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A preliminary investigation in contemporary Shamanic designs in Taiwan

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Abstract

Recent artistic and cultural creations and performances in Taiwan have exhibited certain trends and phenomena. Most creations focused on the essential features and social relationships of everyday lives, traditional craft, and folk traditions and rites and attempted to translate these elements into new forms of contemporary Taiwanese art. In truth, however, such phenomenon begun to appear in the late 1980s and 1990s following the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. However, these efforts were largely isolated until today where development became a continuous process, giving rise to an explosive growth of performances. Visual designs derived from these performances, as well as their essential principles and spirit, also brought forth new spectacles that helped to enrich the breadth and depth of Taiwan's cultural autonomy, expanded the vision of contemporary Taiwanese art and designs, and injected new vitality and energy into the sector. This round of archaism could also be described as an attempt to investigate and study people's lifestyles and ritual artifacts, helping to compensate for the disorderliness or displacement of spiritual focus experienced in the modern lifestyle. In other words, these activities could be regarded as efforts of tempered re-imagination amidst a world of spiritual dissonance, serving as an interchange of new and original forms and confluence of ancient spirits that linger in the memories and phantoms born of a modern mind for the purpose of generating a new and independent landscape of Taiwanese design.

The purpose of this paper is to adopt the principles of "shamanism" and imaginary elements of trance and possession to describe observations in recent attempts of spiritual archaism and restoration of folk traditions. Visual designs of the two theatrical performances of Cloud Gate 2 - 13 Tongues and Kau-Puê, Mutual Companionship in Near Future: Folk Art Parade x Design Exhibition were used as the template in an attempt to decipher the mindsets and modus operandi behind these design projects as well as to establish design concepts with subjective characteristics and descriptions of visual landscapes in contemporary Taiwanese design. The method of field research was adopted to unlock the spiritual inspirations of shamanic designs in the entrancing performances offered by contemporary Taiwanese arts. To achieve this purpose, this paper is divided into the chapters of description, primal characteristics, primal energies, Kau-Puê (socializing) and Rao-Jing (temple parades), symbolism, and utilization of materials, etc.

Key words: Shamanism, traditional folk culture, rituals, contemporary visual designs

Foreword

Taiwan's mainstream folk belief system is dominated by Mazu (Chinese sea goddess who was originally a shamaness from Fujian) and Wang-Ye (princes and lords). The ubiquitous nature of this system reveals Taiwan's overall social structure and relationships that serve as one of the pillars of social order and balance in everyday lives.

Rituals and ceremonies carried out in the worship of Mazu and Wang-Ye gave rise to various ritual forms, artifacts, and other types of material entities, forming an extremely unique aesthetic representation of Taiwanese folk beliefs. These entities, based upon everyday lives of the Taiwanese people, naturally^[1] form the foundations of a visual system that gave rise to an extremely large and complex aesthetic system. These include temple architectures, shrines, statues, and carvings of the gods, jian-nian (traditional temple gable mosaic), calligraphy, and painted and carved pillars and beams that encompass the traditional Han Chinese virtues of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness and blessings of fortune, wealth, longevity, and joy. All these can be regarded as commitments and projections of the people's desire for national peace, social stability, good weather, and productive lands. In addition to the temples, activities such as Rao-Jing (temple parades) and Kau-Puê (socializing), the associated theatrical performances such as open-air Koa-á-hì (Taiwanese folk opera) and Pò-tê-hì (glove puppet performances) dedicated to the gods, neon-lit performance trucks, brightly colored and dazzling Rao-Jing parade processions that include divine palanquins, umbrellas, dragon and tiger flags, Tîn-thâu (parade formations), pat-ka-tsiòng (Eight Underworld Officers), and Song Jiang Zhen (Song Jiang Battle Array), and Yi Ge (decorated parade wagons), and the sounds of drums, cymbals, and firecrackers produce a riotous carnival where people share their joy and bounties with their gods.

This paper proposes that a certain driving force lurks within contemporary Taiwanese art and designs, and is acting through these explosive aesthetic representations, expanding and extending into contemporary new visual imaginations and contemplations in an attempt to make up for the large gap in the

[1] Although *naturally* was used in this text, a number of other elements must be considered, such as Taiwan's colonial history and rule by foreign powers.

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