

Roundtable Review: ‘The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection’

Lu Pei-Yi

Leora Joy Jones

Fernanda Hsiuh

Christopher Whitfield

Co-curated by Nobuo Takamori, independent curator and historian, and Ping Lin, ex-director of the Taipei Fine Art Museum (TFAM), ‘The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection’ (25 July 2020–25 October 2020) was a revisionist historical exhibition displayed across multiple galleries on the second floor of TFAM. Thematically separated into several sections, the show examined notions of the South, particularly in relation to Taiwan’s political histories with various countries and regions. Beginning with the effects of the Cold War in Southeast Asia (1940s to 1960s); and moving on to art exchanges between Taiwan and the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, Singapore, Latin America, and Africa, the exhibition included re-commissioned and newly commissioned works by contemporary artists as well as archival projects. In July of 2020, Nobuo Takamori gave a guided tour of ‘The Secret South’ to students and lecturers from the MA program on Critical and Curatorial Studies in Contemporary Art (CCSCA), at the National Taipei University of Education. This is what they thought of the exhibition.

From Hidden Collection to Witness of History

Lu Pei-Yi



Installation view of ‘The Secret South’ exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2020. Courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

The collection is an integral feature of a museum, presenting the mission and rationale of an institution, as well as reflecting the social-political circumstance of the time. However, as time passes, some collected works are merely well-preserved in storage and seldom have a chance to be seen in public. How can we make the invisible museum collection visible? How can contemporary curatorial approaches offer new and alternative ways of seeing and reading the museum collection? What are the possibilities for curatorial intervention in the museum collection?

‘The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection’, an exhibition that drew on the

Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) collection, offers a fertile case-study for exploring these questions. In contrast to conservative collection-based exhibitions that adopt a linear chronology based on art history, 'The Secret South' aimed to provide a fresh perspective on the significance of TFAM's permanent collections, as well as a new way of understanding its practices of collection and acquisition. There are three components of this show: artworks based on collections, research projects and archives, and commissioned works by contemporary artists.

The TFAM collection relating to countries in the Global South is sparse. Works of art were collected on sporadic occasions, either as official diplomatic gifts, private donations or artists' travel sketches in the context of the ideological rivalries of the Cold War. Most of those works were kept in storage for a long time and were difficult to incorporate into a traditional art historical narrative. These works, therefore, are merely seen as items, or even labels, on the collection list. 'The Secret South' exhibition not only drew from TFAM's collection but also from various sources, such as loaned works from other museums, works provided by the artists themselves or their relatives, as well as several archives. In this way, the history of the Cold War is revealed through these shreds of evidence hidden in the collection. The works enact a form of testimony that bear witness to complex cultural dynamics and politics of the Cold War. Moreover, as a supplement to this exhibition and as a potential mode of knowledge production, the archive section provides a historical context for understanding the international exchanges during the Cold War during the period of martial law under the Kuomintang (KMT). In addition, the artist commissions in the exhibition work not only connect the previous two sections, they also foreground the current socio-political situation thereby evoking a critical concept for renewing and revitalising the collection — that is, a living and dynamic history is more important than a 'dead object'.

Overall, 'The Secret South' exhibition demonstrates a mode of curating the museum collection, one in which the curator could be seen as a theatre director to present the historical moment.

A Paradoxical Parody: Mei Dean-E's *I-DEN-TI-TY* and Taiwan's Search for International Recognition

Leora Joy Jones



Installation view of *I-DEN-TI-TY*, 1996, 2020, in 'The Secret South' at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Mei Dean-E's installation *I-DEN-TI-TY* (1996, 2020) is firmly situated within the historical and research based context of 'The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection' at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), which explores Taiwan's relations within the Global South through art and visual culture. In particular, *I-DEN-TI-TY* offers a thoughtful and updated reflection on Taiwan's sense of self through a satirical examination of the island's history of exchanges with its allies past and present. It also humorously assesses Taiwan's uneasy relationship with China, in connection

to its ongoing quest to define a national identity¹ and gain international recognition. This installation was radical when it was first exhibited in 1994,² seven years after the lifting of Martial Law, as it reflected on Taiwan's nascent independence, and parodied Taiwan's diplomacy. Mei's renovated installation, re-commissioned by independent curator and historian Takamori Nobuo and Ping Lin (then director of TFAM who served as the show's chief curator), proves to be even more radical in 2020, precisely because its message is in many ways unaltered.

However, one change is unmistakable; Taiwan's dwindling number of allies. An isolated nation — historically and culturally influenced by China, and severely limited in its political reach due to cross-strait relations — Taiwan now has diplomatic ties with only a handful of countries. One by one, these alliances are falling away. In *I-DEN-TI-TY*, Mei parodies the fragility of Taiwan's diplomatic ties: black, red and yellow cloths embroidered with 'shame,' 'disgrace,' or 'ungrateful' cover the golden ceremonial plates of fifteen countries that have broken relations with Taiwan, providing a humorous and satirical reading of Taiwan's diplomacy. By commissioning Mei to update this work for 'The Secret South' in 2020, the curators reveal sensitive consideration of the ever changing reality of contemporary Taiwanese politics. Furthermore, *I-DEN-TI-TY* acquires new meaning in the context of the curatorial framework of 'The Secret South' as it is a revisionist show exploring the many secrets hidden within museum collections, and so *I-DEN-TI-TY* provides an alternative lens on what is often perceived as a singular monolithic history.

When it was first exhibited in 1996, *I-DEN-TI-TY* resembled an official bureaucratic reception area, complete with all the governmental decorations and regalia you would expect to see in presidential palaces, such as plaques, maps, flags, ceremonial plates, and official portraits. In 'The Secret South', the walls are no longer deep blue as in past iterations, but neon turquoise. With all the various traditional trappings of office placed on these bright walls, *I-DEN-TI-TY* literally and ironically highlights the performative aspects of diplomacy. In the new work, there is no connecting doorway out the room, and unlike previous

configurations, no seats are provided, accentuating the discomfort of endlessly waiting to hold audience with government officials. On one wall a pixelated illustration of Confucius looks out, a QR code hidden in his beard. The fugitive placement of the hyperlink possibly alludes to the ways in which China is perceived as subtly using culture as a tool for propaganda.³

Furthermore, *I-DEN-TI-TY* queries Taiwan's independence from the mainland. Hung on the wall are portraits of Tsai Ing-Wen and Xi Jinping, the current presidents of the two Republics.⁴ They stare out, side by side, at the end of a long red carpet, each one partially masked by the 'other's' flag. The ambiguous flag reversal shrewdly alludes to their intertwined histories, and Taipei's diplomatic dance with Beijing. Viewing *I-DEN-TI-TY* now, in light of this current junction of history and the various political changes that have occurred during the pandemic — such as Taiwan's successful handling of the COVID-19, China's increasingly forceful intimidation tactics, as well as the recent US elections — the work is pervaded with an uneasy irony. The passing years have turned the installation's presidential reception area into an unmanned and inhospitable waiting room.

Taiwan *still* has a nebulous political status and its inclusion in 'The Secret South' provoked even more controversy than ever before, as it offers a satirical interpretation of contemporary politics, revealing just how complicated Taiwan's international identity is. In fact, near the end of the show in October 2020, accusations were made that the inclusion of *I-DEN-TI-TY* in 'The Secret South' sparked "diplomatic hatred"⁵ and incited criticism of Taiwanese politics. Indeed, the mayor of Taipei suggested that Ping Lin be penalised. Lin, who had served as the director of TFAM since 2015 resigned suddenly after.

Hung on a wall near the official portraits of the two China leaders is a long red ribbon, its tail twisted into delicate bows, its silken end resting on a small ornate table. A heavy pair of scissors holds it down, alluding to the inevitability of more political severances. Much of Mei's installation revels in allusion, word play, and subversive language. Evidence of this is most apparent in the title of the work. Inscribed in gold on the red shellacked

plaque that hangs over the entrance is the word ‘identity’ and below it, the artist’s phonetic translation into Chinese (ai 哀, dun 敦, di 砥, ti 悌). Individually, these characters express Confucian principles such as ‘sorrow’, ‘honest persistence’, ‘encourage[ment]’, and ‘brotherhood’. Mei’s paradoxical combination of these Confucian principles alludes to Taiwan’s arduous and ongoing quest for identity on an international stage.

Accompanying the show is an origin story by the artist that candidly highlights and questions the uncertainties that underpin the island’s political status. An additional postscript declares that “this artwork would remain ongoing and would only be considered done when the Republic of China (Taiwan) is without any formal diplomatic alliances.”⁶ Does Mei intend for this room to serve as a parody of Taiwan’s performance of diplomacy? In light of the postscript on the wall, and the furore created by the inclusion of this work in ‘The Secret South’, it may also serve as a mausoleum for the dream of a Taiwanese identity. We can only wait and see what time will make of it.

Endnotes:

1. Many well established Taiwanese artists — such as Yang Mao-Lin, Wu Mali, Wu Tien-chang, and Yao Jiu-hung — examined national and individual identity in their practice after the lifting of Martial Law, and this is evident in much of their work throughout the nineties.
2. *I-DEN-TI-TY* was made in 1994 and was included in the 1996 Taipei Biennial titled 'Quest for Identity'. In 2000 it was collected by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM). It was widely displayed across Taiwan in different configurations over the years, and in 2020 TFAM recommissioned the artist to update it to reflect current changes. The dates provided by TFAM refer to the 1996 Taipei Biennial and 2020 re-commission.
3. The QR code in Confucius' beard links to a BBC article on Confucian Institutes opening worldwide that are rumoured to propagate Chinese propaganda. This was included to highlight and comment on the many ways in which culture is used to soft-sell China, and as a means to sway perceptions of the CCP. Pratik Jakhar "Confucius Institutes: The growth of China's controversial cultural branch" in BBC News, September 2019.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49511231>
4. In its prior configuration, presidents Lee Teng-hui (Taiwan) and Deng Xiaoping (China) were on the walls. In this installation, their portraits are on the floor, leaning against a wall nearby. Lee's face partially covers Deng's.
5. The inclusion of Mei's *I-DEN-TI-TY* in 'The Secret South' at TFAM sparked great controversy just before the show closed. One Taipei City Councillor thought the work stirred up xenophobia, and used inappropriate language, especially in light of the current political events. When asked to comment on this, the mayor of Taipei suggested that Ping Lin — the prior director of TFAM and chief curator of 'The Secret South'— be penalised. TFAM responded to the mayor's suggestion by reminding him that this installation was an expression of the artist's perspective and was by no means reflective of the institution's political views. TFAM also highlighted how, furthermore, *I-DEN-TI-TY* was exhibited several times over the last two decades in many different institutions, and Mei had won multiple international and local awards for this work. In response to this, another Taipei City Councillor wrote that "As a free and democratic country or the representative[s] of this country, we should try our best to protect the rights of creators to express and exhibit." However, Lin unexpectedly resigned. TFAM affirmed that her sudden departure was linked to her wish to retire soon,

and not simply in response to the accusations made against the curators.

6. TFAM. Mei Dean-E 'Origin' wall text. *I-DEN-TI-TY* (1996, 2020).

New World: Taiwanese – Latin American Art Exchange

Fernanda Hsueh



Xenia Mejia Padilla *The Popular Inspiration*, 1997. Mixed media. Photo by Leora Joy Jones.

The fifth gallery of ‘The Secret South’ is titled “New World: Taiwanese – Latin American Art Exchange at TFAM, 1980s–2000s.” Taiwan and Central America are both part of the Global South, which is closely intertwined with the geopolitics of the time frame spanning the Cold War to the present. The diplomatic relationship between Taiwan and its Central American allies led to the commencement of a series of Central American art exhibitions at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) from the 1980s to the 2000s, resulting in numerous additions to TFAM’s permanent collection.¹ The artwork exhibited in the ‘New World’ gallery were all selected from the museum’s permanent collection and created by artists from Guatemala, Honduras, El

Salvador and Costa Rica. These videos, paintings, photographs and collages reflect the social and political conditions in Central America at the time.

Although the four Latin American countries share similar postcolonial histories of political and social upheaval due to Spanish colonisation and subsequent independence movements, Central America is still a large and diverse region, and the art produced there is neither unified nor homogenous. Many works in 'The Secret South' depict groups of marginalised people who suffered oppression during the multiple civil wars and coups² which occurred during the Cold War. Along with Euro-North American dominance, these were common themes that contribute to the historical context that is crucial to the understanding of Central American art. Take for example *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1998) by the Guatemalan artist, Luis Gonzalez Palma. It consists of two sepia toned portraits of women above a silver-white Mayan textile embroidered with the words 'Anatomie de la Melancholie'.³ The woman on the left resembles a religious Madonna figure, complete with a backlit halo. To the right is a close-up portrait of a younger girl staring directly at the camera. Both images are filled with mysticism. The artist uses symbols and imagery to present and construct the identity of the Mayan people, and make visible the women who have been excluded and discriminated against in society. In contrast with the serenity of these images, *The Popular Inspiration* (1997) by Honduran artist Xenia Meija Padilla presents a sequence of paintings across sixteen square collages in shades of pinkish-red. The colour implies bloody, feminine elements, applied to simple figures who are falling or fighting in multiple chaotic and brutal situations. The artist depicts the violence of riots and natural disasters⁴ that she experienced in Honduras, but obscures that violence by turning it into childlike graffiti.

These two artists developed and created their artworks based on regional circumstances and histories. Each action that the artists' perform in their works serve as a metaphor for social realities that need to be presented and comprehended based on each region's specific historical context. Unlike other galleries

which addressed Taiwan's diplomatic relations with individual countries (Taiwan/Indonesia), the curators of 'The Secret South' grouped together artists from many countries in Latin America, leaving visitors unable to properly address the detailed historical context of the artworks. Moreover, the approach of only focusing on the cultural diplomatic exchanges limits the exhibition's ability to present a more comprehensive narrative and context for the artworks. Nonetheless, the curatorial framework in "The New World" gallery still provided a new and interesting angle for reflecting on TFAM's Central American art collection. These Central American artists all have their own colourful and unique local perspectives that need to be addressed and expanded on more deeply.

Endnotes:

1. Between 1985 and 2008, TFAM started to hold a series of Latin American art exhibitions. Around the same time, in 1987, the abolition of Martial Law in Taiwan marked a new political era, and the country began more aggressive diplomatic tactics with Central American countries in order to solidify and legitimise the international status of the post martial law Taiwanese government (for instance, the president LEE Teng-hui started diplomatic visits after CHIANG Ching-kuo's presidential term). In 2008 president MA Ying-jeou who represented the KMT party changed the diplomatic strategy by reducing diplomatic tactics with Central American countries in order to develop diplomacy with China. At that time TFAM put on a series of commencement of Chinese art exhibitions and refrained from Central American art exhibitions.
2. El Salvador experienced the Salvadoran Civil War from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Meanwhile, Guatemala suffered 36 years of civil war from the 1960s to 1996. At that time, INDIGENOUS Guatemalans were targeted by brutal state-led repression. In Honduras, the military seemed to hand over its power to the democratic government, but in actual fact the military made alliances with the US government to plague its neighbors. In contrast, following the Costa Rican Civil War the provisional president abolished the military in 1948, which led to a more peaceful and non-domestic military dictatorship in Costa Rica.
3. Luis Gonzalez Palma makes work that addresses Mayan INDIGENOUS identity and his experience witnessing decades of civil war in Guatemala. "The New World" gallery exhibited four photograph collages of sepia-tinted portraits with the subjects facing towards the camera. The collages contain red paint, transparency sheet, text, and traditional Mayan textiles and embroidery. The Mayan peoples see embroidery as a significant technique, which represents a shared history.
4. Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America in 1998.

Taiwan in Africa in Taiwan: Responsibilities of Artistic Exchange

Christopher Whitfield



Installation view of *Project B — Chinese Pagoda (Domaine Agro-Industriel Presidentiel de la N'Sele)* in 'The Secret South' at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2020. Image courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Though 'The Secret South' exhibition is almost three quarters of a century removed from Bandung, this exploration of Taiwan's (ROC) southward orientation within the arts traces a map which is largely unable to afford the African continent a place within the country's vision of exchange. Taiwan was officially absent from the historic Bandung Conference of 1955. Recognised as one of the central large scale venues for Afro-Asian diplomatic engagement, the conference was pivotal in linking the political self-imaginaries burgeoning in post-colonial nations across the global South. However, as Lu Peng-Po observed in a February

1955 article for Taiwan Review (then Free China Review), as the large majority of the thirty states invited [to the Bandung Conference] and all of the sponsoring states are Asian, it may be preferable to call it the Asian-African Conference (Lu 1955, n.p) Similarly, in ‘The Secret South’ we are presented with a narrative of Taiwanese southward exchange that is thus far only able to configure itself largely through a lens of inter-Asian interaction. In its attempt to provide some evidence of existing artistic exchange with the African continent, the exhibition pursues both human and nonhuman entanglements, unraveling networks of modern political and historic cultural transactions. However, reiterating the consequence of Lu Peng-Po’s preference of sixty years prior, the imbalance in focus quietly marginalises African presence within the discourse on Southward exchange, and participation in relations between nations of the Global South.

Historian Hao Chen tells us that during the Cold War, the struggle for legitimacy between the ROC and PRC was to become all consuming (Chen 2021, 257). Ironically, amongst the archival works collected in ‘The Secret South’, nowhere is this more succinctly pronounced than in an artwork which takes Africa as its focus. *Project B – Chinese Pagoda (Domaine Agro-Industriel Présidentiel de la N’Sele)* (2020) is a commissioned work by Taiwanese artists Yao Jui Chung and Hank Cheng, which documents an architectural landmark within an agro-industrial park, built just outside of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the Mobutu Sese Seko era. In their telling of the site’s history — a presidential villa, built by Taiwanese agents for one of the continents most corrupt dictators, funded through US intervention — the artists ruminate on its decline. “After Mobutu’s regime ended, the building has become a ruin, and is referred to by locals as ‘Chinese Pagoda’, and they are unclear about which ‘China’ had actually constructed it.” Even in the contemporary moment, with Taiwanese diplomatic relations on the continent dwindling to a single ally, and nations still grappling with the aftermath of such intervention, Chung and Cheng lament, or perhaps chastise, the fact that locals apparently did not feel it to be a priority to distinguish the two China’s when

sorting through what is left.

Implied in Chung and Cheng's statement is a vision of civil, rather than diplomatic exchange — an expected international awareness of the political complexities that underpin the intersection of personal and national identity. The networks of exchange that substantiate this type of consciousness are dynamically excavated in 'The Secret South'. The exhibition is districted into rooms dedicated to particular countries, regions, or trajectories of exchange. Within them a patchwork of historical anecdotes, archived snapshots, and collected artworks attest to the interpersonal foundations of the cultural understanding central to the exhibition's intent. Many of the interactions captured by the works in the exhibition suggest a kind of soft-power that goes beyond the influence of officially sanctioned engagement. In 2016 the Ministry of Culture (MoC) were asked why African nations had been disenfranchised from participation in their projects intended to promote international artistic exchange.¹ Representatives claimed that "for policy makers, 'Africa' is still a dangerous area of poverty, war, and people who need to flee to Europe".² When one considers the international political support for regimes such as Seko's, and their violent ramifications, a fear based exclusion of African subjects from access to dynamic avenues of cultural exchange represents a particularly hypocritical failing. The fact that these circumstances impede exchange at the interpersonal level is meaningful in various ways. Not only does it allow lopsided representations of African subjects to continue to prevail, but exhibitions such as 'The Secret South' — which are underwritten by governmental policy which so often enables international exchange — will remain unable to fully represent or benefit from the potential of the region's southward orientation.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, the presentation by the Nusantara Archive examines unseen traces of exchange between Taiwan and the African continent. In Chang En Man's work *The Snail Paradise* 2019 the artist studies the incorporation of the Giant African land snail into the biome of Taiwan. The display exhibits documents alongside a collection of shells, a mingling

of human and natural archives. This work intends to query the anthropocentrism of discourse related to exchange. However, in regards to the examination of the African context within 'The Secret South' the work takes on a secondary aspect. Pursuing the global trajectory of this nonhuman specimen also unearths pathways of human exchange that predate our contemporary political constructs. Though in and of itself the movement of a snail cannot be framed as an "interaction", the act of tracing the assisted migrations of these nonhuman creatures that have become so deeply embedded in the ecologies that surround us, also speaks to the expansive opportunity for intimate and varied interpersonal connection. These tangents suffuse histories of exchange with possibilities that are not limited by the requirements of current political or national ideology. Organic and historic links already surround us, leaving trails in the underbrush. Outside of the limited scope thus far envisioned by those who sculpt the trajectories of international dialogue, as yet unrealised forms of contact and exchange abound.

Endnotes:

1. These projects include The Jade, Coloured Glaze, and Coral Projects, which were all iterations of the Ministry of Culture's program to promote international artistic exchange.
2. The Stand News, Accessed 12 February 2021.
<https://www.thestandnews.com/art/%E5%A4%96%E4%BA%A4%E5%9B%B0%E5%A2%83%E4%B8%AD-%E5%8F%B0%E7%81%A3%E8%97%9D%E6%96%87%E5%9C%88%E7%9A%84%E8%B6%85%E7%B4%9A%E9%80%A3%E7%B5%90-i/>

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Notes on Contributors:

Lu Pei-Yi is a curator, researcher and art critic based in Taipei. She was awarded her PhD in humanities and Cultural Studies (London Consortium) by the University of London in 2010. Now, she is an associate professor at the MA Program on Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Art (CCSCA), at the National Taipei University of Education. Her research interests are mainly divided into two parts: one relates to Off-Site Art (artistic practice outside museums, including institutional critique, public art, art and city, community art, socially-engaged art, and activist art), and the other is exhibition histories with a specific focus on Taiwan exhibition histories after the 90s, curatorial research and exhibition-making.

Leora Joy Jones is a poet, photographer, writer, editor, and arts practitioner. She is interested in the perverted intersections between art, the practice of everyday life, and popular culture. Recently, her art criticism has been trained on ecological art practices and their potential to shift the ways in which people

perceive their relationship with the environment. Born in the USA, and raised in South Africa, she now lives and works in Taiwan. Leora holds a degree in Fine Art from the university currently known as Rhodes, and is earning an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Art (CCSCA) in Taipei. A founder of the Taipei Poetry Collective, Leora hosts readings and biweekly poetry workshops. She is assistant editor at *Southerly*, and her writing can be found in *4A Papers*, *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Design Anthology*, *the Newslens International*, and *Southerly*. You can see more of her writing at leorajoy.com and her photography on instagram [@loveleorajoy](https://www.instagram.com/loveleorajoy).

Fernanda Hsiuh's research interests revolve around visual culture and performance art. Her curatorial focus and practice often explore body, memory, and history through performance events and exhibitions. Hsueh is currently studying for a master's degree in Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Art at the National Taipei University of Education.

Christopher Whitfield is a writer based in Taipei.

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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