

Recovering the Mainland and Liberating Taiwan

Concerning History: Yao Jui-Chung's Examination of the Remains

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Two films in Yao Jui-Chung's latest show *Phantom of History* are two minutes and twenty-eight seconds long. Yao Jui-Chung said he didn't intend to make a reference to the 228 Incident, it was just a coincidence. Perhaps what revolves around these three sensitive numbers is a task that political language would gladly carry out, but it probably doesn't lie within the province of art, at least not now. What attracts my attention is that Yao Jui-Chung seized this coincidence and then played on its dark humor.

Perhaps we should say that the stories Yao Jui-Chung wants to tell in *Phantom of History* are basically ghost stories concerned with how the ghosts of the authoritarian era make their presence felt in society today. Anyone who grew up in Taiwan during the cross-strait cold war can easily detect the atmosphere of the authoritarianism in Yao's artwork. However, this reading doesn't possess the necessary emotional construct to create feelings of nostalgia, instead Yao Jui-Chung intends to delight us with *kuso* humor. In his work, the two opposing yet great historical undertakings of recovering the Mainland and liberating Taiwan never seems to be taken too seriously. Therefore, when we watch the grandiose scene of the Generalissimo reviewing troops for National Day celebrations beside the ever-shrinking presidential palace, we can't help but split our sides with laughter. In another film, when the national anthem starts to play, we see a PLA soldier donning his red star insignia hat and successfully occupying the peak of Taiwan's Jade Mountain, and Yao Jui-Chung quietly mutters, "Finally, he's liberated Taiwan." This all seems to have been done with minimal effort.

Ghost Stories from the Authoritarian Era

History is in our bones, political ghosts make their presence felt and Yao Jui-Chung's ghost stories take place in the present. The film with same title as the show, *Phantom of History* conveniently came out in 2008 when the DPP government, who had been in power since 2000, frantically started implementing their consciousness revision projects, which were anti-Chiang Kai-shek, anti-Mainland, anti-KMT party-state, under the pressure of an impending regime change. Along with controversies like textbook revisions, name changes in state run enterprises, removal of bronze Chiang Kai-shek statues from public areas, changing the name of Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (中正紀念堂) to Taiwan National Democracy Memorial Hall (臺灣民主紀念館) and removing sentries at the tomb of the two Chiangs (兩蔣), politicians have been assiduously criticizing, quoting and re-evaluating the legacy of the authoritarian era, which, as it turns out, is sometimes just history, but other times a curse. The authoritarian era didn't just completely disappear from Taiwan after the abrogation of martial law, but rather lingered on in a different, ghost-like manifestation to haunt Taiwanese society down to this day. Just like in the film, where a faceless solitary figure in black is goose stepping among an assortment of disused Chiang Kai-shek statues, one might suppose he is going somewhere, but in fact, he is just walking in circles. Accordingly, it is difficult for us not to see these works by Yao Jui-Chung that have emerged in the context of contemporary Taiwan as perfectly positioned political allegories.

In *Mt. Jade Floating*, the artist climbed Jade Mountain to summon another ghost from history. Originally there was a bust of Yu Youren (于右任) at the summit of Jade Mountain that had been placed there by the KMT in 1966. In 1996, someone cut down the statue and it fell into a ravine. The Yushan National Park Headquarters erected another statue, but this time a stone tablet engraved with the words, "Mt. Jade Main Peak." It wasn't until 2007 that the director of the 228 Memorial Museum, Yeh Poh-Wen (葉博文), publicly

explained that it was he and a few friends who cut down the statue to, “restore our Jade Mountain's original features.” He also didn't forget to mention, “there is no regime or government in this entire world as ruthless and uncivilized.”

If Yao Jui-Chung were to explore the full extent of this event's political implications, he would be doomed to a morass of endless name calling and empty rhetoric, and this really isn't the purview of the artist. What first attracted Yao Jui-Chung's attention were the emblematic features of Jade Mountain (both politically and geographically) and its sublime and inviolable quality, which provides a focal point for his intervening action.¹ However, this doesn't prevent us from simultaneously seeing the mountain as both Taiwan's highest peak and also an ideological battle field in Yao's work *Mt. Jade Floating*. If we suppose that the original purpose of erecting the Yu Youren statue was to manifest his intention of recovering the mainland found in his famous poem, “bury me on the high mountains, so that I can look at the mainland...” then following the rise in localism of the 1990s, which corresponds with the statue toppling incident, another wave of activism focused on making Jade Mountain a symbol of national identity has already begun. Jade Mountain isn't simply Jade Mountain anymore, but has become a high and mighty symbol of national identity.² Even if Yu Youren can no longer gaze at the mainland from this promontory, it is difficult for us to see Jade Mountain in its original state, much in the same way that the authoritarian era can't be erased by the continual destruction of Chiang Kai-shek statues.

Jacques Derrida attempted to replace the traditional western idea of ontology with his notion of hauntology. In his view, everything in this life is necessarily constructed upon spiritual states and the past. History is entangled with the present and future, and like a ghost is repeatedly appearing and disappearing.³ Today, the historical view that Yao Jui-Chung gives us seems like a local Taiwanese version of hauntology, responding to the complex puzzle of nationalism and systems of authority spanning the Taiwan Strait that have plagued us for so long. It has been very difficult for us to make a clean break from the authoritarian era; on the contrary, we are always thinking about how we can coexist with our historical ghosts.

1 Yao Jui-Chung said himself that the inspiration for *Territory Take Over* came from a time when he needed to urinate. In 1992, before the head of the Yu Youren bust was chopped off, Yao, someone who loved climbing, once went to Jade Mountain and urinated at the summit. He said, “The experience of peeing at the top of Taiwan's highest peak liberated me. I wanted to pee all over Taiwan, but then thought maybe it is too big, so I found a place that was occupied by a foreign regime. This facilitated the making of *Territory Take Over*.”

2 Starting in 1997, the publisher of the magazine *New Idea* (新觀念雜誌) started the Jade Mountain Campaign, which combined business, media, national ceremonies, mountain climbing and arts and culture to discuss the various significances of the Mountain. The National Alpine Association of Taiwan was formally established in 1999. The organization devoted itself to promoting the concept of Jade Mountain, the highest peak in Taiwan, as a symbol of national identity. On May 20, 2000, Chen Shuibian (陳水扁) was elected president and Ode to Jade Mountain by Tyzen Hsiao (蕭泰然) was played at his inauguration ceremony. Also, work of the poet Lee Min-Yung (李敏勇) was read aloud. The Taiwan Post Company issued a commemorative stamp for the occasion, using Jade Mountain as the backdrop. To view Dai Bao-Tsun's (戴寶村) essay *The History of Jade Mountain and Taiwanese Identity*, see www.twhistory.org.tw/20011119.htm.

3 Jacques Derrida, in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*, theorized that after the decline of Marxism the ghost of Marx would still continue to haunt Europe. Derrida critiqued Francis Fukuyama's 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, emphasizing that history had come to end along with the end of the cold war and the defeat of socialism.

Raising the Ghost, or Examining the Remains?

Perhaps the above clarification of historical context still can't contain Yao's original concept for these works, and I think merely considering them local versions of hauntology, or a certain kind of resurrection of the past, still more or less indulges too heavily in a romanticized interpretation. I don't think these art action videos by Yao Jui-Chung mean to use poetic language to arrive at some spiritual essence, but on the contrary are devoted to materialistic aspects. There is no way we can neglect the other things he calls back with his *Phantom of History* video, filmed in Tzu-Hu Memorial Sculpture Park (慈湖雕塑紀念公園).

In 1998, twenty bronze statues of Chiang Kai-shek were placed at the Da-Shi Township Community Center, in addition to several more stored at a warehouse outside of the nearby office of the town mayor. They were all collected from various cities and towns around Taiwan, and at the time the Da-Shi town mayor intended on creating a Chiang Kai-shek sculpture park, and so solicited the no longer used statues from various locations. In 2004, the sculpture park formally opened and today there are one-hundred and twenty-five statues of Chiang in the park.

All of these Chiang Kai-shek statues were situated at public offices, schools, parks and traffic circles in the old days, and have been assembled here in this park today. The statues are sometimes sitting and other times standing, smiling just like they always have and no longer occupy the center of places, but are dispersed along the sides of walking paths as scenery. Sightseers, who are not only from Taiwan, have started to appear in front of the statues, and the local government believes that in the future the majority of visitors will be from Mainland China. Last year, tour agents in Taoyuan County went to great lengths to make the two Chiangs the spokesmen of Taoyuan County and not only held an art fair but also released some two Chiangs souvenirs. Today the two Chiangs have already become a part of Taiwan's culture industry, and local officials even predict that after tourists start coming to Taiwan from the Mainland, the value of the tourist industry in Tzu-Hu will increase ten fold from the current 2 billion NTD a year, and surpass both Ali Mountain and Sun Moon Lake.⁴

The film *Phantom of History* acts like a prism, in that it refracts the ghosts of the authoritarian era haunting the contemporary consumer society of Taiwan. This situation seems to be schizophrenic in nature: on one hand, according to the official government position, it is no longer politically correct to deify Chiang Kai-shek by leaving a respectful space before his name, yet on the other hand Chiang's fall from grace has landed him in the midsts of the flourishing materialism of contemporary Taiwanese society, where his image now circulates and accumulates. The authoritarian past has become both an intangible spiritual presence and a tangible, ready-made cultural product in contemporary Taiwanese society.

Yao Jui-Chung, using his strategies to capture the schizophrenia of this situation, brings us to disused structures, ruins, gateway arches, amusement parks and sculpture parks. History has always emerged in material form in his work, and this kind of attention has made it possible for Yao Jui-Chung to carry out his historical revisions in a manner not at all like raising ghosts, but on the contrary, like examining the remains. Yao Jui-Chung's enlightening message for us is that history isn't merely some illusory spectre, but rather a stiff cadaver that is still among us.

The Unknown Interloper

4 There once was a study that indicated that the third most popular destination for Mainland Chinese tour groups in Taiwan were cultural sites related to the two Chiangs, right behind Ali Mountain and Sun Moon Lake.

Facing these cadavers of history, Yao Jui-Chung seems to value the kind of emptiness after the dissipation of passions that they suggest, rather than their historical content. He uses absurd, futile and nihilistic behavior to probe and verify this emptiness: pissing to declare his sovereignty, staging a single-handed counter attack against the Mainland, invoking the slogan “the world is for all” in front of Chinatown and even scaling Jade Mountain and urinating to liberate Taiwan. The surge of passions in the grand narrative have always resulted in an anticlimax in Yao's work.

In nearly every scene, Yao Jui-Chung looks like some unknown interloper who doesn't seem to belong. His body appears in every scene, but only for a very short period of time. This kind of relationship which Yao forms with his environments, which is much like a tourist who get a condensed version of the local history, is obviously a consciously applied strategy. In his *Territory Take Over*, this is abundantly clear from the sentence he appended to the end of the historical context he wrote for each place he visited that reads, “While visiting this site, Yao Jui-Chung pissed here marking his territory.” At the end of his film *March Past*, we can see the same absurd quality: dressed as the generalissimo, some guy repeatedly salutes and then turns and leaves an entire march-past as it continues on its way. In reality, Yao Jui-Chung shot this entire scene by hopping an amusement park fence without permission from its managing organization, and then later fled the area after the security guard shouted him off. The scene has always been there, but the person that appears is always an unknown interloper. I believe Yao Jui-Chung really takes delight in telling his audience that he is merely a traveler who can leave anytime just like the rest of us.

Yao Jui-Chung uses actions, impulses, and the power of his senses to undertake the examination of these cadavers of history, which gives his work an extremely intense sense of the physical body.⁵ Yao, as he is rushing about through various scenes, quickly appearing and then leaving, is always an activist, and even though these actions look absurd, the relationship between his body and the scene remains straight forward. He once used the sentence “the historical destiny of humanity has a certain incurable absurdity” to summarize the essence of his artwork. I don't think an assertion as simple as the absurdity of history is the only thing important here, what's more valuable is the rising intensity concealed in this statement: history is not just absurd, it is incurably absurd, so much so that whatever action we take, it is ultimately futile and the feeling of predestination envelops everything.

This is also why, even if Yao Jui-Chung can only give as much as a jump and as little as a piss for his grand historical projects, no matter how light his touch may look, it always has a certain feeling of striving. Just like in his solo exhibition at IT Park (1994), where he strapped a propeller around his neck and it seemed as if he had already left the earth's surface, but it also seemed like he was tied up as he was screaming, “I made myself lighter, but only because I had no choice!” This body that wants to be light actually cannot successfully get away, but is instead trapped in midair. This work was very similar in spirit to Hou Chun-Ming's *Erotic Paradise—Radical Diagram* (1990), in which an avant-garde artist is suspended by his head from a ship, and the text “any great effort is futile, but you must always persevere in your resistance.”

Who is this Guy?

If we say that a striving avant-garde artist is the impression we get from Yao Jui-Chung's early work, then his appropriation of historical styles and emphasis on makeup and theatricality in the *Phantom of History* exhibition make this work stick out from his what he had done in the past. Both of the film shorts *Phantom of History*, which has a style similar to the armed forces Juguang (莒光日) political education programs, and

5 This can be seen in his on-site surveys, like when he directly appears in his videos or when he documents Taiwan's disused structures with photography, and is also expressed in his carefully drawn, time consuming magical drawings.

Liberation of Taiwan, which deliberately recreates the quality of propaganda posters, recall the styles of our former patriotic culture. Yao Jui-Chung has completely stylized the authoritarian era, and his identity, when he appears, has become even more ambiguous due to the addition of more costuming, and this allows the work to transcend the notion of the artist just stepping into the frame or intervening in reality.

The multiple significance of roles in Yao Jui-Chung's action art videos was rare (or rarely noticed) before, but today is more important.⁶ That guy goose stepping in *Phantom of History*, could easily be taken for a flesh and blood version of old Chiang's ghost through the artist's clever use of makeup. However, I suspect that if the entire proposition were about the art of costuming, and we were restricted to interpreting his iconography this way then the result would be less pleasing. There is another issue that attracts my attention: who could this guy who time and again plays a leading role in Yao Jui-Chung's work be, besides an artist who is carrying out the mission in his own art projects? Is it possible that we can bring along this kind of question when taking another look at the image of Yao Jui-Chung in his work?

This guy actually looks a little familiar. He reminds us of that gender-free, gravity defying, fingerprint-less, mindless, mute, ghost-like, long and lanky figure in IT Park.⁷ That propeller around his neck is a metaphor for flying. In this next art action, he pretended to be a flying machine, and flew up in the air over various communist regions, obviously at the scene, but seemingly divorced from the scene. In *The World is for All China-China Beyond China*, he is holding his hands in the air, and although he is standing on the ground, he is still drifting in the sense that his identity is unclear. You can even pick up an air gun, and in an exercise of state power, take aim and shoot.

Yao Jui-Chung seems to take up the role of the other in his work, not only the *he* or *she* of indeterminate gender, but also a guy that can't be named. This guy often wears sunglasses, his identity isn't clear and like a ghost he appears in many places. He might be a soldier, secret agent, tourist, zealot, dissident, John Doe or someone taking a piss completely naked. Lately he has become a generalissimo and a PLA soldier. His posture is sometimes stiff and appears as a ghost in grand scenes from the past. Throughout Yao Jui-Chung's works, this mysterious guy always appears. If in the past we were accustomed to defining Yao Jui-Chung's action art videos as merely documentation of his actions, then in *Phantom of History* he has once again turned this definition into a question with the ambiguity, complexity and multiple meanings of his identity,⁸ and in this way, Yao Jui-Chung uses his own body to create an allegory.

6 Compared with this, Yao Jui-Chung is extremely skilled at using text to play with these multivalent meanings. Just like when he deliberately misreads or misinterprets English to create different meanings (even opposite meanings) by playing with pronunciation, and in doing so revolts against western logocentrism. This point also illustrates his ability to understand and apply postmodern theories.

7 Wang Jiin-Hwa "History is like Maggot in the Encounter of Infinite Fiction," Taipei: Pots Weekly, No.49, 1996.8.9., pp.6~7.

8 This tendency seems to become more obvious in his following work. According to Yao Jui-Chung, he plans on continuing the use of costuming in his up coming video work, using international issues as his subject matter.