Narrating Taiwan – Culture Construction in Taiwan since 2000

Chang Bi-yu (Research Fellow, LSE)

As early as the late 1980s, the Kuomintang (KMT) had already started a process of indigenisation. The KMT was pressurised to shift its emphasis to Taiwan, and started localisation in order to deal with the growing demands of Taiwanese awareness, and to justify its political regime. However, this change of course in culture construction was not a smooth process, and it was not until the 1990s that Taiwanese cultural policy moved away from a China-centric position.

When the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came to power in 2000, indigenisation took centre stage and became the top priority for the DPP governance. An era of Taiwanisation finally began in full swing.

Generally speaking, since Ch’ên Shui-bian took ofice in 2000, there have been two focuses of DPP cultural policy: indigenisation and globalisation. Both trends aim to create a brand new image of Taiwan. To achieve this, the DPP has set the goal ‘Creative Taiwan’ (chuanyi taiwan) for 2050. (TCHEN YU-CHIOU, 2004) Furthermore, facing the competition and impact of China hosting the 2008 International Olympic Games, the DPP launched the “Challenge 2008 – National Development Plan”, in order to increase Taiwan’s international competitiveness.

Substantial investments will be made in areas to improve manpower, R&D and innovation, logistics networks, and the living environment. (GIO, 2003a) The ten key areas are:

1, e-Generation Manpower Cultivation Plan
2, Cultural and Creative Industry Development Plan
3, International Innovation and R&D Base Plan
4, Industrial Value Heightening Plan
5, Doubling Tourist Arrivals Plan
6, e-Taiwan Construction Plan
7, Operations Headquarters Development Plan
8, Island-wide Trunk Transportation Construction Plan
9, Water and Green Construction Plan
‘Challenge 2008’ aims to turn Taiwan into a “Green Silicon Island”. (CEPD, 2002) However, the scheme was severely hit soon after its launch, firstly by the impact made by 9/11 Incident on the world economy, and the uncertainty brought with the War in Iraq, and secondly by the heavy blow dealt by the SARS epidemic in 2003. In order to boost the economy and renew the focus of “Challenge 2008”, the Executive Yuan launched “Ten New Major Construction Projects (xin shi da jianshe)” in November 2003, expecting to invest NT$500 billion in five years. (CEPD, 2004) Ten New Major Construction Projects are the cream of the Challenge 2008 project. This is an attempt designed to speed up the process of Challenge 2008 and ensure its completion.

The chosen projects are:
1. Creating first rate universities and research centres
2. Creating international arts and popular music centres
3. Launching the Mobile Taiwan Plan
4. Organising the Taiwan Exposition
5. TRA (Taiwan Railway Administration) Rapid Transit Plan
6. Third-phase freeways
7. Kaohsiung Harbour Intercontinental Container Centre
8. Mass rapid transit systems in northern, central and southern Taiwan
9. Wastewater treatment system
10. Lowland reservoirs and desalination plants

On the surface, the emphasis on culture in these 2 national plans is placed on creativity, multicultural expressions and domestic tourism. Measures were set up to build a ‘Homeland’ in Taiwan, constructing it as a land of innovative cultural achievement and natural beauty. However, the hidden agenda is to earn international recognition as an creative, high-tech, advanced, and most of all, unique country. In other words, the DPP intends to build a Creative Taiwan, different in every way from China.

In comparing the cultural policy in the KMT and DPP periods, it becomes clear that the emphases on community construction and the promotion of domestic tourism remain unchanged. Nevertheless, the focus of DPP culture construction has
fundamentally shifted. The DPP cultural policy has 3 unique tendencies: an emphasis on the economic values of the cultural industries, the theorisation of Taiwanese subjectivity, and branding Taiwan with culture.

** Economic values 

The economic value of the cultural industries has been forcefully advocated by the DPP government. Instead of concentrating solely on high culture, the DPP extends its focus to creative industries (including: design, tourism, popular music, film, fashion, and digital industries), and stresses the added values they can bring. Therefore, a discourse is created by the DPP who quoting from UNESCO's research and taking European countries (especially the UK) as examples, state that “Culture is Good Business”, emphasising the potential for employment and describing them as “sunrise or future oriented industries”. (CCA, 2003)

The Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA) took the initiative of organising competitions and funding to encourage new fashions and designs, in the hope to establish a unique and innovative brand for Taiwanese products. For example, the “2003 Taiwanese Fashion Party” (2003 taiwan yi___party) encouraged Taiwanese designers to introduce indigenous culture into their fashion designs and to use local textiles. The “Made in Taiwan, Stunning China” (Taiwan pinpai jingyan taoci______) scheme was launched to encourage the creation of a recognisable label in porcelain design drawing inspiration from Taiwanese cultural symbols and natural beauty.

Influenced by this trend, the focus of community construction has also been shifted from building local community and a sense of homeland to boosting domestic tourism and local industries. Therefore, the mentality of the Community Construction Movement, commenced in 1995, is now considered dated. Instead, the New-Home Community Development Plan in ‘Challenge 2008’ has been transformed to promote local industry and domestic tourism. (CCA, 2003) As a result, a new programme to set up Local Culture Houses (difang wenhua guan______) was launched in 2002, encouraging private investment to establish Local Culture Houses for performances
and exhibitions. The CCA believes the marriage between culture and enterprise will not only boost the economy, but will also help to regenerate depressed areas. (CCA, 2002; TCHEN YU-CHIOU, 2002)

**Theorising Taiwan**

Since the DPP came to power, a discourse of ‘Taiwanese subjectivity’ has been vigorously constructed. Through cultural policy, the CCA has become involved directly in the construction of ‘what Taiwanese culture is’ and redefining the meaning of the term ‘Taiwanese’.

The effort to widen interest in Taiwan Studies and to expand its profile has focused on the digitisation of historical archives. For example, the virtual research centre ‘Taiwan History and Culture in Time and Space’ (THCTS, *Taiwan lishi wenhua ditu* ______, at [http://thcts.ascc.net/](http://thcts.ascc.net/)) – was set up by the Academia Sinica. It aims to make accessible digitised maps documenting Taiwan’s natural resources, and of the last 400 years of its history, and culture. (FAN I-CHUN, 2003)

In addition to representing history, Taiwan’s geographic positioning has also been re-examined. The ‘Databases of Places in Taiwan Region (*Taiwan diqu diming ziliao ku*______)’ was commissioned in 2001, documenting place names, their history and geographical characteristics. The digitised database will provide not only valuable resources for academics, but also teaching materials for the subject ‘Local Studies’(*xiangtu jiaoxue*____) in schools.

Last February, the CCA invited cartography experts to draw up maps of Taiwan presenting the angle and viewpoint of the Taiwanese. 7 new maps were drawn providing different approaches to the representation of the island, including ethnic, oceanic, linguistic, and cultural mapping. The CCA asserted that: “Map... reflects the drawers’ viewpoint and interpretation of a place, and hence, is a symbol of power... Through these [new] maps, Taiwanese subjectivity... is clearly shown, providing opportunities for Taiwanese to understand their homeland and plan for the future.” (CCA, 2004b)
To popularise the discourse of ‘Taiwanese subjectivity’, the CCA has also focused on publication. In the last 5 months alone, the CCA has published over 70 books. The majority of these are publications about Taiwanese history, culture and artists. Similarly, many measures were taken to encourage the development of Taiwan Studies, such as the dramatic increase in the funding of scholarships for foreign students who wish to study in Taiwan, and to study Taiwan as a subject, and the rapid growth of new Taiwanese Literature Departments in the Universities.

**Branding Taiwan**

In establishing a brand name and building up brand associations, the DPP uses cultural policy as a marketing tool to introduce an image of contemporary Taiwan to the world. (TCHEN YU-CHIOU, 2004) Measures have been implemented in order to build a new image through Taiwan’s distinct (or invented) tradition and local culture. The ‘Searching for Taiwan Red (xunzhao Taiwan hong)’ project is a good case study of this move to ‘branding Taiwan’.

The CCA chairwoman Tchen Yu-chiou explained, “Turkey has its Turkish Blue, Taiwan should also have its own colour.” (CHÊN HUI-MIN, 2004) This project was set up to promote a shade of dusty pink. It was chosen because its association with

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1 They include *Cultural Taiwan: New Century, New Appearance* (___:___), *Complete Collection of Taiwanese Poems* (___), *Collection of Taiwan History* (______). Furthermore, there were several serial publications and compilations, such as *Taiwan’s Contemporary Arts* (______), *The Beauty of Taiwan’s Tradition* series (______), *Hall of Taiwanese Music* series (______), *Hall of Taiwanese Dance* series (______), *Senior Taiwanese Artists* series (______).

2 A large portion of foreign aid will be diverted to scholarships for foreign students to study in Taiwan. As Premier Yu Shyi-kun suggested, such scholarships will provide many benefits. He believed that such scholarships would attract many foreign students to Taiwan. It would help to solve the under-enrolment problems of many domestic universities. While studying in Taiwan, their economic activities will boost Taiwan’s economy and increase employment. Most of all, funding foreign students to study in Taiwan also has a diplomatic function. Yu predicted that when they return to their countries, Taiwan would be “forging an important link in the chain of Taiwan’s long-term relations with foreign countries and serving to expand Taiwan’s national power.” (GIO, 2003b)

3 The establishment of Taiwan Literature Departments started in 1997 at the Aletheia University (then the Danshui Management College). In the following year, a proposal of the National Cheng Kung University (NCKU) to set up a Master degree course in Taiwanese Literature was also approved. Since then, the proposals to set up new Taiwanese Literature Departments at the Ch’ing-hua University, the Chung-hsing University and Providence University were all approved. Even without the formal establishment of a department, many universities started to run ‘Taiwanese Literature and Language’ courses/sessions as part of General Education (tongshi jiaoyu) modules, while Chinese Literature Departments started to provide Taiwanese Literature modules to satisfy their students’ needs.
traditional culture, festivals and celebrations. It is said that Taiwan Red is like the red of the *hong-kui-guo* (red rice cake). This colour, according to Tchen, represents “the joy of Taiwan”, sh owing a country with a positive, modern and joyful image, shaking of f the sad and bleak old past. (YOUNG SHAO-HUA, 2004; CCA, 2004a)

When Tchen Yu-chiou saw the exhibition “The Earth From Above” by French photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand, she negotiated a deal with his workshop to include Taiwan in his next project *Visages et Paysages*. She hoped this would be an opportunity to “let the world see Taiwan and get to understand us better”. (WU MERCY, 2004) “Let the world see Taiwan” is indeed the ultimate goal for ‘Branding Taiwan’. So despite the seemingly emphasis on indigenisation and homeland, it can be seen that DPP cultural policy is motivated by a desire to promote Taiwan in the international arena.

**Conclusion**

Generally speaking, there are 3 major differences between the KMT and the DPP in the direction of culture construction. They are:

1. **The Ways to go about Taiwanisation**

The KMT was put under pressure to adopt an indigenisation policy. Furthermore, Taiwanese culture was still promoted under a China-centric framework. The move to indigenisation was a gradual and patchy process at first, but gathered speed after the mid-1990s. The DPP, on the other hand, has embraced the indigenisation trend, and strived to find new ways of ‘narrating’ Taiwan, reconstructing the past, theorising Taiwanese history, and re-establishing Taiwanese subjectivity.

As the CCA Chairwoman Tchen Yu-chiou said in the opening of the National Museum of Taiwanese Literature, its establishment symbolised ‘a spiritual national territory’ and a return of power to Taiwanese people to have their say about their identity and to decide their own ‘national narrative’. (TAINAN CITY GOVERNMENT, 2003)

By shaking of f Chinese cultural traces, encouraging indigenous culture and welcoming global influence, the DPP government aims to create an identity for the
Taiwanese that is wholly unique. This approach consciously distances Taiwan from China, and constructs Taiwan with a cosmopolitan hybrid culture and high-tech development. By introducing both digitisation and global influences, Taiwan becomes more vibrant and cosmopolitan. At the same time, the intention to de-Sinificate Taiwanese culture is also taking effect.

**Political & economic vehicle**

In the past, whenever there was a crisis, the KMT used cultural policy for political purposes to create a cultural environment, formulate a certain cultural discourse, or ease political tension. (e.g. Cultural Revolution Movement, 'Spiritual Reform xinling gaige', or Community Construction Movement)

The DPP is no different. It has become involved in culture construction extensively, and has intervened in the writing of national narrative. Nevertheless, the DPP also encourages a broadly-defined cultural industries and emphasises the economic benefits.

**Branding Taiwan**

In the past, the KMT used cultural exchange as a vehicle to expand diplomatic relationships. The DPP has taken this further, using Taiwanese culture as a marketing tool, narrating a modern, innovative and upbeat country.

For the CCA, Taiwan is presented as a cultural product, placed in the international market by the creation of brand names, logos, positioning, brand associations, and brand personality. Taiwan is marketed as a place of rich natural beauty and cultural heritage, has a distinct colour, a highly developed computer industry, and full of theatres of international standard. Contemporary Taiwan is vibrant, exciting, and modern, in other words, a country with its own cultural label having almost nothing to do with China. 'Branding Taiwan' articulates an 'ideal identity' and a new version of 'national narrative' to the 'significant others' in the international society.

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TCHEN YU-CHIOU____
