of colonial history and state violence, clinging onto whatever remains from their previous way of life.
When my father hadn’t yet sold his car in Taipei to afford a new one in Shanghai, we used to drive up the mountain to see his parents’ tombs every summer. We would not speak throughout the two hour climb, partly because I was always car sick from the twisting roads, partly because the destination weighed heavy on their tongues in the small enclosed vehicle. At the summit lied a Presbyterian burial ground, a green slope of black marble tombstones and white holy crosses, a ground reserved only for those who were baptized before death. Our family grave waited beyond several flights of stairs; it is where my father’s parents and his mother’s mother rest eternally, and where one day his spouse and children and his children’s children will be buried as well, the idea being, of course, that they would all be baptized Christians. He’d replace the withered flowers, and sometimes he burned incense, even though that is not the Christian way. Invariably, he’d want us to stand in front of the tomb stone, and bow our heads. He would address his parents and grandmother in Hokkien, the only language they had in common. He would thank them for watching over us for the past year, and tell them his family is happy and well. He would explain future plans and aspirations that felt especially difficult, and ask for particular guidance and protection. Years later, I would return to the tomb without my father; his sister would take up his role instead, and recite passages from the Bible in Hokkien. I was unable to perform any complete prayers because I couldn’t speak this language of those who passed.

I also remember, in my maternal grandparents’ home, praying and bowing in the same manner to Buddhist idols on the altars. A row of a dozen ceramic idols stand atop a raised platform, before a red backdrop, illuminated with red bulbous lamps of various size. I could identify only Gautama Buddha in the center, flanked by two statuettes of The One with a
Thousand Arms and a Thousand Eyes, and spreading out into other variations of Guan Yin.\textsuperscript{2}. No bigger than 12 inches in height in reality, to my childhood perspectives they were impossibly tall and unreachable. In front of them, an incense burner sat in the middle of the table, always with half-burned or burning incense, smoke rising above and reaching the altar. Ritual instruments such as the wooden fish and standing bells sat orderly on the edge, readily accessible to be performed. The rituals would begin with my grandparents, \textit{ah-gong} and \textit{ah-ma}, reciting sutras that were transliterated from sanskrit, sometimes hours on end. I remember thinking of the sutras as magic spells, a language of the enlightened and transcended beings whose words and forms are impenetrable to us, for even \textit{ah-gong} and \textit{ah-ma} could not decipher them for me, and though I could read out the transliterated chinese characters I could no more derive meaning from them than I could from tea leaves in a cup. It was a system of codes functional only in the realm of religion and ritual.

Through time, Hokkien came to occupy the same space for me as Sanskrit seemingly did for \textit{ah-gong} and \textit{ah-ma}. It was the language of the spiritual, the language I hear in Confucian shrines where parents pray for their children’s academic success, the language I see on television where \textit{diviners}\textsuperscript{3} would fall into a trance during folk festivals and transmit the divine messages of heavenly beings to our mortal ears. It was a language in which I could passively interpret and intercept, yet could not participate in, what I thought of as the only way to communicate with the dead and the divine. For the longest time I believed ghosts and spirits could only speak in

\footnote{\textsuperscript{2} Originating from India as Avalokiteśvara, Guan Yin or Guanshiyin (or Kannon in Japan) has come to represent all compassion in Buddhist teachings, and is also sometimes known in English as the Mercy Goddess. It should be noted however that this deity is understood to transcend the limits of gender.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{3} 乩童, or \textit{Tongji}, are divinely touched individuals in Chinese and Taiwanese folk religions, traditionally children who could be possessed by the gods, then falling into a trance where they jolt and dance in an aggressive fashion, becoming a vehicle for the deities to speak through their mouths.}
Hokkien. And since all of my ancestors spoke Hokkien, it wasn’t necessarily untrue under the framework of ancestor worship. It was as if speaking this tongue displaces us spatially and temporally, to the spirit world that shadows and parallels ours, and to a primordial past from whence China first sprung its 5000 year root, and where gods walked upon lily pads wherever their feet touched this land.

To a certain extent, this relegation of Hokkien in selective parts of our lives stands true for my parents as well. The imposition of a national language (Mandarin) by the KMT4 did not erase Hokkien from the private sphere so perfectly. For Hokkien-speaking communities, the dialect retained its function in the religious register and its prevalent usage in quotidienn conversations. Though barred from education and governmental transactions, Hokkien persisted and permeated throughout the dealings with the sanctified and the holy, much like the burning of incense that inserted itself across the Christian, Buddhist, and Taoist practices in my childhood.

The significance of Hokkien placed in spiritual practices in Taiwan is then directly tied to a social and cultural response to the KMT’s brutal repression of pre-1945 (and pre-1895) Taiwanese traditions. Both Hokkien and folk religion were spaces of rebellion and preserves the remnants of an imagined Taiwanese identity. The result was my generation of people losing access to an entire tradition of this spiritual ontology.

The perspective through which I wish to examine this linguistic phenomenon is twofold: 1) the social implications involved in the relegation of a mother-tongue to the abstract and incorporeal realm of spiritual belief, particularly within a cultural system emphasizing ancestor

4 Governing party of the Republic of China immediately after Taiwan’s transfer of power from the Japanese Empire. Often referred to as the Chinese Nationalist Party, it is responsible for the Feb 28 Massacre that wiped out a generation of Taiwanese scholars and social elites and the subsequent period of dictatorship under martial law.
worship, as well as 2) the anthropo-psychological diagnosis extracted from the manifesting symptoms of a society on the brink of decaying order (wrought by the KMT), and the subsequent auto-prescription of religion as adopted instinctively by a culture to self-medicate and postpone a succumbing to chaos.

Culture, as defined by Clifford Geertz, is the “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” (Geertz, “Interpretation of Culture.” 89) The concept of symbols is paramount here, as it denotes any vehicle for a particular conception, the signpost that is to be distinguished from its referent.

Carrying over, Geertz understands religion as a set of symbols (including conceptions and rituals) which order our lives and give them meaning. In his words, a religion is:

“(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” (Geertz, 94)

What Geertz calls moods and motivations are essentially one’s tendencies to perform certain acts or have certain feelings, differentiated by the ends with reference to which we are able to make them meaningful: motivations in terms of consummations while moods in terms of sources. (Geertz, 97) Contrary to previous theories that permeated the field of Anthropology in the 19th century, Geertz argues that the purpose of religion stands not merely as an instrumentalized mechanism to facilitate social control and manipulate the economy of bodies⁵, but rather it is the very moods and motivations which its system of symbols induces that allows

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⁵ Notes from “Spiritual Economics and Bodily Politics,” a lecture on France and the Long Medieval Ages given by S. Romi Mukherjee at NYU Paris on Sep 24, 2014.
men to function in a society. According to Geertz, a person’s cognitive abilities reach their limits at three points: analytic capacities (uninterpretability of a reason behind destiny), powers of endurance (the will to survive life’s inevitable suffering), and moral insight (inability to reconcile the existence of evil). Beyond these limits, chaos threatens to penetrate the minds and lives of men. Religion, then, serves to instill a sense of order and comprehensibility that keeps the chaos at bay.

Because men cannot deal with the chaos and existential randomness of life, religious symbols then move beyond realities of everyday life to correct and complete such realities. Religious symbols effectively bestow meaning to the irregularities of life such as natural disasters, death, famine, war, etc., and subsequently deny that chaos is an inalienable and immutable component of the world.

To Geertz, religion serves both as a model of reality and a model for behavior, which further engenders social and psychological consequences. On the one hand, religion renders social relationships graspable, while on the other, religion provides ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience is rendered meaningful. According to Geertz, a cultural understanding of religion is thus essential to understanding the ordinary, common sense perspective of a society, conceived equally by the set of symbols which comprises religion.

“The religious response to this suspicion is in each case the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience.” (Geertz, 108)

Ancestor worship becomes all the more salient in a context where an entire people are systematically forced to forget about their past...
Ah-ma now lied in bed speechless, motionless and staring ahead across space, sometimes across time. Alzheimer’s took away what cognitive ability my grandmother had, and she calls me by the name of my 35 year-old brother when I try to hold her hands in mine. Dust had collected on the altar table, coating the standing bells, mixing in with cinders of incense, sitting on the tips of the nose of buddha statues. My aunts moved ah-ma out of her own bedroom to the maid’s living quarters where she could be better taken cared of— displaced in space and time.

Old-timey Japanese pop music played from a bluetooth speaker that my aunt placed there, when she visits ah-ma once per week. She claimed my grandmother used to sing to herself in Japanese when she was younger, in the morning, combing her hair, tucking her children to sleep. I remember ah-ma tried teaching me the Japanese alphabet when I was little and that she had a Disney’s Peter Pan story book in Japanese somewhere in her possession. I sat with her a little longer and recognized the song playing in the background, realizing that it actually debuted when I was 8 or 7. My grandmother stared at me listlessly.

I found my aunt’s DJing skills ridiculous. Ah-ma could not have known this song from her youth. Was this song, simply by virtue of being sung in Japanese, enough or even appropriate to bring comfort to her present state of mind? I saw in my aunt the same tendencies in my mother: engaging with the past only superficially in form, compromising with half-truths, unable and unwilling to investigate what transpired prior to Retrocession⁶. Perhaps it is the case that my parents’ generation has a much more stable relationship to their identity than I do, and that in its

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⁶ Retrocession Day (台灣光復日) refers to the transfer of power from Shōwa Japan to the Republic of China in 1945, seen by the ROC government as a recovery of lost territory, a return to the light. This transference of territories was spearheaded by Chiang Kai-shek, president of the ROC, during the Cairo Conference with Roosevelt and Churchill in 1943.
early stages the Republic of China allowed little room to question the legitimacy of a Chinese Nation. Yet looking at my grandmother, sitting in an invisible shroud that hides her from our currents of time and space, I realized the remaining clues we have with the past are slowly vanishing as a generation. And still, I could not touch her, no more than the anachronistic music loitering in her space.

A majority of academic texts I’ve read locates Taiwan on the border of Chinese and Japanese Empires; some argue its people move between the two identities, some say they are stuck in the middle. My grandmother now seemed subject to three generational projections of identity that places her on different points of the axis. Ah-ma’s instinctive need to share with someone this language she learned and lost. My aunt’s reductionist idea of her mother’s relationship with Japanese song and my mother’s insistence on ignorance. My own directionless search for a meaningful lineage, perhaps not free of exotification and romanticizing the shape and sound of colonial history. It is in these moments of loss that I doubt my ancestors could really be watching over me from the beyond. The entire collective of ancestor spirits in Taiwan did not prevent Japanese subjugation, did not thwart the February 28 massacre that dragged out into 30 days. My grandfather’s spirit could no more answer the questions I have today.

The indonesian housekeeper my aunts hired to take care of ah-ma would sometimes rummage through drawers and cabinets in the disused and cluttered bedrooms, either under my aunts’ orders or accompanied by them closely behind, in attempt to scavenge whatever usable items in the ruining apartment. I found in their wake today a small paper slip, abandoned on the floor of my grandfather’s bedroom, where I have been staying every summer since my grandfather had passed away. It was a photocopy of ah-ma’s national identity card, printed in
double sides. The ID proclaims her a citizen of the Republic of China in bold letters beneath a ROC flag, the words overlaid further with a stamped sigil. It lists her birthdate, her hometown, her current address. I found also, listed in black and white, the name of her parents: my great-grandfather, Jumping Zhang, and his wife, Lotus Root Chen-Zhang. I recalled the gifts my mother’s relatives used to send us each year from the south, mostly consisting of powdered lotus roots that we could stew into a porridge-like dessert (my mother’s words that we were farmhands ringed in my ears). We had lost contact with them since my parents and I moved to Shanghai. The photocopy sits now next to me on my desk in Brooklyn. I don’t know what to do with it.

I instinctively distrust how my mind pronounces lotus root in Taiwanese Hokkien.

Because that’s the impasse. Each generation of my family had lived in a different dominant language, from Hokkien to Japanese to Mandarin to English, passing through drastically different maps of cultural referents at the speed of signing conference papers and treaties. The generational divide becomes akin to barriers of translation, the inability of words to be ferried across tongue to tongue, teeth to teeth, words as signposts as vehicles as trapped spirits
unable to penetrate the veil. This wrinkled scrap of paper next to me felt like the only tangible link to the past I could touch, the roots of an identity nobody knows how to define... found now, in something left haphazardly in my grandfather’s room where even ah-ma’s consciousness had fled, something I could seemingly decipher and understand. A message. I recalled suddenly that I did not have a last word with my grandfather before he passed away. And here is a letter silently addressed, to me.
Chapter 3: Imagining the Self

—Constructed Narratives in Still Images and Oral History

Now, the Japanese becomes the Republic of China, and is said to be the “motherland” of Taiwanese people. The sign of the Office of the Taiwan Governor-General is replaced by that of the Provincial Government. What remains unchanged is Taipei Prison - it is still set up for Taiwanese people.

—The Burial of the Wronged Dead in 1947, Part II (1995), Li Chiao

In the above extract, Li puts his finger on the heart of colonial tactics—vehicilutaing language in the interest of politics. Language usages inevitably reflect politics, and the renaming of a nation often symbolizes the shift in political paradigms, whereas the designation of some faraway land as the “motherland” spins narratives and ideologies into everyday conversation. What is “going home?” What is the name of home if the only time we ever see it is attached to a prison cell? Where are we returning to everyday after work if the true home is supposedly this landmass we have never set foot on in our life? The most invisible and insidious of colonial strategies is the curation of language to construct meaning, brandishing poetics and politics to till the colonial mind.

I think of museums: the pinnacle of Western imperialism. Today, museums remain in the once-colonized spaces, now run by the locals. Here then lies a potential to turn the weaponized language back at the colonizers, to take control of history and write ourselves back into the narrative. Fanon’s writings on combat literature typifies such engagements in decolonizing the
mind, while Myerhoff’s focus on the social function of narratives and rituals amplifies the salience of the stories we tell ourselves in shaping our own reality.

I will begin this discussion with a field report of my visit to the National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTH), situated a five-hour train ride away from the capital city of Taipei. NMTH is the only museum in Taiwan that focuses on the history that transpired within the geographic confines of the island, instead of an abstract history that supposedly befell an entire nation of people, and follows us no matter where we go. Traveling with my mother to her ancestral home, it felt to me almost like a pilgrimage.
Behind glass cases I saw photographs of young men and women, dressed in bland suits that seemed at once displaced and nostalgic. I could not touch them. The wall text next to me labeled them as prominent Taiwanese intellectuals during the third and final phase of Japanese colonization circa 1940s— in the back of my head I understood that their costumes marked doubly their assimilation into elite Japanese society as well as their literal embodiment of the Empire’s successful efforts in westernizing itself... the West being the only mode of modernization that its leaders understood. I read quietly a list of their publications, and a short description of the failed attempts to parley with the colonial occupation for an autonomous government, led by a local Taiwanese cabinet. It was also understood, however, that attempts to reconnect with Chinese intellectuals in the mainland had never truly subsided, and many people still secretly hoped for one day when they could return to the embrace of the fatherland, even go back in time to when the Qing dynasty hasn’t yet ceded Taiwan to Japan.

Ironically, despite the apparent flourishing of a (Chinese-)Taiwanese national consciousness in the 1940s, another group of Taiwanese gentries and social elites of that generation had adopted Japanese names, under a movement that aimed to manufacture colonial subjects loyal to the Japanese Emperor; I allowed myself to wonder what mine could have been.
A handful of cardboard cutouts lined up into a partition that divided the exhibition space, black and white portraits of strangers caught in the motion of crossing streets, moving forward, standing still: phantoms populating a space of recollection. Some of the figures were my height, my age; I did not recognize them. Yet clearly this museum expected me to re-cognize them. To rethink our own history, so to speak.

We dredge up version after version of nationalist fairy tales, permutations of the same national(ist) hero. Who made them? Who do they really stand for? So often these figures are invoked in contemporary debates as part of a Taiwanese nationalist legacy, to legitimize the latest efforts for Independence⁷. And yet standing here, facing the figures, their eyes are piercing

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⁷ The Taiwanese Nationalist movement attempts to maintain autonomy under the current government of Republic of China, and resists international pressures to assimilate into People’s Republic of China. The Taiwanese Independence movement seeks to formulate a new political identity that is independent of any denominations of China.
yet uncomprehending. Our contexts are completely alien. They pledge allegiance to a Chinese
dynasty that no longer exists. The warring polities now and before are incomparable. The
multitudes of factions cannot be untangled. (The quiet in the museum builds up.)

Later, I would ask my mother what my maternal grandparents’ and great grandparents’
Japanese names were during that era, knowing also that her family lived here in the south, before
my grandfather migrated to the capital city Taipei. She would respond, voice taught, that our
family were farmhands who were uneducated and barely spoke the Japanese language beyond
what necessities that colonial occupation had ingrained on them. We did not even live here in
this city Tainan. Instead, our lotus fields were farther south, shielded from direct contact with the
administration and control. Perhaps this is how our family survived one century of violence. My
mother laughed that I probably know more Japanese now than my great grandmother ever did.

I felt in my gut that she was lying. About her grandparents’ competency in Japanese, at
least. Like her sisters, my mother is prone to making up stories about the past, tailored so as to
not offend the current political paradigms, then retold again and again until the actual memories
of the event are fully replaced by memories of their recounting. Yet these stories, in effect,
become no different from reality. I am in no position to dismiss such recounts as invalid. Neither
am I exempt from this hereditary obsession with narratives, for it is exactly what I am doing right
now: crafting narratives of my history, my own identity, attempting to approach clarity through
combing and organizing my own words. Fanon would describe me as a colonized writer, so fully
immersed in Western culture, only now attempting to reconnect with his roots and rubbing
shoulders with his people. It is by no accident that the French word for ‘history’ and ‘narrative’ are both *histoire*.

Jewish-American anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, most known for her ethnographic film *Number Our Days* (1976), affirms the psychological power of narratives through her research in elderly communities. Interested in the construction of personal identity and what she calls the social drama, Myerhoff argues in her essay “Life History Amongst the Elderly,” that each person has the potential to become “active participants in their own history and provide their own sharp, insistent definitions of themselves and explanations for their destiny, past and future.” (Myerhoff 231) She goes on: “Then the subjects know that their knowing a component of their conduct. They assume responsibility for inventing themselves and yet maintain their sense of authenticity and integrity.” (Myerhoff 232, original emphasis.)

Myerhoff’s research subjects in Venice, California had used actual theater and wall murals to (re)produce their identities and control their public image. In the following chapter, I will argue that the Hokkien populace in Taiwan engages in a no less performative activity of self-invention through everyday narratives, mixed in with compulsory and compulsive amnesia. However, while the Venice elders strived to render themselves hypervisible to a rapidly changing world that threatens to forget them, Hokkien speakers strives instead to erase themselves completely from the public eye. Although my parents eagerly disparage Chinese Mainlanders who fled to Taiwan with the Nationalists in 1950, they also exclude themselves from any conversations on political or communal interests, refraining from overt forms of public expression, and eliding any ostentatious difference between *waishengren* (people from outside of the province of Taiwan) and *benshengren* (people from within the province of Taiwan). This
inability amongst *benshengren* to conceive of themselves as political agents reaches its zenith in 2016, when a film producer of Hakka origins, Chen, pretends to be Japanese in order to justify her involvement in a documentary on *wansei*, or Taiwanese-born Japanese. Fanon might coin this as a result of colonial brainwashing, where the colonized intellectual is induced into roleplaying as the colonizer, yet Chen was born decades after Japanese colonization had ended. What wound is she trying to heal through spinning this narrative? At whose hands did she suffer the colonial brainwashing? From whose mouths did she endure the psychological trauma?

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When I asked my father if his grandmother knew anything of a Taiwanese student society forming in Tokyo while she studied there in the early 1900s, he hastily chastised me. The whole exchange was conducted through text message and yet I could feel him looking over his shoulder. Our family would not be involved in any sort of politics, he insisted. Your great grandmother was a pious Christian who focused her life only in educating others. Why are you always looking for dangerous (read: political) information? You will do well not to meddle with politics.

It was a vehement denial, the same sort my mother would take up in clinging onto the semblances of peace and order, the opposite of what I felt today’s museums and journals and films were trying to do. While the cut-out figures bored their eyes into me, my father turned away.

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Summer of 2016, I came across a new vocabulary via the Internet: 灣生 (or *wansheng*, as I read it in Chinese), signifying Japanese nationals who were born in colonial Taiwan. Between
memorizing historical facts for my summer internship at the National Taiwan Museum and listening to Taiwanese punk rock on the bed of my then-boyfriend, perhaps I had instinctively recognized within *wansheng* the issues of country, of roots, and of home. Content at the time, I silently welcomed the generation of *wansheng* as another oddity produced by the specificities of our history, and didn’t pay much attention to whatever documentary and dialectics were being made of these people all over Facebook. Soon, as summer ends, my boyfriend will break up with me because my upbringing overseas made us “people from different worlds,” and I will be singled out during the internship’s performance showcase as an American who grew up in China.

In September I fled to Paris, where I could be safely foreign and ambiguously third-culture amongst other NYU students (too busy grappling with their own foreignizing experiences in France). I learned more about *wansheng*, which in fact came from the Japanese term 湾生 (or *wansei*, as pronounced in Japanese). 1945, after Harrison Truman effaced Hiroshima and Nagasaki with two atomic bombs, Shōwa Japan relinquished control over numerous territories, amongst them the island of Taiwan. All 284,000 Japanese nationals residing on the island (many of them *wansei*) were ordered to leave, an exodus not dissimilar to that in Algeria when the National Liberation Front gained independence from the French Fifth Republic in 1962. Families composed of Japanese colonials and ethnically Chinese or Austronesian spouses were broken apart; the enmity that the Republic of China cultivated towards Japan immediately after reclaiming Taiwan prevented *wansei* from visiting their birthplace for another 40 years.

A documentary called *Wansei Back Home* was then released in Taiwan in 2015, taking 12 years of preparation and production, which gathers and presents the life stories of several
wansei returning to Taiwan in search of lost relatives and childhood friends. *Wansei Back Home* in particular highlights the ostracization faced by wansei when they returned to an alien homeland that they did not recognize. Furthermore, surrounded by the lingering ideologies of national superiority and ethnic purism in mainland Japan, wansei found themselves the laughingstock of their neighbors because of their accents, their gaps in cultural capital, and their ineptitude in the highly structured Japanese socialization. It is this rejection from their supposed country people, perhaps, that brewed the wansei’s romantic ideals of Taiwan as their true motherland, a birthright regardless of their colonial relationship with the land and its people.

Clearly, it is also this universal feeling of adriftness that resonates with the Taiwanese public, starkly parallelling their current situation as the “Chinese Rejects” on international forums, ever since Republic of China (ROC) was voted out of the UN in 1971, replaced by People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Along with *Wansei Back Home* came the publication of a book under the same title, but with no direct correlations in content, authored by the documentary’s producer known as Tanaka Takashi. Tanaka claimed to be the granddaughter of a wansei woman, forcefully evicted from her childhood home of Taiwan in 1945. Tanaka had grown up in Japan, surrounded by nostalgic tales of Taiwanese landscape and its friendly people, which purportedly motivated her to produce *Wansei Back Home*, where she documents the visit of a dozen wansei back to their childhood haunts in Taiwan.

Suddenly, summer of 2016, a debacle sprung forth that flooded my social media. One after another, Taiwanese journalists debunked Tanaka’s claims as a wansei descendant, born in Japan and who only later in life decided to return to her roots in Taiwan. Media broadcasters
rushed to exposed Tanaka (belatedly) as Chen Hsuan-Ju, a Taiwanese woman raised in rural
Taiwan, born of Taiwanese parents and Taiwanese grandparents. This raised a plethora of
questions—could the documentary still hold any credibility? Why did Taiwanese media fail to
background check Chen? How did such a flimsy fabrication become so enticing to the Taiwanese
public that no one questioned it, and what are we to think of now about the public’s susceptibility
and gullibility towards crowd-manipulations on such a massive scale? For there was no doubt
that Chen, in her desire to portray the histories (histoire) of wansei, had constructed for herself a
similar narrative (histoire), ultimately losing touch on both fiction and reality.

The political context into which the documentary and the autobiography inserted
themselves is no doubt also notable as well: Taiwan in 2015 was caught in the middle of a new
round of presidential elections. The democracy was proposed with two women candidates who
represent respectively the movements for Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese independence.
With Wansei Back Home, a re-entry into the forays of Japanese colonial era could have
potentially served as an escape for those unable to choose between the two seemingly extremist
decisions. Affiliations and ties with Japan could pretend to an alternative in their imagination of
a future nationhood—after all, Taiwan abounded with wistful sentiments that the Japanese had
ruled Taiwan better than the Chinese, especially after the disillusionment post-February 28
Massacre. Tanaka’s fabrication, whether conscious or subconscious, made sense within a
collective Taiwanese psyche that had grown wary and suspicious of any dealing with the
Chinese.

More importantly, the Chinese language’s state of diglossia further contributes to the
Hokkien-Taiwanese’s fundamental disidentification with the Chinese Nationalists. I have
mentioned in earlier chapters that each province in China maintains their own dialect, with unique pronunciations for a universal Chinese script. This phenomenon likely occurred through time, as evidenced by the lingering presence of two registers within each dialect: the literary and the colloquial, which can be considered as further subsets of pronunciation in every dialect. While the colloquial is used for everyday life, the literary register is reserved for official purposes, such as reporting in the imperial court or reciting classical poetry. The literary is also the interface that different language groups use to converse with each other, whether in the government or in academia. In contemporary sinophone circles, Mandarin Chinese has completely replaced the social function of literary registers as a common tongue. The below table provides an example of the differences that can occur in Amoy, a Hokkien subdialect that closely resembles Taiwanese Hokkien. Linguist S. Robert Ramsey states in his book, *Languages of China* (1987): “Although all Chinese dialects have differences between reading and spoken vocabularies, nowhere are these differences so great as in Southern Min [aka. Hokkien]:” (109)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amoy literary</th>
<th>Amoy colloquial</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘yellow’</td>
<td>hōng²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘round’</td>
<td>wan²</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘shoes’</td>
<td>hai²</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘below’</td>
<td>ha⁶</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘boil’</td>
<td>hut⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘prostrate’</td>
<td>hōk⁷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘tile’</td>
<td>wa³</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘rain’</td>
<td>u³</td>
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This dramatic difference contributes to the sense of alienation among Hokkien speakers in relationship to a Mandarin speaking regime, whose pronunciation patterns more closely resembles the Amoy literary. The Hokkien’s ability to compartmentalize is exemplified in these two registers, clearly producing two separate aspects of a person’s identity: the public and the private. As such, while my parents could align their public face with the requirements of a Mandarin-speaking Nationalist government, they spouted their contempt freely in private. Ironically, this defeats the Nationalist’s purpose of creating unity and pan-Chinese patriotism amongst its subjects. The national language only covered up dissenting voices, yet did not resolve them. However, this did not solve the Hokkien’s dilemma, their inability to perform as political agents. Drawing back to *Wansei Back Home*, Chen’s adoption of or reversion into a Japanese identity fills in this gap of cultural-linguistic impotence, not only for Chen, but for an entire generation of non-Mandarin speakers. The total sense of betrayal from the unmasking of Tanaka only becomes more impactful.

We were fed a fantasy that informed us on our identity and relationship with the world, only to have it abruptly interrupted, a false image of ourselves broken and toppled over. While it may be tempting to argue that we as a society should extract ourselves from such dependence on fiction and narratives to conceptualize history and reality, Myerhoff made it clear that such ritualized creation of narratives perform significant amounts of work that, when utilized appropriately, has the potential to stabilize an entire community, their sense of purpose, and their relationship to the world.
Chapter 4: Speaking Taiwan

—Language Diversity as a Creative Source

… to be honest, we have never experienced wars, and we really know nothing about wars. However, we are children of the generations that have genuinely lived through wars. Our parents and grandparents have gone through the natural selection of wars. Whether they had to kill to survive, to beg and yield in disgrace to escape death, or to avoid killing with silence, hiding, lies, those were correct survival strategies. And only through those survival strategies that our parents have rightly chosen could we have eventually be brought into this world…

—Routes in the Dreams (2007), WU Ming-Yi,

In her most recent exhibition in Brooklyn, Taiwanese contemporary artist Shake (often stylized as SHAKE), titled her curation of videos and literary excerpts as the following:

“Re-Re-positioning the Present: An exhibition exploring the complex political reality of Taiwan.” Included in the pamphlet was a brief yet cutting statement on Taiwan’s history of exploitation:

“During a half-century of Japanese colonization from 1895-1945, Taiwan served as a base for Japan, and [a] place to maneuver to the south. After the end of World War II, the exiled government from China took over Taiwan. During the Cold War, Taiwan became part of the frontier for the US to fend off Communist Powers. As neoliberalism has arisen, the empire assumes yet another new face.”

— This is in reference to Shōwa Japan’s imperialist project: the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (大東亜共栄圏), an effort to emulate the Western colonial powers. Taiwan was a strategic base for Japan to advance further to the Pacific islands, including Hawaii. At its height, the Japanese Empire encompassed a portion of Inner Mongolia, Manchuria, Korea, Philippines, and the entirety of the Southeast Asian peninsula.
In one fell swoop, Shake condemns the alternating and seemingly never-ending series of subtle and insidious subjugations that the island and its people were (perhaps still are) subject to. This cry of injustice constitutes the foundation of most of Shake’s video installations, where she juxtaposes airborne shots of Taiwan’s topography with narrative voices that range from the song and chants of Taiwanese school children to political speeches and UN conference recordings. Shake understands a known but ineffable connection between a people, the language they speak, and the land they stand upon.

One video in particular explores the multitude of languages that exist on the island, and along with them the different epochs of political loyalties and economic interests bound to regimes that disembarked from the sea: like the island’s volcanic geology, its history is fraught with layers upon layers of violent sediments (read: bodies) buried and interred by their successors.

Shake’s “Our Suite de Danses” (2016) thus opens with a mid-shot centered on a class of secondary school students, all in uniform, standing in the middle of a rocky mountain valley. They begin dancing and singing in Chinese a monotonous rendition of a popular Japanese cartoon’s theme song\(^9\). What seems to be an innocuous version of *Welcome to Our Family* slowly dissolves into something more sinister, however, as one by one the students begin singing a different tune after each passing stanza. The knowing audience would already catch on the military rhythm and tone, until finally in unison, the performance transforms into a military

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\(^9\) The cartoon is called *Atashin’chi* (あたしんち), literally “my home” or “my family” in the feminine colloquial register. It is translated in Taiwan as 我們這一家, meaning “our home” or “our family.” The voice actress of the main protagonist gives her character, a middle-class housewife, a distinctive Taiwanese vernacular of Mandarin, an “accent” often considered as the language of the uneducated and lower-class citizens, also strongly associated with Chinese settlers who first came to the island prior to the Republic of China’s takeover.
demonstration of young soldiers incanting a Chinese war chant and engaging each other in battle, firing off imaginary guns. To be brief, the video then goes through a handful of other songs, including a vagabond’s ballad\textsuperscript{10} and a ceremonial song of harvest from one of Taiwan’s mountainous indigenous tribes. What are we to make of these young adults and their political allegiances, as they cycle through the languages of different epochs and times? At one point, in sync with the repeated thrusts of imaginary spears, the students invoked the famous Shakespearean line: “to be or not to be!” while the Chinese subtitles on the side translated it as 抵抗還是服從: “to resist or obey?”

Shake made a conscious choice with “Our Suite de Danses” to predominantly include music that are salient to the Chinese speaking communities in Taiwan, yet other video installations in the same exhibition present a cacophony of languages, each competing for time, space, and recognition. One voice sings softly an old tune of the plane aboriginal tribes who lived on the coasts when the first Chinese settlers arrived. After centuries, the plane peoples have all but disappeared. Their cultures submerged, or shifted or transformed into the ever-rising rivers of Hokkien culture and Hakka communities. Now, it is the Hokkien and the Hakka who are on the cusp of disappearance.

The theme of invasion and conquer is then clear: under subjugation and war, the only decision for civilians to make is either to assimilate into the prevailing culture or die a martyr for independence. Speaking it now, it really isn’t a choice after all; our ancestors have already chosen for us. We live on, thanks to their choices, but we inherit also the unspoken tremors, the

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\textsuperscript{10} Chyi Yu’s Olive Tree (1979), is a song that was censored by the KMT for 8 years after its release. The song sings from the perspective of Chinese diaspora who fled their country to avoid the communist regime, understanding that the old country no longer exists, no matter how adamantly the ROC government claims otherwise. The most famous lines from this song include: “do not ask me where I am from, my homeland is far away/ do not ask me why I wander, wander far away...”
hushed lips, the shame attached to mother tongues like umbilical cords and the fog already clinging about our faces, obscuring mirrors, choking our throats. To be or not to be? To move forward or move back?

Clearly, Shake refuses this amnesia of ancestral languages, choosing instead to quite literally breath life back into the tip of these tongues, pushing them to the forefront of their audience’s consciousness. Yet they are still faced with the same fundamental question: how could they claim Hokkien or Hakka as distinctly Taiwanese, uniquely apart from the Mandarin that “belongs” to (mainland) China?

Parallel case studies can be useful in examining and understanding Taiwan’s linguistic landscape today. *Linguistic Rivalries*, a book that looks at ideologies of language purism and linguistic nationalism in Quebec’s Tamil diaspora, artfully offers readers a set of lenses that can render the image of Taiwan into focus. Using the 1995 Quebec Referendum as a backdrop, a controversial event that decided the province’s independence (a struggle often construed as a linguistically organized), linguistic anthropologist Sonia Das examines the phenomenon where Sri Lankan Tamil communities claim for themselves a “Written Tamil,” while Indian Tamil communities adopt “Spoken Tamil” as their own. *Linguistic Rivalries* especially underlines the relationship between linguistic and national identity, suspicions towards code-mixing and its alleged potential to bastardize a culture, thus examining language both as a subject of contention and a tool in the production of ideologies.

In Das’s example, Sri Lankan Tamil communities claim a more immediate relationship with antiquity through their preserved usage of “Written Tamil,” often in the process disparaging Indian Tamil communities for “corrupting” their “Spoken Tamil” with foreign load words.
Through empirical data collection and scientific analysis, however, Das uncovers the fact that the two groups simply speak dialects of the same language from two different regions in South Asia; any claim to difference was simply that—an effort to differentiate oneself from the other. According to Das, the question of political loyalty lies at the heart of this dispute. With such a political climate in Quebec that hyperfixates on language as a marker of identity, nationalists and philologists develop tendencies to equate linguistic purity with intellectual superiority, elitism, and racial purity. In territories wrought by conflict, language ideologies further run the risk of being instrumentalized by political leaders to claim ancestral territory, cultural inheritance, and political dominance.

Within a nationalist narrative, the parallels between Tamil communities in Quebec and Han-Chinese communities in Taiwan then emerge throughout recurring themes of authenticity and patriotism. Like the Tamils caught between the French and the English in Quebec, Chinese speaking Taiwanese people find themselves lost in internationally rising oceans of nationalism and ethnocentrism, thus falling prone to imbuing language with ideas of uniqueness, primordiality, and divine poetics that legitimize a people’s claims to nationhood, as well as keeping at bay the constant fear of impurity, inauthenticity, and disloyalty.

In Taiwan, ideologies of purism also run unchecked, often in service of ungratified urges for nationalism and recognition. The rising prominence of Mandarin Chinese as a unifying language came only at the turn of the twentieth century, a few decades later (and perhaps in response) to the rise of linguistic nationalism in the Western World, where nation states had already begun imposing Standardized Languages as the unifying vehicle across diverse ethnic circles. Much like how an Italian language has never quite existed, and what we know today as
French was really just the elite tongue of the Parisian island, there had not been a common “Chinese” language that traveled across the Chinese Empire. While Classical Chinese circulated as a literary text that transported imperial orders, philosophical texts, and poetic writings, there did not exist a standardized pronunciation. Even the learned cultural elites in the imperial court would often read Classical Chinese characters out loud in their own regional dialects, each of them dramatically different and mutually unintelligible across the empire’s vast landscapes. It wasn’t until 1909 when the Qing dynasty decided to impose the Beijing dialect called Mandarin as the official language, codified as Guoyu (or “national language”). The practice was carried on with much more success (and force) in 1911 by Qing’s successor, the Republic of China, and then once again by People’s Republic of China, who took power in 1949 and renamed Guoyu as Putonghua (or “common speech”).

Attempts to codify Hokkien into written form have consistently run into the dilemma where the grammar and corresponding vocabulary are simply too similar to Modern Standard Mandarin that when written in Chinese characters, it is extremely difficult to tell the two apart, and thus Hokkien cannot seemingly be distilled nor its essence extracted from the corpus of Modern Standard Mandarin. (They are both, afterall, Chinese.) More contemporary experiments have tried incorporating roman alphabets alongside Chinese characters, transcribing colloquial sounds that have no literary equivalent, preserving thus an oral quality in the writing; yet this version was not considered pure, authentic, nor faithful to traditional times.

Along this line, some scholars have even claimed that Hokkien pronunciations are closer than Mandarin to how the classical poets of Tang and Song have spoken their now canonical verses--effectively elevating the status of Hokkien as a truer inheritor of ancient Chinese culture,
a closer portal to fantasies of primordiality and thus immortality, further bolstered by Taiwan’s continued usage of Traditional Chinese characters, at times congratulated as “unadulterated” by the Communist Party’s Cultural Revolutions.

By imbuing Hokkien with notions of antiquity, its speakers could claim legitimacy to an unbroken lineage of Chinese culture, in this way legitimizing Taiwan also as the authentic bearers of 5000 years of history. However, another dilemma yet arises, namely, that Japanese, as a result of Japan and China’s close interactions throughout history, especially during periods when Japan imported massive bodies of religious text into the archipelago, also writes extensively with Chinese characters, reads profusely the poets of Tang, and is considered as the closest approximation to China’s Tang dynasty in what societies we have today. In the same way, Vietnam is the inheritor of the Song dynasty, while Korea is considered to be that of the Ming. Yet anyone would clearly laugh at the idea if any of these countries would try to claim that they are the true, legitimate China. (The Asian world has already mocked Korea endlessly when they apparently tried to claim Confucius as their own.) Laying claim to legitimacy through precarious arguments for antiquity and primordiality is clearly a dangerous path. Most crucially, it forgets the fact that a culture must be something that is lived and practiced; like biological evolution, coexisting cultures have no intrinsic hierarchy in terms of advancement or sophistication. All had adapted to their needs and evolved through the same amount of time.

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A documentary released in 2011 titled *Dear Taiwan* illustrates the political situation in Taiwan through a collection of interviews with activists, academics, and artists from various

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11 The Chinese title is called 好國好民, roughly meaning “a good people of a good nation”
different backgrounds and generations. What caught my attention was that all the artists—poets, musicians, vloggers, creators, all in seemingly unspoken accord, point to one particular aspect of their creative process that sets apart their works as distinctively Taiwanese: language.

Whether using Chinese dialects of Hokkien and Hakka, or indigenous Austronesian languages, all the artists interviewed in Dear Taiwan argue that using these minority languages allows them to tap into the spirit of the land, or reconnect with their family, their past. One pop-rock band even proclaims that their goal is to get younger generations as well as foreigners to become interested in what they call “Taiwanese languages,” and further to draw in international audiences to learn more about the island’s prosperous people and their cultures.

It may be worth noting, however, that some, though not all, of these artists conduct their interviews in the official language of Republic of China: Mandarin Chinese. Furthermore, as a result of centuries of defamation and land deprivation, indigenous culture in Taiwan occupies a nigh invisible space in the public domain. Consequently, most subcultural or counter-cultural music scenes employ more commonly Taiwanese Hokkien as their medium of protest. How effectively could these settler languages “connect to the spirits of the land” is a perhaps legitimate question we could ask in comparison to the two dozen indigenous languages spread throughout the island. (The name “Taiwan” is even thought to come from the name of an indigenous people who lived along the southern coasts where Dutch merchants had settled and colonized in the 1600s.)

Another aspect of the artists’ claims render their position rather suspect: what, exactly, do they mean by “Taiwanese languages,” or “languages of Taiwan?” Critics have long been eager to point out that the colloquial Chinese dialect which is commonly referred to as “Taiwanese,”
more formally known as Taiwanese Hokkien, had obviously traveled across the strait from the Chinese province of Fujian, pronounced as Hokkien in Hokkien; whereas Hakka originated from the province of Guangdong. To opposers, calling Hokkien and Hakka as Taiwanese languages is akin to claiming English as an American language. Of course, no one in today’s international forum could deny the fact that Standard(ized) American English is the vehicle that carries some of USA’s most renowned cultural products, as well as serving as the platform upon which most of its creative projects continue to take place. Yet, perhaps what continues to trouble the Taiwanese public and beyond is that the Taiwanese artists mentioned above attempt to instrumentalize their mastery of such a vehicle and platform--really, a tool--to distinguish themselves from the country where the tool originated from, and where its practice is still well and alive. If Hokkien and Hakka come from China, and belong to China, how can Taiwan claim them to be distinctively and distinguishably Taiwanese? Wouldn’t that be indirectly admitting that Taiwan also comes from China, and belongs to China?

In addition, unlike English’s status in the States, Hokkien is far from the dominant language in Taiwan. After a century of colonial suppression across different regimes, barely anyone born after 1970s and 80s still speak Hokkien or Hakka today. More people speak (American) English in Taiwan today than they do Hokkien, a simple reality dictated by the different levels of prestige and capital of these two languages in the linguistic market. With recent voices within the Parlement calling for the establishment of English as an official language of Taiwan, we might more quickly leverage English proficiency rather than Hokkien proficiency to “distinguish” China from Taiwan.
Not to mention, this discussion of “languages of Taiwan” seems to leave out a rather obvious option that is Japanese. Whether it is the archived generation of poets and novelists composing in Japanese by sheer force of colonial education, or the sunset generation of merchants and salesmen who began working for Japanese joint-stock companies during Japan’s economic miracle, or even today’s increasingly globalized generation acquiring the language just as a hobby to facilitate media consumption, the footprint of Japanese on Taiwan’s linguistic landscape cannot be denied. Taiwan’s first democratic president, Lee Tung-Hui, elected 1988, was perfectly fluent in Japanese, and even referred to Japan as Taiwan’s “motherland.” With Japan standing as one of the only remaining polities still willing to engage with Taiwan in a friendly manner after PRC replaced ROC in all diplomatic relationships across the world, the appeal to learn its language for Taiwanese people seems understandable. Though of course, the reason this colonial language sits awkwardly with other “languages of Taiwan” is precisely due to its colonial nature.

This argument begs the question still, is the presence of Mandarin any less tied up to the Nationalist’s military takeover? Is Hokkien or Hakka any less distinct from the history of settlement and forced displacement and assimilation of indigenous populations? Without dismissing or absolving the violence of colonial enterprises, our biggest challenge may be to envision a mode of being that acknowledges foreign influences in culture and customs, wrought upon the people by colonizing forces and branded into the land. To deny it seems to be revisionist of history, while accepting it seems slavish and defeatist. As national boundaries

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12 Educated under the third and final stage of Japanese Colonization in Taiwan, Lee was part of the intellectual elite who went through the process of “imperialization,” adopting a Japanese name: “Iwasato Masao” and accepted as an official Japanese citizen. After KMT took over in 1945, Lee reverted back to using his Chinese name. When Lee was elected president, he opened the gates for Japanese wansei to visit Taiwan on tourist visas for the first time in 40 years.
becomes less and less relevant in today’s world, perhaps it could be more useful for Taiwan to stop looking introspectively, toward a primordial source, but rather look outward, toward the future for solutions.
Ending Notes:

From Island to the Sea

The Taiwanese government has organized a competition for designers to reimagine the outlook of our national identification cards, something that hasn’t changed since my parents were born. One of the submissions introduces the themes of ocean, island, and home.
I leave below a loosely translated description of their vision in incorporating all languages of Taiwan.

In others’ eyes, Taiwan may not be special. It may not even be beautiful; but it is our home. Taiwan’s story is our memory, our way of imagining the world, it is our hopes and our aspirations. What is the name of home? According to the Ministry of the Interior’s census, aside from indigenous and Han populations, the number of immigrants and their descendants from Southeast Asia and other corners of the world are approaching one million. As such, we use the words for “home” in each tongue of the indigenous tribes, each language of the Southeast Asian countries, in Japanese, in Chinese, in English, to make up the security printing in small letters, reverently inscribing them into the gleaming light of laser-beamed waves. No matter when we came here or from where we came, in the end we are all Taiwanese.

-Liu Cowei
Liu’s simple words paint an utopic picture to me: island, ocean, and home. He shifts our confinement of the concepts of civilization and culture from the solid grounds of earth to an ever moving, ever fluid body of water. The ocean water that carved this island from its neighboring landmass, that brought upon its waves the vessels of change and destruction, the seeds of nourishment and endless possibilities. Like water, we mix and intermingle, like water we are in constant motion. Fluidity is such a beautiful word when used to describe humanity: pliant and adaptive and acceptive and soft.

Liu understands identification cards as a material medium through which we could project and mold the Taiwanese identity, and attempts to map upon it a panorama that
encompasses and represents every single individual on the island. Anthropology and sociology both testify the impossible existence of a culture without contradictions, without conflict, without incoherencies. Taiwan’s quest to find a singular cultural identity may well be frivolous and futile; its legitimacy as a vibrant nation does not depend on the number of patriots who would respond to commands issued under one single tongue. At the crossroad of oceans, we flourish in the meeting of plural minds and diverse perspectives.

My generation find ourselves nearing the end of a road of uncertainties: a looming end is closing in on us, the suspense now only induces fatigue, and our future is slowly narrowing into a couple of possible paths constituted by varying combinations of diplomatic compromise and self-determination. If previous generations had often made decisions based on fatigue and exhaustion, bereft of the usually institutionalized transmissions of memory, forced to invent themselves from scratch under each regime, may ours be the first to believe in hope and bravery. May ours, finally born into a democracy made possible by our predecessors, be one that can envision pluralistic futures populated by faces different than ours, names different than ours, love different than ours, living side by side in contentment.
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