From National Art to Critical Globalism

Chu-Chiun Wei

To cite this article: Chu-Chiun Wei (2013) From National Art to Critical Globalism, Third Text, 27:4, 470-484, DOI: 10.1080/09528822.2013.814444

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2013.814444

Published online: 01 Aug 2013.

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From National Art to Critical Globalism
The Politics and Curatorial Strategies of the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

Chu-Chiun Wei

In late November 2012, a great controversy broke out in Taiwanese art circles when the Taipei Fine Arts Museum announced its plan for the 2013 Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, in which two of the three featured artists were to be foreigners.¹ This would be the first time that the Taiwan Pavilion featured works by non-Taiwanese nationals. At the centre of the controversy were questions such as: ‘What is the Taiwan Pavilion?’ and ‘What kind of biennials does Taiwan need?’ and ‘In the global art world embodied in the institution of biennial exhibitions, does an artist’s nationality still matter?’ The Taipei Fine Arts Museum and Esther Lu, the independent curator whose proposal for the 2013 Taiwan Pavilion was selected, defended their decision by saying that breaking with the convention of the national pavilion that features artists only from its own country was a contemporary trend, citing as precedents the fact that British artist Liam Gillick had represented Germany in 2009 and Chinese artist Ai Weiwei would contribute to the German Pavilion in 2013.² In an open letter to Taiwanese art circles, Lu further explained that her curatorial concept was meant to problematise the concept of the ‘Taiwan Pavilion’ itself and to investigate how it has been conceived.³ While some people applauded this proposal for upending the concept of national representation at international biennials, and for expanding the meaning of contemporary Taiwanese art – and furthermore for ingeniously revealing Taiwan’s ambiguous status in international politics – others criticised it for being absurdly ‘too international’, for sacrificing Taiwanese artists for the sake of being curatorially ‘advanced’, for ‘abandoning the subjectivity of Taiwanese art’ and for ‘being hijacked by an imagined international trend’. Some also attacked the bureaucratic opacity of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum’s

¹. The three artists were Taiwanese artist Chia-Wei Hsu, Taiwanese-German artist Bernd Behr, and Czech artist Kateřina Šedá.


decision-making process.\(^4\) Notwithstanding the lack of consensus in Taiwanese art circles, how do we make sense of a seemingly Magrittean national pavilion of Taiwan that says, ‘This is not a national pavilion’? And what does the idea of being ‘national’ and ‘international’ at biennials mean for Taiwanese contemporary art? What does participating in and hosting biennials mean for ‘Taiwan’?

Considering the proliferation of art biennials as an entry point for an examination of the impact of globalization on contemporary art, Okwui Enwezor, in his seminal article ‘Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form’, attempted to answer the question: ‘Why biennials?’\(^5\) For him, the global phenomenon of biennials, especially those thriving on the periphery of the West, manifests a process of fragmentation that unhinges hegemonic and totalising notions of art and culture. Addressing the issues of what he calls ‘strategic globality’ and active spectatorship of an unknown, heterogeneous demographic in biennial culture, he emphasises the agency of all kinds of biennial participants. This sets him apart from the more pessimistic anti-globalization critique that simplistically views biennials as the quintessential indication that the capitalist hegemony of the Western culture industry has absorbed and contained the production of contemporary art and turned art into a commodity in every possible corner of the world. The latter view usually traces the origin of biennials to the Venice Biennale and the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, both initiated at the end of the nineteenth century, and reveals the cultural imperialist ideology and capitalist infrastructure that buttressed these large-scale exhibitions.\(^6\)

Building on Enwezor’s insights, Ranjit Hoskote has theorised ‘the biennial of resistance’ as a counter-hegemonic model conceptually different from the Western biennial prototype. He defines it this way:

\[\text{A biennial of resistance marks its host site’s claim to the world-historical importance of its own dramas of consciousnesses and of its own regional modernity, which emerges from the local and yet is imbricated with global circumstances. It often testifies to the belief, held by the progressive elite of a transitional society, that cultural expression can articulate a political drive towards emancipation, dignity, and an optimistic appraisal of historical predicaments.}\]

Included in Hoskote’s list of such biennials are the São Paulo Biennial, the India Triennial, the Havana Biennial, the Asia-Pacific Triennial, the Gwangju Biennial, the Johannesburg Biennial and the Delhi Biennial. All are located outside the West, a fact that, according to Hoskote, articulates ‘the emergence of a global South’. While Hoskote’s intention to recullate the biennial discourse that has been predominantly based on the Euro-American perspective is valid and commendable, it seems to me equally problematic to lump all biennials in the South together and to make the generalised claim that they all take a counter-hegemonic position against the West or that they are all politically progressive.

How each biennial came about is conditioned by the host site’s unique historical context. The biennial, a Western institution, was adopted and adapted by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, a non-Western official institution, in response to the nation-state’s politico-social change and in order to reform its official art exhibition. In Taiwan, the biennial is neither a Western imperialist enterprise nor is it a counter-hegemonic
8. The Taiwan Pavilion is not Taiwan’s first attempt at participating in international biennials. This can be dated to 1957 when Taiwan’s National Museum of History organized an exhibition of works by Bai-Shui Ma, Ying-Fong Yang and Min-Hsien Hsiao in the form of a national pavilion at the 4th São Paulo Biennial. But it should be pointed out that from 1945 until the late 1980s, modern art in Taiwan was seen – and self-identified – as Chinese modern art. See Chong-Ray Hsiao, Fa shao de shuang nian zhan: Zheng zhi/ mei xue/ jzi de dai yuan (雙年展：現代／美學／機制的代表, Biennale Fever: The Alternative Voice of Politics, Aesthetics and Institutes), Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, 2011.

9. The Taiten (an abbreviation of Taiwan bijutsu tenrankai or Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition) was held ten times from 1927 to 1936. It was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. In 1938 it was revived as the Futen (abbreviated from Taiwan Sôtokufu bijutsu tenrankai or Taiwan Government-General Art Exhibition), which was held six times until 1943. See Chong-Ray Hsiao, ed, Ling guang zai xian: tai wan mei zhan ba shi nian (靈光再现：臺灣美展五十年, Recurrence of the Aura: A Retrospective on the 80 Years Taiwan Arts Exhibitions), National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung, Taiwan, 2009; Taiwan Soka Association, Ri zhi shi qi tai wang guan ban mei zhan (1927–1943) tu lu yu lun wen ji (日治時期台灣官辦美展[1927–1943]圖錄與論文集, The Official Fine Arts Exhibition in Taiwan [1927–1943] During the Japanese Occupation), Qin xuan wen jiao ji jin hui, Taipei, Taiwan, 2010; Chuan-Ying Yen, ‘Regulated Space and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Modern Art in Colonial

In this article, through a close analysis of the curatorial strategies of the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale from 1995 to the present, I attempt to reformulate our understanding of the biennial not merely as an exhibition format showcasing works of art but as a more flexible mechanism that signifies global postmodernity as both a continuation of and a break from the project of modernism that had been previously carried out by museums. Although the Taiwan Pavilion is not a biennial per se, it is at the centre of biennial discourse and controversies in Taiwan. It represents Taiwan’s first response to the global expansion of the biennial phenomenon since the 1990s. For this reason, it is significant for the way biennials have been understood and operated in the Taiwanese context. Because the recurring Taiwan Pavilion has been organised by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum since 1995, and the same institution has hosted the Taipei Biennial as an international art exhibition since 1996, it is necessary to begin with how the term ‘biennial’ was used for the first time in Taiwan by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

THE BIENNIAL AS THE XIN GUAN ZHAN

I propose that Taiwan’s biennial culture be understood within the historical context of the official art exhibition, or guan ban mei zhan, abbreviated as guan zhan. It was the Japanese colonial government that first implemented the recurring large-scale art exhibitions, the Taiten and the Futen, in Taiwan from 1927 until Japan’s departure from Taiwan in 1945. The Taiten and the Futen were based on the model of the Tokyo Art Exhibition, the roots of which can be traced to the eighteenth-century salon exhibition in France. Although official art exhibitions were promoted as symbols of cultural modernity, they were nonetheless part of the Japanese colonial apparatus meant to civilize the Taiwanese and to promote Tôyôgâ, or Japanese nationalist-style painting, as well as Seiyôga, or Western-style painting. They were juried exhibitions mandated by the cultural policy emanating from the colonizing metropolis in keeping with the Tenmoization, or Japanization policy. After Japan’s defeat in 1945, Taiwan was taken over by the government of its presumed motherland, the Republic of China, founded by the Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang, in 1912 after the fall of the Qing dynasty that had ceded Taiwan to Japan in 1895. Immediately after the transition of power in 1946 the Kuomintang government resumed the official art exhibition in Taiwan with a new name, the ‘Fine Arts Exhibition of Taiwan Province’, and continued to organize it annually after the government of the Republic of China retreated to Taiwan – the Kuomintang having lost the civil war to the Chinese Communist Party, and the new regime, the People’s Republic of China, having established itself on mainland China in 1949. In effect, the political significance of the official art exhibition was inherited from the conventions established during the colonial period. One of the very few, yet important, changes was that the category of Tôyôgâ was replaced by Kuohua, that is ‘National Painting’ or Chinese Painting, which triggered the so-called controversy over ‘Orthodox Chinese painting’; but the juried system and the competition-based nature directed by a top-down cultural policy preoccupied with the legitimate artistic expression of the
In Taiwan, official art exhibitions are in every sense what Carol Duncan has called ‘identity-defining machines’.\(^{11}\)

Even with the emergence of alternative art spaces and the gradual growth of galleries and the art market since the late 1980s, official art exhibitions have served as the most important, and for a long time the sole, channels through which young artists are able to show their work and become successful. To be recognized publicly, one has first to be recognized officially. This did not change after the Taipei Fine Arts Museum opened in late 1983. Because it is the first museum of modern and contemporary art in Taiwan’s history, it has been entrusted with the important task of leading the way in the development of modern and contemporary art for the entire country. It comes as no surprise that the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, a cultural institution in the government’s bureaucratic system, began organizing recurring nationwide juried art exhibitions following existing conventions, right from the start. Art critic and curator Rui-Ren Shih has rightly called them ‘xin guan zhan’ or ‘new official art exhibitions’.\(^{12}\)

It is important to point out that what was later renamed the Taipei Biennial was one of these xin guan zhan, the competition-based biannual exhibition called ‘Contemporary Art Trends’ that ran four times from 1984 to 1990 and privileged works influenced by the Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism of the United States.\(^{13}\) The Taipei Fine Arts Museum’s adoption of the term ‘Biennial’ in 1992 was by no means a random decision. It was intended first to reform the official art exhibition and then to put Taiwanese contemporary art on the map of the global art world.

Correspondingly, there were two major changes in the format of the exhibition. First, after two transitional editions in 1992 and 1994 that basically followed the old exhibition format, in 1996 the juried system was deemed unsuitable for the new biennial and abolished. A themed exhibition organized by a group of curators replaced the old competition. Second, in 1998 the Japanese curator Nanjo Fumio was invited to curate the Taipei Biennial, and artists from China, Japan and Korea were invited to exhibit along with Taiwanese artists. It was billed as the first international exhibition to be held by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.\(^{14}\)

The format of the biennial was introduced for several reasons: to react to the situation after the lifting of martial law, to break down unified aesthetics and to function as a platform for intellectual and cultural interpretations of the transformation era. The lifting of martial law in 1987 was the most important event in recent Taiwanese history. It marks the closure of forty years of dictatorship exercised under a regime of White Terror, and it symbolizes the newly emerging dynamics of power in the political, aesthetic and cultural spheres. It expedited democratic reforms and rekindled the development of Nativism and Taiwanese identity consciousness. In the 1990s, the process of desinicization that resulted from the loosening up of the Kuomintang’s anti-Communist ideology of returning and retrieving mainland China triggered the redefinition of Taiwanese identity, a significant change considering the fact that from 1945 to the 1980s most people in Taiwan had been educated to identify themselves as Chinese.

It was thus rather revealing that the theme of the aforementioned first non-juried Taipei Biennial in 1996 – also the last domestic one before it was launched internationally – was ‘The Quest for Identity’ or, translated
literally from the Chinese title, ‘The Quest for Subjectivity in Taiwanese Art’. This showed works by 119 artists, including two indigenous artists, and a participatory section called ‘Experiencing Taipei’, or ‘Civic Aesthetics’, if translated literally from the Chinese title. This was the first time in Taiwan that a major art exhibition extensively showed artworks exploring Taiwan’s history and culture. The 1996 Taipei Biennial showed that the subjectivity of Taiwanese Art was anything but homogeneous and could not be reduced to any singular style or aesthetic promoted by the competition-based guan zhan of the past. Doing biennials was one of the ways that the Taipei Fine Arts Museum responded to the rise of multiculturalism and postmodernism in Taiwan’s post-martial law era.

However, this is not to suggest that the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale represent a complete break from the tradition of guan zhan. In Taiwan, a country with a history of colonialism and a party-state dictatorship fostered by the United States government during the Cold War, the biennial phenomenon was initiated by official institutions of art according to the government’s cultural policies. The multicultural postmodernism promoted by biennial culture in the 1990s was sanctioned by the government, which in turn sought recognition in the international arena, especially by cultural centres in the West.

In addition to the inherent official characteristics of Taiwan’s biennial exhibitions, biennial culture has in effect renewed and intensified the struggle over the Westernization of Taiwanese art that had been the fundamental issue in the development of modern art in Taiwan. A brief examination of the biennial discourse in Taiwan will be sufficient to grasp the ambivalent attitude towards biennials that a country in the global South would experience. Pei-I Lu, citing Kwame Anthony Appiah, argues that in the 1990s the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale was an ‘Otherness Machine’ through which Taiwanese curators conspired with and relied on invited foreign jurors and curators in self-orientalizing the representation of Taiwan’s art and catering towards the latter’s imagination of the Other. Analysing the curatorial strategies of the Taipei Biennial, especially the dual curator system in which a foreign curator was invited to collaborate with a Taiwanese curator, Jia-Xian Wang contends that Taiwan remains a consumer of contemporary art that does not have its own voice yet. Hosting and participating in biennials are in fact part of the Westernization of contemporary art dismissed in and normalized by the name of globalization. Amy Huei-Hua Cheng, the Taiwanese curator of the 2004 Taipei Biennial, who pulled her curatorial statement out of the biennial catalogue to protest against her Belgian co-curator Barbara Vanderlinden’s condescending and imperious attitude, states that the local curator is usually in a subordinate position to the foreign curator, reflecting the hierarchy of international relationships. Although Cheng does not deny that staging biennials is necessary, she thinks that because of this disequilibrium of power the dual curator system set up by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum is in fact a form of aggressive cultural import, the consequences of which could threaten the existence of Taiwan’s cultural identity and ultimately erase its voice. Similarly, Chin-Tao Wu, questioning the notion of ‘biennials without borders’, writes, ‘the biennial… has, despite its decolonizing and democratic claims, proved still to embody the traditional power structures of the contemporary Western art world’.
Chien-Hung Huang has astutely commented on Taiwan’s curatorial discourse of absence – the absence of Taiwanese artistic subjectivity and the absence of Taiwanese perspective in the contemporary art world – that has become the actual impulse driving Taiwan’s desire to be present at international biennials. He cautioned that this biennialized identity of absence has created a Catch-22 situation that could perpetually evacuate the subjectivity of Taiwanese art. But might thematizing Taiwan’s absence also suggest a constantly changing, fluid and non-essentialist identity formation in Taiwanese contemporary art, a kind of identity politics based on the relation of positions, rather than cultural characteristics?

**CURATING TAIWAN AT THE VENICE BIENNALE**

In what follows, I will trace changes in curatorial strategies for the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale from efforts to define a Taiwanese national art in the 1990s to the adoption of a non-national, non-culturally-specific approach after the mid-2000s.

At the Venice Biennale, the Taiwanese National Pavilion presents an anomaly: it is not located in the main exhibition venue, the Giardini district, the site of most national pavilions. In 1994, when Taiwan first attempted to participate in the event, the Biennale board rejected the application of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum to exhibit the official national pavilion of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in the Giardini district – on the grounds of limited space. But the board agreed to cooperate if Taiwan could find another suitable exhibition venue. Ironically, according to the official report of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, the decision was rooted in a proposal for the Biennale’s centennial made by Jean Clair, the first non-Italian curator of the Biennale, who suggested that the Biennale should break with the archaic tradition that divided the Biennale into national pavilions.

Since 1995 the Palazzo delle Prigioni, a 200-square-metre former prison to the left of the Basilica di San Marco, has been the venue where the organizing institute, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, mounts the exhibition of Taiwanese art. Although the location of the Taiwan Pavilion has never changed, from 2003 on it was no longer listed as a national pavilion in the exhibition’s official record; instead, it became a concurrently held ‘collateral event’. Therefore the Taiwan Pavilion is paradoxically an unofficial, self-proclaimed national pavilion.

The ambiguous status of the Taiwan Pavilion corresponds in fact to Taiwan’s international and diplomatic situation. One could define Taiwan as a nation existing *de facto*, but not *de jure*, and the Taiwanese as a people in want of a nation. Officially known as the Republic of China, Taiwan withdrew from the United Nations in 1971 and lost its status as the legitimate regime of China in 1979 when the United States switched its diplomatic recognition to the People’s Republic of China. Internationally, Taiwan is isolated: it is not officially recognized by most countries in the world.

The curatorial strategies that have framed Taiwanese art at the Venice Biennale since 1995 are directly influenced by the changing political and cultural contexts at the Biennale over the course of the late 1990s and...
2000s. I argue that the Taiwan Pavilion shifted from positioning Taiwanese art as a culturally distinctive ‘Other’ to positioning it as an in-between participant in the age of globalization, and finally framing it as a cultural critic and an interlocutor from the periphery challenging the logic of globalization and the institution of the Venice Biennale itself.

1995–1999: DEFINING A NATIONAL ART

For the first three exhibitions from 1995 to 1999, the Taiwan Pavilion positioned Taiwan and its artists on the premise that the outside world was uninformed about Taiwan. The theme of its premiere in 1995 was simply ‘Art Taiwan’, and it showcased five different artists whose works represented multiple trends – including Conceptualism, Neo-expressionism and Pop Art – that could be recognized easily by the international art audience, but with Asian features such as Chinese characters and traditional ink and brush techniques. This ‘Art Taiwan’ theme corresponded to identity issues that became prominent in the 1990s in both the international and domestic art scenes. In their catalogue articles for the ‘Art Taiwan’ exhibition, the three European critics who had been invited to join the jury panel to select the artists in the show all stressed the unique Taiwanese cultural characteristics present in the works. Wolfgang Becker, president of the Ludwig Forum for International Art in Aachen, Germany, wrote:

Huang Chin-ho and Lien Te-cheng, two artists pertaining to the older generation, work more conservatively with canvas and monumental pictures, the iconography of the mass media, bringing in strong political Taiwanese motives. Wu Mali is a feminist artist who mixes Asian and European topic[s] in iconological and semiological manner. And, as members of a younger generation, Huo Chun-ming and Huang Chih-yang both quote historical and anthropological images from Taiwan in form and content of their oeuvre, furnishing the exhibition with a special national accent.21

The goal of the next two editions of the Taiwan Pavilion remained an ambition to show the complete spectrum of Taiwanese contemporary art, with exhibition themes of ‘Taiwan Taiwan: Facing Faces’, in 1997, and ‘Close to Open: Taiwanese Artists Exposed’, in 1999.

In 1997, juror Ching-Fu Lu, in his statement article, provided historical and cultural backgrounds in identifying the major themes and distinctive characteristics of Taiwanese art.22 He began with a brief narrative recounting Taiwan’s multicultural history from its first ‘brave and vigorous aboriginals’ to its immigrants, including the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and, as relative latecomers, the Han Chinese. Lu asserted:

This influx of European culture, followed by Chinese, Japanese, and even American culture, has given Taiwan’s culture very diverse content. This is one reason why someone has even compared Taiwan, at the western edge of the Pacific Ocean, to the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea in Ancient times, and expressed the hope that she could give birth to a culture as gloriously rich as the Mycenaean culture.23

The multiculturalism and the desinicized, oceanic identity of Taiwan is, however, something rediscovered, or invented, in the process of Taiwan’s democratic reforms and the resurgent Nativist movement in the 1990s after the lifting of martial law in 1987.
In these texts, the affirmative tone defining what a national art is, however, failed to capture the deconstructive and critical approach towards Taiwanese identity adopted by some of the exhibited works. For example, in Te-Cheng Lien’s *Untitled* (1993), a three-canvas collage shown at the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion, the four white Chinese characters on the green background on the canvas on the lower left read from right to left, ‘hua min guo zhong’, which means ‘Huamin Junior High School’, carrying no particular significance. Because of the cognitive tendency to read characters as a whole regardless of word order, a common Chinese reader would easily misread the term as ‘zhong hua min guo’, which means ‘the Republic of China’, Taiwan’s official national title, a term consisting of exactly the same characters in a different order, with the character of ‘zhong’ (중) as the first character on the far right instead of the last word on the left. When the viewer perceives his or her mistake with a laugh, the stable meaning of ‘the Republic of China’ is subverted. Similarly, the canvas on the right side resembles the national flag of Taiwan, but not quite, with the canvas turned ninety degrees clockwise and minus the emblem of the Chinese Nationalist Party on the blue field.
The beetle on the yellow ground is a linguistic play on the first Chinese character of beetle, ‘jia’, which shares the same pronunciation as the word ‘fake’ in Chinese. Therefore, the beetle can be read as a commentary on the elusive relation between what Taiwan is called and what Taiwan really is. By deconstructing our visual and linguistic perception, Lien’s work reflects the identity crisis that Taiwanese experienced in the 1990s, which seems to contradict the attempt at identity formation expressed in the catalogue articles. This discrepancy betrayed a gap between the official curatorial policy and the works exhibited.


After the 1990s, an important change took place in the curatorial approach to the 2001 and 2003 Taiwan Pavilions. In 2001, three of the five artists were expatriates, living and working outside Taiwan; in 2003, three of the four artists were expatriates, but all four artists had already been active on the international art scene. This indicates an
attempt to go beyond the strategy of merely forming an identity for Taiwanese art and introducing Taiwanese art to the international art audience at the Venice Biennale. Compared with the works shown in the 1990s, the works by these expatriate artists required less background knowledge of Taiwan to be understood. Generally speaking, they are more concerned with universal issues of human existence than with Taiwanese subjectivity.

For example, in The Sleeping Project (2003) by US-trained and now New York-based artist Lee Mingwei, the artist invited a different willing visitor to sleep over with him in his exhibition space in the Palazzo delle Prigioni every night during the first two weeks of the exhibition. It was a participatory and site-specific project. Lee created a cross-cultural atmosphere on the site of the former prison by incorporating a Ming dynasty Luohan bed, a traditional Chinese sedan chair, and the bow of a Venetian gondola. The participant was asked to bring his or her favourite objects which the participant would leave behind the next morning and which would be displayed as part of the project. The Sleeping Project thus experimented with cross-cultural co-habitation and challenged mutual trust and intimacy in human interaction.

Lee Mingwei, The Sleeping Project, 2003, mixed media interactive installation, dimensions variable, 50th Venice Biennale, Taiwan Pavilion, Italy, photo: Gary Lee
Entering the twenty-first century, the curatorial question of the Taiwan Pavilion is no longer the visibility of Taiwanese art as an isolated, silent ‘Other’, but the active search for a shared platform to formulate dialogue with the world. This new direction was announced in Chien-Hui Kao’s curatorial statement of 2001:

In ‘The Living Cell: Soul Factory of Mankind’, the sharing of cross-cultural spirits is the main theme of the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale... Taiwan contemporary art in Venice is an arts event seeking to collide with various cultural memes from different regions... Any cultural collision will generate dynamic living cells that are the driving force behind the exchanges between regional and international art forms.\(^{24}\)

The curatorial strategy that Kao adopted to establish this exchange was an appeal to shared humanistic concerns and human spiritual life. She wrote: ‘From the perspective of human character, human nature, humaneness, human rights, and human emotions, the regional contemporary arts have ample room for visual and conceptual dialog with global arts'.\(^{25}\) Taking up the concerns with universalism and globalism, Lin Shu-Min, curator of the 2003 Taiwan Pavilion, proposed to explore human psychic spaces through art with the theme ‘Limbo Zone’.

It is worth noting that the name ‘Taiwan’ that had been so prominently accentuated in all three themes of the Taiwan Pavilion in the 1990s – ‘Art Taiwan’, ‘Taiwan Taiwan: Facing Faces’, and ‘Close to Open: Taiwanese Artists Exposed’ – was now strategically dropped. This omission was not based purely on curatorial concerns in order to better position Taiwanese art in the age of globalization. It was largely because of political concerns prompted by the threat of the Chinese government, which in late 1999 had lodged a protest with Biennale organizers against Taiwan’s participation under the national title ‘Taiwan, Republic of China’. Chinese diplomats accused the organizers of challenging their government’s ‘One China Policy’. In October 2000, four conferences were held by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum to gather opinions from the domestic arts community on the exhibition strategy for the Venice Biennale and, more importantly, to face the greater challenge of ‘how to exhibit at the Biennale under the name Taiwan without provoking a political reaction from China’.\(^{26}\) Subsequently, the shift from identity politics to globalism in the representation of Taiwanese art in Venice was a political expediency shaped by the cross-strait tension between Taiwan and China.

In 2003, China succeeded in blocking Taiwan from exhibiting under its national title and being listed as a national pavilion. The Taiwan Pavilion thus appeared as Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan and was included in the section of the ‘Extra 50’ non-national exhibition projects by individual institutions, such as Wales Arts International, Hong Kong Arts Development Council, and the Henry Moore Foundation. Shown in the Taiwanese exhibition at the Venice Biennale amidst the national title scandal in 2003, Goang-Ming Yuan’s digitally altered photographic work City Disqualified (2002), in which Yuan edited out all the people and traffic from Ximen Ding, one of the most crowded districts in Taipei City, and transformed the signature scene of the capital city into an uncanny phantasm, became an ironic commentary on Taiwan’s controversial status as a disqualified nation.

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25. Ibid, p 14

The 2005 exhibition in Venice, whose theme was ‘The Spectre of Freedom’, was a direct response to the Chinese government’s political repression, and according to its curator, Chia-Chi Wang, ‘a deeply penetrating metaphor of Taiwan’s past, present, and future state’. In his curatorial statement Wang first pointed out that the expansion of neoliberalism in the age of globalization has made the majority of people accept exploitation. Under this circumstance, he stated, freedom has become a spectre, just as Taiwan’s democracy and freedom has been threatened by the constant cross-strait tension. In Wang’s curatorial statement and the works he selected, a clear turning point can be seen. When the Biennale did not even recognize Taiwan as a nation-state independent of mainland China, the effort to define a national artistic identity had become inopportune, if not futile. Paradoxically, the controversy had carved out a new niche for Taiwanese art at the Venice Biennale. Taiwan now represents the art that reveals the nature of peripheralized existence in the era of globalization in a way that critiques national and cultural hegemonies and the boundaries they created.

A work representative of this position is Chieh-Jen Chen’s Empire’s Borders I (2008–2009), shown in Venice in 2009. It is an installation of a single-channel video projection with twenty documents. Based on experiences of being denied a visa that people shared on the ‘Illegal Immigrant’ blog set up by Chen, the first part of the video reconstructs interviews with Taiwanese people who have applied for a visa at the American Institute in Taiwan. The second part of the video then presents...
the discrimination that mainland Chinese women faced upon arrival at Taiwan’s Taoyuan International Airport when they came to reunite with their Taiwanese husbands. Empire’s Borders I therefore explores how imperial ideology and national sovereignty are exerted through border control by both the US and Taiwanese governments.

Compared with the globalist editions of the Taiwan Pavilion in 2001 and 2003, the position of the 2007, 2009 and 2011 editions, the themes of which were ‘Atopia’, ‘Foreign Affairs’ and ‘The Heard and the Unheard – Soundscape Taiwan’ respectively, can be called critical globalism – which proposes a cross-cultural alliance between suppressed and excluded groups of people regardless of nationality. This position proved to be a viable strategy at the Venice Biennale, where the principle of national representations has always been criticized, but the number of participating countries is constantly growing. Taiwanese art has been excluded from the ‘exhibitionary order’ set up at the Giardini district and the official thematic exhibition of the Venice Biennale.28 By problematizing and visualizing this exclusion, the Taiwan Pavilion attempts to position artworks from Taiwan in relation to the world, and the identity of Taiwanese art becomes socially, culturally and politically relational rather than inherently national.

**THE NATIONAL QUESTION OF THE BIENNIAL**

In The Global Artworld, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art, Charlotte Bydler has demonstrated that biennials are not the same everywhere.29 There is not just one ‘biennial format’, no single ‘biennial

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discourse’, but several. Accordingly, before a synchronous reading of the global biennial phenomenon can be reached, we have to begin with the study of the historical formation of each biennial in its own specificity and local context. The Taipei Fine Arts Museum first used the term ‘biennial’ for the Taipei Biennial in 1992 in order to democratize and reform Taiwan’s old, competition-based official exhibition ‘Contemporary Art Trends’. From this point of view, in the Taiwanese context biennial is not simply an imported institution directly based on a foreign model, such as the Venice Biennale. The format of the juried, official exhibition of art was in fact first introduced in Taiwan by the Japanese colonial government. The old ‘Contemporary Art Trends’ exhibition, which showed the very few officially approved prize-winners’ works, was deemed outdated and authoritarian. The goal of the Taipei Biennial was to expose the ‘multiplicity’ of Taiwanese society in the post-martial law era. The inception of biennials in Taiwan, one can argue, announced the twilight of modernism and the dawn of postmodernism in art.

As discussed earlier in this article, most Taiwanese critics saw the biennial as an institution imported from the West and Taiwan as the empire of OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer), which excels in copying and manufacturing Western culture and products but lacks originality. Therefore, staging biennials is sometimes seen as another form of Westernization: the biennial is an institution of cultural hegemony not rooted in Taiwanese culture and society. This view presumes a rigid opposition of East and West, with East always at the passive, receiving end of cultural exchange. The binarism of this view is actually shared in Hoskote’s rationale for proposing the concept of the ‘biennial of the resistance’.

What a contextualized study of Taiwan’s biennial culture can contribute to art history and contemporary cultural criticism is a more nuanced understanding of the central role of a nation-state with a history of colonialism and dictatorship, rather than a ‘progressive elite’, in initiating the ‘will to globality’ by adopting the biennial form. Amidst the celebratory rhetoric of postmodernism, perhaps a sober willingness to admit the heterogeneous composition of the global South and the undying power of the nation-state would lead us a step forward in understanding the question: ‘how can we properly situate today the phenomenon of mega-exhibitions that still function under the imprimatur of the nation-state’s view of culture?’ raised by Enwezor via a reading of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s book Empire. The national question raised by the current article of the history of the Taiwan Pavilion can also shed light on the changing characteristics of the Venice Biennale over time and its investment in the same issues of nationalism and globalization.

By focusing on the issue of Taiwanese subjectivity in the curatorial discourses of the Taiwan Pavilion, I have tried to investigate how Taiwanese contemporary art has been framed within the biennial enterprise by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Ironically, the trajectory of the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale has taken it from being an exhibition motivated by a marginalized country’s longing for national representation in a global art fair to one that critiques the logic of cultural, political and economic hegemony dominating the biennale and causes Taiwan’s own marginality. This shift shows a
marginalized country that defines itself by questioning this marginalization. While Enwezor raised the question ‘Why biennials?’ it seems to me a more fundamental inquiry for an art historian would be ‘Why study biennials?’. The Biennial has become one of the central sites and integral factors for understanding today’s artwork. The Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale not only functions as an exhibition venue on the international stage but also gives impetus to the continual redefinition of Taiwanese contemporary art.