

“Everyday Life and Landscapes of the Island”: Unsettling the Colonial Gaze

Daniella Romano

The colonial gaze has historically rendered Taiwanese identity synonymous with its ecology. However, the specific role of British travel photography in forming these narratives has remained overlooked in discussions of the development of Japanese environmental policy in Taiwan. This essay examines how the exhibition ‘Everyday Life and Landscapes of the Island: Betel Nuts, Bananas, Sugar Cane and Palms’ (22 February–31 May 2020) at Tainan Art Museum explores the wider issues of history, culture and identity through its inclusion of John Thomson’s nineteenth century photographs of Taiwan and its depiction of a pristine landscape untouched by modernisation. In particular, an analysis of the exhibition’s curatorial approach through the lens of this photography will be used to examine how artists represent and interpret the historic development of the Taiwanese landscape and its implications in the formation of a distinctively local sense of self. Classification and cultivation — central elements of Japanese expressions of power through environmental policy — are redefined by artists in a local and postcolonial context. The essay argues that a consideration of the intersection of colonial images of landscape, politics and contemporary art potentially offers a deeper understanding of the complexity and dynamism of contemporary Taiwanese identity.

The ‘Everyday Life and Landscapes of the Island: Betel Nuts, Bananas, Sugar Cane and Palms’ (22 February–31 May 2020) exhibition at Tainan Art Museum examines the historic link between the Taiwanese environment and daily life. The artworks exhibited make connections between local

contemporary artists and an everyday identity molded by a colonial-based environmental intervention that has continued to define everyday life in Taiwan. From both a colonial and local perspective, Taiwanese identity is synonymous with its ecological environment. While the Taiwanese landscape has been subjected to the colonial gaze within both European and Japanese narratives, it has also been reclaimed by contemporary Taiwanese artists. By focusing on plants that are symbolic of these changes — such as betel nuts, bananas, sugar cane and palm trees — these artists explore the wider issues of history, culture and identity.

The exhibition begins its story of Taiwan's modern ecological identity with John Thomson's photography which offers a reminder of an environment untouched by colonial development. Significantly, Thomson's three prints *Formosa* (1), *Formosa* (2) [Figure 1] and *Lau-long, Formosa* (1871) [Figure 2] depict the ideology of the imperial gaze of the European explorer in Taiwan. In these prints, Thomson represents Taiwan's nature and ecology as wild and mysterious, its power unrecognised and misused by local inhabitants. His focus on untamed nature is a product of the British imperialist gaze in relation to foreign lands; a gaze that invokes Western knowledge and technologies to tame and 'civilise' these lands and align them with British conception of modernity. As the first known photographer of Taiwan, Thomson's work represents the historic role of the outsider in shaping Taiwan's ecology during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The placement of the images at the beginning of the exhibition serves as a reminder of the origins of a landscape unaltered by the Japanese colonial government. Writing in relation to the tropical plants — banana, palm, sugar and betel nut — that define the local theme of the exhibition, the co-curator Nobuo Takamori observes that "it is apparent that these four plants have caused drastic topographical changes in Taiwan" (Takamori 2019, 17). The British imperial gaze present in these images prefaces these environmental changes; the desire to alter nature to align with their psychological and economic ideals. Contemporary artists



Figure 1. John Thomson, *Formosa*, 1871, digital print. Photo by Daniella Romano.

exhibited in ‘Everyday Life’ reflect on the meaning of this colonial legacy through daily experience, as seen in the changing natural environment and its impact on the psyche of the local people in their definition of self and circumstance.



Figure 2. John Thomson, *Lau-long, Formosa*, 1871, digital print. Photo by Daniella Romano.

This essay further examines the implications of Thomson's photography as the foundation for the exploration of Taiwanese identity in the context of the 'Everyday Life and Landscapes' exhibition. In particular, this essay explores how his depiction of the untamed landscape of the island references Western perspectives alongside the two primary elements of Japanese environmental policy that aimed to make Taiwan 'governable': the cataloguing of discoveries, and use of nature as a resource or commodity. Artists in the exhibition reflect upon the curator's depiction of how this history shapes Taiwanese identity within these themes. As Takamori notes:

reverting our focus back to art history's developmental trajectory, we could see that contemporary artworks have gradually shifted from realism depictions into explorations of the self-landscape relationship (Takamori 2019, 17).

Colonialism, Ecology, and Photography

The tropical environment in Taiwan and its association with Taiwanese INDIGENOUS culture distinguished it from that of Europe and Japan. Taiwan's environment sparked the curiosities of British travelers following a long history of interest in the China region, marking the starting point of change for Taiwan's ecological identity. Chien Yun-Ping, curator of 'The Silver Halide Era, Aura of Times: Vintage Photography Prints by Taiwanese Photographers 1890s–2015' (2016), a retrospective exhibition of Taiwanese photography at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, notes that the arrival of photography from the West was a significant moment in the history of photography in Taiwan (Chien 2016, 24). The images produced by these travelers, epitomised by Thomson's photographs, projected British preconceptions of difference, such as stadial theory and ideas of the "sublime" onto the Taiwanese landscape. This practice would foreshadow the significance of photography under Japanese colonial rule.

'Everyday Life and Landscapes' explores the development of Taiwan's ecology under Japanese colonial rule, whilst suggesting that within the contemporary context of the everyday, the line

between what is definitively Taiwanese and Japanese has now become blurred. Initially, for the Japanese, the environment was a tool of governance — the first governor general Goto Shinpei firmly believed in the “biological principle,” which prioritised documenting the natural order of Taiwan in order to further understand the resources within their control (Low 2003, 100). In this way, the unknown environment imagined by the British became, under Japanese colonial rule, tamed for profit through agriculture and tourism. Photography was a means of imposing ideas of Japanese development. As historian Morris Low observed, “through the use of Western science and the camera, the Japanese sought to impose a modernity on [their colonised subjects].” (Low 2003, 18). Photography historian David Bate’s discussion of the connection between photography and colonialism significantly suggests that photography also indirectly represents the “fantasy” of the photographer, making it the setting for, rather than the object of, colonial desire (Bate 1993, 81). In this context, Taiwan’s natural environment is the stage upon which the project of colonialism is enacted. Yet at the same time, historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki notes that research is lacking in relation to Japan and environmental change in its colonies, thus, making a discussion of colonial photography within the framework of the artworks in ‘Everyday Life and Landscapes’ significant in understanding Japanese colonial governance of Taiwan (Morris-Suzuki 2013, 225).

Jo Mei Lee’s *Landscape Remains – Roystone regia* (H.B. et K.) Cook (2020) is relevant here as it uses imagery of the palm tree to convey how the Japanese colonial government altered Taiwan’s environment. Placed in the same space as Thomson’s photographs so as to create a dialogue between the colonial gaze and its aftermath, Lee’s work poses questions about the role of environmental alterations made under the pretence of colonial benefit. The decayed palm tree is reconstructed with paper and charcoal, implying the irrelevance of the plant in a postcolonial context. Despite dominating the Taiwanese landscape in the present day, palm trees were introduced by the Japanese colonial government to emphasise the role of Taiwan as its exotic colony,

due to its tropical environment. Lee is reminding the viewer of the contentious role of Taiwan's modern environment, and how it was obscured by colonial discourses to form its identity. No longer of use as a symbol of the tropical Japanese colony, the origins of the palm tree in Taiwan is now obsolete, instead appearing as a common element of the Taiwanese landscape.



Figure 3. Jo Mei Lee, *Landscape Remains – Roystonea regia* (H.B. et K.) Cook, 2020, Arches watercolour paper (cold press), pencils, charcoal, iron, wood, magnet. Photo by Daniella Romano.

Botanical Classification

The aura of mystery in John Thomson's photographs alludes to the perception that Taiwan was still 'undiscovered' and thus in need of documentation as a way of heightening awareness of its potential for economic and social development. He spent the period from 1868 to 1872 photographing China (including Taiwan as a Chinese territory at the time), later publishing *China and Its*

People: A Series of Two Hundred Photographs (1873). Thomson's practice is representative of the curiosities of British travelers following a long history of interest in the China region during the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, photography became a staple part of inquiry into foreign cultures (Allen 2014, 1011). Classification was a major tool of imposing Western conceptions of the natural environment onto Taiwan; W. A. Pickering, for example, commented that "there is much scope for the collector" in his travel narrative (Pickering 2016, 38). The Japanese colonial government would build upon the British traveler's more casual recordings and begin to catalogue the entirety of Taiwan's flora and fauna in order to govern effectively. Both Low and Suzuki cite Japan's turn to ecology as a way of producing knowledge about Taiwan and thus assert its colonial policy (Low 2003; Morris-Suzuki 2013). Established to showcase this practice during the Japanese era, Taiwan's oldest natural history museum — the National Taiwan Museum in Taipei — not only symbolises of the taming of nature through practices of cataloguing and collecting, but its neoclassical architecture also serves as reminder of the influence of European colonial vision.

In the second room of the exhibition, depictions of the rigidity of Japanese power dissolve and the line between colonial and local context becomes blurred. In Su-Chen Hsu and Chien-Ming Lu's *Plants in Adverse Environments — Taiwan Series* (2008), the tradition of botanical research is redefined with imported and exported plant matter presented as equally significant in the rituals of daily life. Prints of culturally significant flora both native and imported are accompanied by handwritten texts about their properties and use. Citing the British and Japanese history of ecological classification, this work features images and scientific descriptions of plants found in Taiwan. However, instead of focusing on their profitability, the text in the work explores the various plants' histories and their significance today. By reclaiming scientific practices of classification within a primarily Taiwanese narrative, the artists assert the distinctively local character of Taiwan's ecology. Considering Bate's argument of colonial photography as one representing 'fantasy', the figure

of ecology has evolved from Thomson's images that show colonial fantasies of economic gain for outsiders and the implementation of a 'civilising' mission as population management, to one wherein the natural landscape and ecology of Taiwan becomes intimately merged with local memory, history and identity.

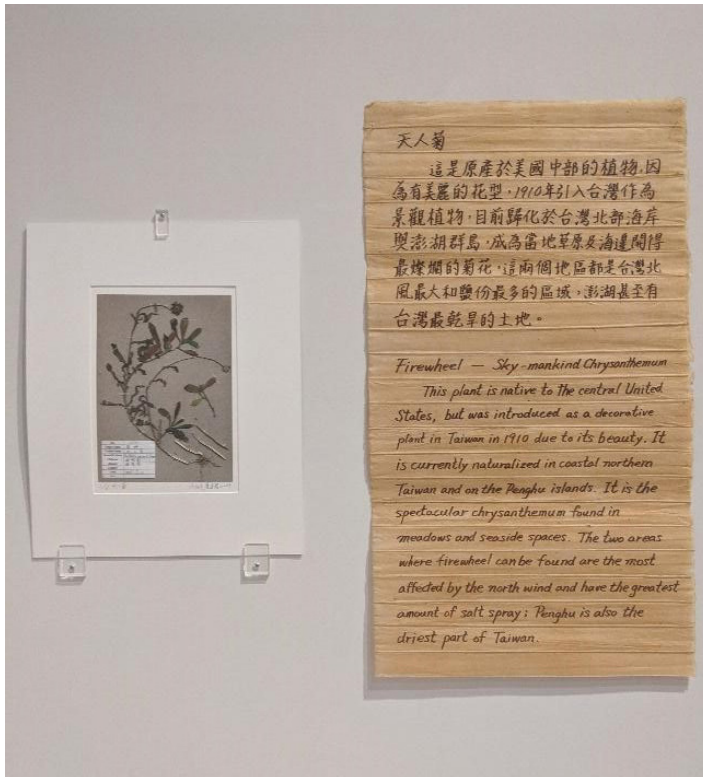


Figure 4. Su-Chen Hsu and Chien-Ming Lu, *Plants in Adverse Environments* — *Taiwan Series*, 2008, Texts: Handmade paper, prints, Hand-made paper, acrylic, prints. Photo courtesy of Tainan Art Museum.

Ecological Development

Cataloguing Taiwan's ecology ultimately led to the cultivation of

plants to further Japanese colonial policy to turn it into a profitable territory; sugar cane, bananas and palms were introduced to Taiwan by the Japanese colonial administration. Synonymous with Taiwanese identity, particularly that of its aboriginal people, betel nuts are also central to the exhibition. However, in contrast to the other plants represented, it was not introduced by the Japanese colonial authorities and was not cultivated for financial benefit; rather, the production and consumption of betel nuts was stigmatised due to its association with a lower class of people (Takamori 2019, 17). In contrast, the establishment of the sugar cane industry and the export of Taiwanese bananas to Japan boosted the local colonial economy. Despite relying heavily on the natural environment, Taiwan's INDIGENOUS people were perceived to lack the ability to make meaningful use of it. Morris-Suzuki argues, "the role of the coloniser was to be a civilising mission that would enable the forest riches to be put to their proper use." (Morris-Suzuki 2013, 231). In cultivating these plants, the Japanese colonial administration was 'civilising' the untamed and pristine environment depicted in Thomson's photographs, financially benefiting from Taiwan's tropical climate whilst subsequently altering its ecology.

Economic change had an inevitable impact upon the daily lives of Taiwanese people, and the photography of Chin Shu Huang in the third exhibition space serves as a reminder of its legacy. *Banana Distribution* and *Coconuts Vendor*, both dated 1955, show bananas being shipped by merchants and coconuts for sale at a local market. In these photographs, bananas and coconuts no longer appear as symbols of Japanese colonial rule; rather, they remain embedded in the daily lives of the Taiwanese people. While plants as commodities dominate the frame of the photographs, the anonymous figures reinforce the dominance of ecology within Taiwanese notions of identity. In direct comparison with Thomson's photography, they embody the desires of the gaze present in his photographs. The untamable and unknown natural environment has become tamed and commodified, forgotten in the service of the local economy.

Whilst Huang's photography focuses on the economic legacy of plant cultivation and commodification, Etan Pavavalung's



Figure 5. Etan Pavavalung, *The Fragrance of Mountain Wind*, 2013. Print and acrylic on wood. Photo by Francis Maravillas.

The Fragrance of Mountain Wind (2013) [Figure 5] depicts the development of the spiritual and psychological. Both British explorers and the Japanese colonial government were interested in Taiwan's INDIGENOUS population and their relationship with the environment. In his account of Japanese colonial image making, historian Paul Barclay comments on the "savagery" depicted in images of INDIGENOUS peoples, which served to reinforce the coloniser's civilising mission (Barclay 2010, 86). The modernisation of Taiwan, along with the commodification of plants and crops disrupted INDIGENOUS reservations, threatening the identity and survival of local tribes. Pavavalung explores the impact of this greed and environmental destruction. In his work, layered patterns dominate the print, INDIGENOUS wild lilies float through space returning the viewer to the original spirit of the mountain wherein the destructive effects of colonialism gives way to the regeneration of nature. As one of the last works in the exhibition, Pavavalung's print appears as a fitting concluding remark to the changing natural and ecological landscapes of Taiwan foreshadowed by Thomson's photographs

at the beginning of the exhibition. In this way, the effort to re-envision the Taiwanese landscape is intimately intertwined with the enduring legacies of the island's colonial past.

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Notes on Contributor:

Daniella Romano is a CCSCA student originally from Buckinghamshire in the UK. Her research interests revolve around the intersection of history and exhibition

practice, as well as the role of colonial narratives present in contemporary art in East Asia. She is a History and History of Art graduate from the University of Nottingham, specialising in Enlightenment Thought (Gender, Race and Empire) and Renaissance Cartography. She has volunteered and interned in various culture and heritage-based institutions/organisations including St Paul's Cathedral, Imperial War Museum, Crop Up Gallery, National Taiwan Museum, and Studio Michael Lin. She co-curated 'Undercover Routes' at Nanhai Gallery (20–27 November 2021).

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Francis Maravillas.

ASSISTANT EDITORS

Leora Joy Jones, Christopher Whitfield.

ART DIRECTION & DESIGN

Leora Joy Jones, Justine Rigal, Christopher Whitfield.

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Shormi Ahmed, Fernanda Hsiuh, Leora Joy Jones, Francis Maravillas, Lu Pei-Yi, Cullen Pitney, Daniella Romano, Christopher Whitfield.

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