Museum vs. the Surrealist Collage: Two Modes of Identity Construction in Modern Taiwanese Ekphrastic Poetry

In recent years, I have been working on interart projects that re-examine the intertextuality between modern Taiwanese literature and the other arts. To be more specific, in order to discuss in a wider scope the formation of the Taiwanese cultural imaginary, I am attempting to relate literature and the other arts; for example, how visual culture and visual imagination have shaped the perspectives and modes of representation in verbal texts, or how visual icons have been quoted and remolded in the verbal text as a strategic disguise for other political purposes. To me, the intertextuality between different art forms inevitably involves ideological agendas such as gender, race, and identity construction. In a previous publication, I discuss the influence of the visual arts and the political motivation behind the transplantation of Surrealism by Taiwanese poets in the 1950s which, in turn, triggered the modernization of Taiwanese poetry (see Liu 1996b). The aim of my present paper is to discuss two modes of identity construction, the “Mode of the Gaze” and the “Mode of the Glance,” or to put it in more figurative and culturally coded terms, the “Palace Museum Mode” and the “Surrealist Collage Mode.”

In the following discussion, I will apply my theoretical framework to modern Taiwanese ekphrasis poetry: how the two generations of poets strategically and rhetorically address silent plastic objects for different contextual purposes. In my discussion, ancient China frequently appears as an absent Other, as a cultural Other in the process of identity construction for Taiwanese poets. The cultural

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2 I borrow the terms and notions of “The Gaze” and “The Glance” from Norman Bryson. In his article, Bryson uses this pair of contrastive notions to distinguish between the different modes of perspective in Western and Chinese painting. Although this contrast may not be appropriate in discussing all Chinese paintings, I found it useful to pair off the different modes of perspectives in modern Taiwanese poetry.
Other serves as a target for dialogue for the Taiwanese diaspora of the late 1940s as well as the younger generation who published in the 1980s and still publish in the 1990s. In this paper, I take Yu Guangzhong and Ya Xian as a pair of contrasting the first generation, and Su Shaoian and Chen Li for the second generation. The genre of ekphrasis has become an important locus of attention in contemporary critical discourse. Literally, ekphrasis means "speaking out" or "telling in full," but to literary critics it suggests the "special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object" (Hagstrum 18, 49-50, 53; see also Davidson; Heffernan; Krieger; Meltzer; Meyer; Mitchell). Classical examples of ekphrasis include verbal texts which comment on utilitarian objects, such as goblets, urns, vases, weapons, etc (Mitchell 703). Ekphrastic poetry may also include verbal representations of painting, sculpture, photography, maps, movies, and theatrical spectacles (Mitchell 717). On the surface, the poet appears to address the still visual form in an apostrophic manner, leads the audience to look at the details, and invokes the silent object; but, behind the scene, what the poet actually does is to impose on the gazed object his/her own narrative and at the same change the significations of the visual signs. The speaker in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Sonnet for a Lady of the Rocks by Leonardo Da Vinci" bluntly asks: "Mother, is this the darkness of the end, / The Shadow of Death, and is that outer sea / Infinite Eternity?" (I-3). The pronouns "this" and "that" become an opaque screen which effaces the naturalism of Da Vinci's landscape and they also become the leak through which Rossetti's Victorian doubts are infused on the pictorial space: "Mother of grace, the pass is difficult, / Keen as these rocks" (9-10). Da Vinci's painting appears in Rossetti's poem as an ekphrastic image, a visual image which attracts the poet's impulse to grasp, to describe and to re-read through writing. This inter-art text-within-the-text, however, serves for the reader as a marker for "the semiotic Others" (Mitchell 699); that is, the poet's intentional misreading causes a "gap" between the two different semiotic systems, creating a site for the reader to confront the experience of alterity through this textual Other, or a "figure of difference" (Mitchell 716). The ekphrasis, the verbal representation and revision of the visual form, therefore, sharpens for us issues of intertextuality between verbal art and visual art, and at the same time brings forth the implicit ideological agenda along with this Subject/Other dialectics, such as religion, gender, race, class, and nation operate.

In his study of intertextuality, Michael Riffaterre points out that the "absent intertext," or the semiotic gap, disturbs the structure of the current text and results in the "ungrammaticality" in the text. This ungrammaticality points to a "syntagm situated elsewhere: the text's ungrammaticality is but a sign of a grammaticality elsewhere, its significance a reference to meaning elsewhere" (Riffaterre 627). This ungrammaticality, moreover, opens up the ambiguity of the text and its signification process. According to Riffaterre, to perceive the relations of the text to its quotations or presuppositions we need not only linguistic competence, but also cultural competence (628). But the "syntagm situated elsewhere" suggests to us not only cultural and linguistic syntags; it also suggests a space relaying the poet's unconscious and his idiosyncratic personal history, filled with linguistic, cultural, political, and erotic desires. The ekphrastic object, furthermore, is presented as the presence of an absence, and hence the target of desire becomes opaque. The absent Other in the literary text, whether it is the "mother earth" which nourishes the bitter gourd, or the sound of the wind, or the legends behind the Tang horse, or the empire the Chin Clay Warriors guarded, they all represent the absent Other as the negative of the plastic object, the invisible, the ungraspable, alluring and elusive. The feminine quality W.I.T. Mitchell or Francoise Meltzer rhetorically attribute to the ekphrastic image in their theorization of the ekphrastic text becomes, then, significant, because the "unapproachable and unrepresentable black hole" (Mitchell 700) and because the "seductress as an icon" (Meltzer 26) draws the complex attraction/resistance dialectics between the poet and the graphic object to the foreground, as well as the poet's anxiety for merging with the Other. Through the semiotic gap occurring in inter-art intertextuality, and in the gendered relation between the verbal text and the graphic object, I think we can obtain a better glimpse into the poets' strategies of representation and their construction of national and cultural identities in modern Taiwanese ekphrastic poetry.

In modern Taiwanese ekphrastic poetry, I find two opposite modes: one speaking about classical Chinese visual art and the other addressing modern western painting, especially the work of the Surrealists. The verbalization of classical Chinese art, a sculpture, a vase, a jade object or a painting, frequently betrays a spatialized representation and relocation of the poets' temporal memories of historical China. I would like to call this ekphrastic rhetoric the "Palace Museum Mode" or the "Mode of the Gaze." In this group, Yu Guangzhong's "Jade Mellon," "The Qin Clay Warrior," "The Tang Horse," Luo Fu's "Reading Chou Ying's Lantaing Picture," Ku Ling's "At the Palace Museum," Sha Sui's "Walking Over the Map of China," and Chen Jiadai's "The Icy Cold Map" are good examples. In the opposite group, poets invoke Western avant-garde artists, such as Matisse, Dali, Miro, Chagall, Delvaux, and re-organize their interpretation of the Western paintings through a collage of disassociated images. For this group, Ya Xian's "To Matisse," Su Shaoian's "Chagall's Dream," Yang Ran's "Reading Magritte," and Chen Li's "The Dog Barking at the Moon" are good examples. Through their interpretation, the West has become a collage in Taiwanese experience. I would like to call this second ekphrastic rhetoric the "Surrealist Collage Mode" or the "Mode of the Glimpse" as explained previously. In the Mode of the Gaze, the poet stands still in front of one plastic object, gazes at the object, worships it, and his invoking follows a centripetal movement. It is as if he would want to "penetrate" the object with his reading and become one with it. But, the masculine gesture in this act and his attachment to the object seems to reveal a hidden separation and disengagement.
In the Mode of the Glance, however, the poet glances at one art work after the other, as if passing through the gallery, selecting random details, piling them up in a seemingly irrational and illogical manner. Here, the poet seems to avoid being tied up by one object, but, through his feminine sideways glance, there is an even stronger lust and hostility for the absent. Whether the pieces of treasures are housed and stored in the Palace Museum or whether distorted and unrelated images are lumped together through the surrealistic collage, the verbal canvas frames the local Taiwanese experience in confrontation with the cultural Other.

Discussing cultural identity, Stuart Hall suggests that there are at least two different positions: the first defines cultural identity “in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’ ... which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (393); the second recognizes that “there are also critical points of deep and significant difference” which constitute “what we really are,” or rather — since history intervenes — “what we have become” (394). The choice of positions reflects political considerations. In reading modern Taiwanese ekphrastic poetry, we will find that these two different positions cannot be a clear-cut distinction. Poets shift from one pole to the other, searching for origins either in ancient Chinese culture or in ancient Taiwanese culture, but occasionally, they linger in a limbo facing the multivalent changes of current society and culture.

In the case of the Diaspora Poets of the 1949 Generation, ekphrasis poetry concretizes Yu Guanzhong’s nostalgia for China, his homeland, and his spiritual origins. Nostalgia is a recurring motif in Yu Guanzhong’s poetry, a motif which recurs throughout his poems from the 1950s to the 1980s. The poet’s sense of “Chineseness” and of “home” in his exile in Hong Kong or Taiwan is the issue critics discuss and debate about the most (see Yan; Chen Guying; Chen Fangming; Liu Qidu; Jian). Early in the 1960s, after his exile from China, Yu traveled in the US. In this period, his nostalgia for the home country is combined with his memories of his deceased mother and his troubled identity as a Chinese. Thus, China is represented in his poetry not only as his mother and as his own body, but also as a trademark of shame. Here, his poems “When I Lay Dying” (“Dang Wo Si Shi” 1966) and “The Beat Music” (“Qiaodaying” 1966) are good examples. But, as Jian Zhengzhen points out, in Yu’s poetry of nostalgia even in the early 1960s to the early 1970s, there is an obvious dialectical tension and conflict between longing for the return and the awareness of the impossibility of this return (103, 120). I would suggest that, besides the awareness of the impossibility of the return, there is even a hidden effort of disengagement in the poems, an effort to remove the influence of China from his world.

In his poems about art objects — e.g., “Jade Bitter Gourd” (“Baiyu Kugua” 1974), “Tang Horse” (“Tang Ma” 1977), “Yellow River” (“Huanghe” 1983), “Chin Clay Warriors” (“Chin Yong” 1988), “Chinese Knot” (“Zhongguo Jie” 1988), Yu summons up the past history of these objects, verbalizes the unspoken desires and activates the lives within these objects. These still and silent images become the history of ancient China, or the mother image, the mother which has nursed him, nourished him, but is now cut off from contact after his exile from China. The Jade Bitter Gourd at the Palace Museum in Taipei which the poet speaks to invokes such mother-child relations:

Look at your winding and intertwining vines, your embracing leaves,
As if you want to suck to the last drop, in the year of the abundant harvest,
The milk endlessly fed by ancient China,
The perfect roundness, happy and content. (6-9)

The vast nine states have condensed into one map;
You did not know to fold it when you were a child:
Spreading it out, the boundless,
Innervate as the memory of the Mother, of her breast.
Crawling to the land of fertility,
You seek for her merciful juice with your roots and your roots.
(Jade Bitter Gourd,” 13-18)

The image of mother earth is the invisible world, the absent Other, envisioned by the poet behind the Jade Bitter Gourd. From these lines we see a clear Mother Earth imagery, abundant harvest, endless milk, perfect roundness, boundless, immense fertility, and a rhetoric of closeness and of touch, such as the winding and intertwining vines, embracing leaves, sucking, and so on. Similar constructions of imagery can be found in other poems of Yu. He sees the wind and the sand of the frontier land, hears the neighing and the hoofs of the horses, and, the legends of battles and of heroes through the Tang Horse. He also pictures the bare breast of the northern plain and the milk-like Yellow River or visualizes the ancient empire reflected in the Chin Clay Warriors.

The crystallization of cultural memories into ancient Chinese art objects, however, reveal clear strategies of disengagement. The gendered position the poet takes in treating the ekphrastic object, for example, implies a tone of separation. In his “Jade Bitter Gourd,” he searches with his pen for the memories of the past, as the Bitter Gourd’s vines’ embrace the breasts of the Mother, entering and penetrating. The phallic impulse of the pen to suck, to search, to penetrate, and to speak for the silent image express maleness and masculinity. The act of invoking these images is, paradoxically, to silence, to feminize, and to freeze memory into a graphic image. The attraction/resistance phenomena of the poet leads to the consumption of these artifacts in his poems.

The milk motif recurs in several of Yu’s homeland poetry, such as the milk of the Yellow River in “Yellow River” (“Huanghe”), of Yangzi River in “Eastward Runs the River” (“Da Jian Dong Hu”). For Yu, the thirst for milk represents his yearning for his homeland.

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dialectic and the anxiety for merging with the cultural Other, as we see in Yu Guanzhong’s ekphrastic poetry, are best reflected in the process of the building up and cementing of the “wall” of the Palace Museum, or the “glass wall” we see in the Jade Bitter Gourd. The miraculous existence of the Jade Bitter Gourd, of the crystallized memory of the past, is preserved as intact and severed from the gazers at the “glass wall”:

The entire mainland loves solely this Bitter Gourd,
Trampled over by the boots and hooves,
And the belts of the weighty tanks;
No trace of wound has been kept.

Only the incredible miracle separated by this glass remains.
(“Jade Bitter Gourd,” 21-25)

The sense of separation maintained by the glass wall also appears in other ekphrastic poems by Yu. In “Tang Horse,” it is the “glass closet” (15) that separates the horse from reality. The “glass closet” frames a “transparent dream” (21) and executes the “open imprisonment” (32), in which a lonely horse stands on the “soft green velvet pad, a tiny meadow, stirring no warring dust” (16-17).

You lonely horse, lost in this glass closet;
The soft green pad underneath your hooves,
Is like a tiny meadow which stirs no warring dust.

... Can you kick through this transparent dream,
Break the glass into pieces, and run away? (”Tang Horse” 15-22)

The Tang horse — used to fight in numerous battles and galloping on the open field — is an embodiment of the past glory of the Tang Dynasty. The entire Chinese history of war is invoked and also condensed through the figure of the horse. But now the horse is locked up in the sound-proof museum; the sounds associated with the warring horse, the wind, the galloping, the battle drums, the neighing, and the legends of the heroes, are all locked up as well. The imprisoned, feminized, and silenced plastic figure conveys an impotent and castrated cultural experience.

The semiotic marker of the “glass wall” and the “glass closet” separates the present from the past and thus separates the poet from the Mother so that the speaking subject can begin to view the past as an objectified difference, and then is able to construct his own individual identity. In the poet’s memory, ancient China is like a “disappearing empire” (42) or an irrevocable Peach Blossom Spring in “Chin Clay Warriors” (20). The poet asks the clay warriors:

Your armours are still on, and your hands holding tightly
The arrows or spears which I do not see.
If the warring drums suddenly rise up,
Would you turn right away and run to the battlefield of two thousand years ago.
And join the rows of warriors? (“Chin Clay Warriors,” 1-6)

But no: “history has been written, the land is lost, and the palace is burnt. You cannot return any more,” replies the poet to his own questions:

Tongquan is besieged, Ah, Xianyang lost.
Who comes to rescue the fires of the Ahsang Palace? Only who you who stay,
You who can never return, who have become
The hostages of the next generation, eternal prisoners. (“Chin Clay Warriors,” 49-52)

And the past is darkness and a dead-end. Thus, he continues: “You are the honourable descendants who didn’t follow Qin Shihuang into the past, but came with Xu Fu to seek eternal life.” Eternal life is possible only in a land for the future, on the legendary island Penglai. They become the diaspora in Taiwan, just like the poet himself. The diaspora in Taiwan cannot return “home.” The umbilical cord extends in the poet’s imaginary through the Jiuguang railway to the vast, benign but estranged body of the Mother in “Jiuguang Railway,” but in “The Chinese Knot,” he cuts the cord and sends it back to the remote mountains of the Mainland while the sea coast of the island is now much closer to the poet’s heart.

The act of staging the plastic object as ancient cultural memory is like visualizing and concretizing the past into a map. In “Jade Bitter Gourd,” Yu says: “the vast nine states have condensed into one map which you did not know to fold when you were a child” (13-14).Listing the names of the places and the spots of time as if through map-reading and history thus becomes a compulsive act. Maps thus appear in Yu’s poems and prose texts as a recurring motif as it also appears in other poets’ work. For example, in Ya Xin’s “My Soul” (“Wode Linghun”), Sha Sui’s “Walking over the Map of China” (“Zhouguo Zhongguo de Ditu”), and Chen Jiada’s “Icy Cold Map” (“Bingliang de Ditu”). But, to traverse, to read, to visualize, and to enchant the past is in fact to flatten and to control the past so that it does not exist as a chaotic mass or overflow. The past which is retrieved rhetorically through naming is metaphorically flattened into a map which the poet can fold and put aside.

Museum collections of the still moments of perfection in Chinese cultural history manifest one mode of representation of China as the cultural Other. For the diaspora in Taiwan, the memories of the cultural past are like the pieces of treasures safely housed and stored in the Palace Museum, blocked with glass
closets. They can visit the museum, pay the tickets, contemplate over the art objects as if they were effigies at a sanctuary; they retrieve bits of memories, and then return to reality. The centripetal movement of invoking works like the gaze which objectifies the visual focus as if building up; once the narrative is finished, the gazed object is blocked inside the citadel and is forever separated from its gazers.

The examples of Yu’s ekphrasis discussed above were written during the 1970s and 1980s when the “root-seeking” movement and the cry for autonomy in Taiwan has just begun. Such sentiments were not allowed in the 1950s, when the Cold War at its most intense stage was still on. Thus, Yu’s nostalgia was expressed, for example, in his 1961 “Variations of Tiantangxian” under disguise: “Noah, Dayu, the people who are still unaccustomed to the earth over these thousand years, / Like the extinguished phoenixes, / The destroyed dragons; The foot prints, the star light. There is no exit for mankind” (21-24). Such a distorted and suppressed voice is even more clearly seen in Ya Xian’s “To Matisse” (“Zhang Hui Matisi”), a surrealistic ekphrastic poem. Surrealism was welcomed enthusiastically by modern Taiwanese poets during the politically tense periods of the 1950s to the early 1970s, such as Luo Fu, Ya Xian during the 1960s, and Wai-lim Yip, Da Huang, Guan Guan, Xin Yu, Chu Ge, Zhou Ding, Shen Linbing, Zhang Mo, Bi Guo, through the 1970s. This surrealist mode extended its influence down to the contemporary period and is manifest in the work of poets such as Su Shaolian and Chen Li (see Liu 1996b). The surrealist’s stress on automatic writing, free associations, irrational collages of images taken from different planes of reality, and nightmarish atmosphere, help liberate the unutterable and the suppressed in order to be transformed and replanted on a crowded plane. In Ya Xian’s “To Matisse” (1961), the reader sees a collage of disassociated images taken from several paintings by Matisse:

In your eyes burns the Notre Dame. In the playroom
The naked bodies slowly rise up and tease those angels.
No echoes. The speckled leopard squatted in the dark corner.
Your hands which weave all coincident disentangle the hair coil.
Under the heavy stroke of the electric guitar,
In the dangerous frontier of some unknown dreams,
These golden women lie
On the blanket knitted with roses. (“To Matisse,” 2-9)

In the poem, we find Matisse with several of his paintings, such as “Notre-Dame,” “Dance,” “Music,” “The Sorrows of the King,” “Dream,”

"Odalsique," and “Sleeping Nude.” Through these otherwise unrelated pictures the poet secretly instills a spectrum of danger and uncertainty: “the dangerous frontier of some unknown dreams” (7), “the rumours accumulated upon the pillows” (12), “the frightened velvets” (13), “little trauma” (14), “the treacherous looks by the bedside” (24), “the lying colours” (30), “screaming for help with massive red” (41), “a rented game within the dangling quilt” (45), “an enormous collapse under the pillow” (86-87). The sense of being a disturbed “passer-by” (49) links these bits of danger from line to line, and sums up at “one house, one room, one bottle of nostalgia, one uncontrollable Matisse” (79-80). Interpreting Matisse, Ya Xian’s suppressed and utterable fears for his nostalgia during the unstable cold war period between Taiwan and the Mainland are released and leaked uncontrollably through the pages as blood-red colour over the canvas. While thus expressed nostalgia may cause real danger, the poet can only tolerate the present reality of his temporary residence in Taiwan; the "degenerate tune" (89), the "filthy palette" (90), or the "declining paradise" (91), as if practicing copulation with the whore is a temporary, dangerous and despicable game.

The surrealist collage provides poets with a mechanism to liberate the shattered and unorganized experience of their historical trauma. Ya Xian’s strategy in his surrealist collage is to divert the audience’s attention away from the centre of the painting. In Ya Xian’s poem the speaker opts for feminine strategy with aleatory glances, selecting unrelated details from the corners of the canvas, avoiding the target, and speaking about the absence of the painting in a circular and fluid exchange. The absence, the void, and the shades of colours become the atomic stimulus which triggers the poet’s random enunciation. But this randomness, unlike the gaze-attracting Palace Museum, frees more violent longing for the past and a hostility against the present which is suppressed and unmentioned in the text.

These two opposite modes of representation, the Palace Museum and the Surrealist Collage, the gaze and the glance, take opposite routes in dealing with the cultural Other: the gazer begins with a centripetal movement, prolonged, contemplative, but ending with a renouncement and disengagement; the glancer moves around in a centrifugal manner, with a futile or sideways look, like someone whose attention is elsewhere, but is nevertheless caught up by the materialized blank space of the canvas along with a hidden message of hostility, collusion, rebellion, and lust.

When we examine the ekphrasis poetry of the second-generation diaspora, we find that the two modes of representation are taken over, and the implied textual and political Otherness is transformed into a different context. The acute sense of alienation from Mainland China and the modernist pang of cultural homelessness experienced by the first-generation diaspora are changed into nightmarish and absurd portrayals of the historical trauma, and even into a carnivalesque parody of the diversity of new origins and identities in Taiwan. In
Su Shaolian's reading of Chagall's paintings in "Chagall's Dream" ("Xiakaer de Meng"); for example, the "red night sky" he sees on the canvas of "La Nuit de Venice" has become "the cover of the closed notebook of his own childhood," indicating the 2-28 incident of 1947, the communist-phobia period, and the White Terror Period. All passages of a silenced history shared by all Taiwanese. The red motif in Chagall's paintings is a complex mingling of the artist's nostalgia for his Russian hometown, childhood, families, and later his deceased wife, with paradoxical feelings of warmth, trauma, hurt, fear, and anger. This red motif is condensed by Su into a sign of the political terror he experienced in his childhood. Su's surrealist method is even more obtrusive when it comes to his reading of a map in "Portrait of an Earthquake" ("Dizhenyu"): The mainland is a dismembered human body; Shandong peninsula, a segment of the leg, stranded over the beach of Penghu island; Mount Huangshan, the crooked fingers of the palm, fallen into the black ditch of the Taiwan Straits; the back of the Yungui Highland is disjoined and thick blood overflowed; the Long Wall of the Yellow Island Plateau is pushed into the Bohai Harbour; the landscape of Sanxia is hanged up-side-down at the edge of the Subua Road at the east coast of Taiwan. (13)

The topographic differences on the map redirect the poet's nightmarish memories. The dismembered and dislocated parts not only metaphorically reflect the poet's views of the state of affairs in China, but also his testament of the bombarded and disintegrated mainland transplanted into Taiwan. The names of the places in China reappear as street names all over Taiwan, and the diaspora from different provinces scatter over different corners in Taiwan. The transplanted, to the poet, is bizarre and surrealistic. And the map of Taiwan shows an even more scary look to the poet:

Ahh Taiwan is a scorched sweet potato, smoking! The land at the north of Tanshui River is drifted away to the islands of Liuqiu; the presidential palace is buried underground, crushed and disappeared; the land of the south of Zhushui River is floated away to Philippines; Lanyu rises up from the sea and becomes the highest point of Taiwan; Dajia River is stretched wide, and the water of the Taiwan Straits flows through the Pacific Ocean. (14)

The land of Taiwan is dispersed as diversely as its political groups: the native Aboriginal population who have been driven to the mountains, the early immigrants who speak "Taiwanese," the late 1949 immigrants who are addressed as the "mainlanders" (wai-sheng-ren), the second generation of the mainlanders who do not share the historical burdens of China, and the younger generation of the "Taiwanese" who do not speak Aboriginal Taiwanese. Like Ya Xian, when speaking of the island, Su Shaolian's in his poems situates himself at a drifting and floating position in the air. In contrast, the poet Chen Li replaces the homelessness and dislocatedness with his re-affirmation of the diverse identities. In his post-modern surrealist revision of Miro's "The Dog Barking at the Moon" ("Feiyue zh quan"), Chen distorts the icons on the canvas even more drastically:

The moon is pasted on the sky like a stamp obscured by the postmark. We write letters with ballpoint pens of starlight and mail them to God, who lives north of the air-raid shelter, and two express conductresses in red skirts and red hats push the pushcart by and ask if he'll buy some medicine.

Of course it's bitter, still he sends us a family photo: the war-fostered colonel, the black-skinned procures, Tomcat Gigi, the unmarried old maid A-lan — they are all there, on the platform of time, facing a dog barking at the moon with wide-open eyes. ("Feiyue zh quan" 16-26)

Xi Mi has discussed the post-modern nature of this poem: temporalized spatial experience, the fictitiousness of the individual, the flow of history, and the collective replacing the individual (10-12). However, Xi did not comment on the historical context which Chen Li installs in this poem. The effaced history of war and emigration from the Mainland to Taiwan, and the effects it had on people are jammed into the family photo: the colonel's life in wars, the dark-faced Aboriginal Taiwanese at the whorehouse, and the old maid all emerge through the darkness on the canvas and line up on the platform of the railway station of time. The black background in Miro's painting becomes for Chen Li a figure of the Taiwanese collective unconscious, with suppressed and/or forgotten memories. Chen Li calls his readers' attention to the black space, summons up traces of forgotten memories, and he seems to be able to see such family photos from every moon-stamp he sees, as it opening up a stamp album: "We open the stamp album, suspiciously searching out / seemingly familiar cries. / Maybe that's what they call family reunion ("Feiyue zh quan") 28-30). The family reunion Chen ridicules but acknowledges is an accepted fact of Taiwan: a reunion of all people. The reunion is a result of the wars which have shaped Taiwanese collective memory of the past. These people speak different languages and carry different pasts, but they all stand on the same platform as travelers. The tone of disengagement echoes that of Ya Xian and Su Shaolian. In a later poem, "Tightrope Walker" ("Zouwozhe" 1995), the poet assumes a similar position of uncertainty and an anxious tone: "with a slanting bamboo cane, with a fictitious pen" (36-37), the poet's collected laughter fell upon the air, "all the jokes of all continents and subcontinents, interwoven in your body like tributaries" (13-15).

Chen Li's intention to reconstruct Taiwanese identity has led him to move away from the surrealism mode of expression to the mode of the gaze, to build an effigy at the museum and treat it as a sacred object. For Chen Li, Taiwan has
long been cut from the Mainland and thus he presents it as an autonomous entity which can speak to the world through his needle-like pen.

On the world map which is reduced to one over forty million, our island is an imperfect yellow button lying loose on a blue uniform.

My hand is holding my needle-like existence: threading through the yellow button rounded and polished by the people on the island, it pierces hard into the heart of the earth that is behind the blue uniform. (*Daoyu Bianyuan* 1-3, 27-30)

He also takes the reader to look at the firemen in a photo at the Memorial Hall and imposes on the figures different languages from Taiwan's past and present: Japanese, Taiwanese, Hakka, Ahmei, Atayal:

The fire engine made in Japan did not choose the language to put out the fire.

He speaks Japanese. He speaks Taiwanese.

He speaks Ahmei, Atayal, Hakka.

But the silent history understands only one voice: The voice of the victor, the voice of the dictator, the voice of the winner. (*Zhaohe Jiinianguan* 28-32; my translation)

In this poem, as in other poems such as "Green Onions," "Water Buffalo," "Hualien Harbor Street, 1939," and "Formosa, 1661," Chen intentionally "searches and reorganizes the image of the island and seeks the echoes of its history" (*The Edge of the Island* 205).

The narratives Taiwanese poets add to ekphrastic images reveal a progressive alienation of Taiwan from Mainland China, even a gradual shift into the search for new and diversified identities. The framed plastic objects in the Palace Museum attract the poet's gaze and channel his longing to return to the cultural homeland, but it also reminds him of a conscious separation from the past, in an attempt to reorganize the chaotic memory of the past and to rebuild his own identity. Through the poet's masculine renunciation, the cultural Mother is worshipped, housed in the Palace Museum, but at the same time stilled, feminized, and silenced. In the Surrealist collage, strangely, we see the poets exercise a feminine disorientation from the gazed object and present the visual objects in a wild, disordered and fluid manner of scattered glances, and the objects are put aside with an anxious laugh. But, from underneath the irrational collage emerges a more violent longing to return. For the second-generation diaspora, the dismembered map of Taiwan is a restructured Taiwanese experience, taking different people onto the island, while the urge to remodel a new identity calls for a second wave of Palace Building. The building process is an act of self-representation, summoning voices from the history of Taiwan and embracing immigrants from different generations.


