Assessing (Multi)culturalism through Public Art Practices

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This chapter investigates the issue of multiculturalism through public art practices in Taiwan. Specifically, we focus on the public art project of the Mass 14Rapid Transit System in Kaohsiung (hereafter, Kaohsiung MRT), and examine how the discourse of multiculturalism intertwines with the discourse of public art that informs the practice of the latter. Multiculturalism in this case is considered as an ideological embodiment of the politics of difference, wherein our main concern is placed on the ways in which different constituencies in Kaohsiung respond to the political-economic ordering of Kaohsiung in post-Second World War Taiwan and to the challenges Kaohsiung City faces in the recent events engendering global economic change. We see the Kaohsiung MRT public art project as a field of contentions and its public artwork as a ‘device of imagination’ and ‘technique of representation’ (see Ngo and Wang in this volume). The various perspectives about public art in general and Kaohsiung MRT public art in particular thus characterize the efforts of different groups in their struggle over the ‘power of naming, recognition and legitimation’ (see Ngo and Wang in this volume) in Taiwan’s current political economy. Ultimately, this chapter questions how multiculturalism, as manifested in the various artistic expressions of Kaohsiung MRT public art, encourages civic participation in public affairs, thereby challenging the state’s hegemony in shaping and promulgating state-building discourses.
Kaohsiung is located in southern Taiwan. It is the second largest city in Taiwan, with a population of around 1.5 million. It is Taiwan’s hub of heavy industries and a world-class port.

The construction of the Kaohsiung MRT started in 2001, and it reached completion in September 2008. It currently comprises two routes, the Red Line and Orange Line, with a total length of 42.7 km and a total of 37 stations. The cost of construction of the Kaohsiung MRT was more than NT$180 billion (approximately US$5.5 billion).\(^1\) Roughly NT$185 million of this money was designated for public artwork, which made the Kaohsiung MRT public art project one of the largest of its kind in Taiwan. The huge amount of money involved in the project made it a highly contentious public issue. Whether and/or how to distribute the funds among the subway’s 37 stations and what criteria to use in soliciting public artwork were at the centre of public debate, especially in cultural circles in Kaohsiung City. This chapter focuses on the views and roles of the two most important constituencies implicated in the debate: on the one hand, the Kaohsiung City government (represented by the Kaohsiung City Mass Transit Bureau [MTBU]) and the Kaohsiung Rapid Transit Corporation (hereafter KRTC), respectively the policy maker and executor of the Kaohsiung MRT public art project, which treats public art as primarily a means of place making and city marketing; and, on the other hand, Kaohsiung-based artists, the chief participants (beneficiaries) and yet also major critics of the project, who see public art as both a venue and manifestation of grass-roots democracy.

Even though these two constituencies seem to be opposing forces with conflicting emphases - the former tends to stress the universal value of and standards for any and all public artwork, whereas the latter concentrates on locally situated identities as the basis of art creation - they share something in common.\(^2\) Both of them have contributed forcefully, if not always equally, to
the construction of public art discourses in Taiwan; and they both are powerful players in shaping the practice of public art in Kaohsiung City. What remains a question about their conduct, however, is the accountability they hold vis-a-vis their intended audience - Kaohsiung City residents who are often invited to be spectators only after the public artwork has been selected but are not involved during the selection process.

The rise of multiculturalism is closely related to democratization in Taiwan since the 1980s. It began as an integral part of the political-cultural movement that aimed to challenge the concept of cultural China, propagated by the Nationalist (KMT) government that had served as both the basis of national identity and government/bureaucratic structure in most of the post-Second World War decades (Chun 1994, 1996). Through the appreciation of diverse characteristics (or cultures) of different communities, multiculturalism sought to nurture a new political legitimacy based on ethnic equality (Wang 2004). Yet, over time, multiculturalism as it is practiced in Taiwan has often been criticized by scholars as an ideological construct in which culture is essentialized as a distinct entity that does not mix or change, even though in reality culture is under constant transformation or reconfiguration (Kuo 2003; Wang 2004). This static view of culture, we argue, is at the root of the Kaohsiung MRT public art debate. It is not so much the lack of consultation with Kaohsiung denizens by either the Kaohsiung City government and the KRTC or Kaohsiung-based artists that we see as the fundamental problem, although this in and of itself is not exactly in line with the spirit of public art. Rather, the fundamental problem is derived from the very assumption that culture is discrete; and, by extension, there is only one ‘right’ way to (re)present Kaohsiung, whether it is global in nature (as highlighted by the Kaohsiung City government and the KRTC) or local in characteristics (as stressed by
Kaohsiung-based artists). Yet, Kaohsiung City residents’ readings of and perceptions about Kaohsiung MRT public art are far more complex, and at times ambivalent and self-contradictory, depending on historical contingencies.

PUBLIC ART AND COMMUNITY BUILDING IN TAIWAN

Public art does not have a long history in Taiwan. It was only in 1992 that the Legislative Yuan passed the Statute for Encouraging the Development of Culture and the Arts (Wenhua yishu jiangzhu tiaoli) that mandated public art installations for all government-funded construction projects (e.g. school or government buildings). The purpose of the statute was to beautify buildings (or architectural structures) as well as their surrounding environment. The statute also requires that the amount of funds allocated to public art for any public-building project should not be less than 1 percent of the project’s total construction cost (Chen 2004: 6). However, in the case of major infrastructure projects such as a mass rapid transit system, which involve multiple billions of (Taiwanese) dollars, the percentage dedicated to public art can be lower than 1 percent. Based on this ordinance, in 1998, the Council for Cultural Affairs, the central government agency under the Executive Yuan in charge of making and implementing the country’s cultural policies, crafted the Regulations Governing the Installation of Public Artwork (Gonggong yishu shezhi banfa) to normalize the practice of public art, including the selection and functioning of judging panels, the actual implementation of chosen artwork, and mandated public involvement in these processes (although the format of public involvement is not specified in the Regulations). Citizens’ participation is emphasized in these regulations because public art funding comes from the government and public artwork is installed in public space; therefore, public art is for the
public and it should belong to the public (Chou & Chen 2008). It is also hoped that public artwork will serve as a source of art education for the general public (Chen 2004: 7-8).

The normalization of public artwork installations coincided with the Integrated Community-Building Program, another major campaign of the Council for Cultural Affairs at the time (Chou & Chen 2008). Enacted in 1994, the Integrated Community-Building Program was a state-sponsored community development project that urged local governments to incorporate grassroots initiatives into their public policy and it channeled funds directly to support locally initiated cultural activities (Chuang 2005; Lü 2002; Tseng 2007). An immediate goal of the Integrated Community-Building Program is ‘to identify the local characteristics of local history.’ According to Tseng Hsu-cheng (2007: 17), a professor at National Tainan University of the Arts and the current president of the Community Empowerment Society (The Republic of China shequ yingzao xuehui), a major non-government organization advocating the cause of community building in Taiwan:

Every community has its own distinctive history and characteristics. The first and foremost task of community building is to bring to light these unique - though often unseen - characteristics, so that they can become the foundation of further actions. We could organize field investigations of regional history and customs, design and sponsor cultural and artistic activities, or initiate or host local festivities. All of these are with the aim of enriching the cultural life of local residents, through which they can develop a better understanding of their own community, thereby strengthening their identity with the place of their residence (authors’ translation).
This place-grounded identity is then expected to form the basis of a collective consciousness, which will enable community residents to work together towards common goals while remaining as independent thinkers and individuals (Tseng 2007: 55). In essence, community building is a process of praxis, of civil engagement. It aims ‘to provide an opportunity for the residents of a community to learn to manage public affairs through hands-on experience by solving real-life problems’ (Tseng 2007: 55).

Public art dovetails with the community-building effort at both the government and grass-roots levels; both have been integral parts of the development of multiculturalism in Taiwan since the 1990s. In 1997, the Tenth Article of the Republic of China (ROC) Constitution was amended to reflect the ROC’s recognition and support of multiculturalism. In 2001, President Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party announced that the ROC was ‘a multiethnic and multicultural state’ (Wang 2004: 301). Correspondingly, the Council for Cultural Affairs affirmed in a 1998 White Paper as a policy statement that Taiwan’s culture should be understood within a multi-ethnic context. Another key issue indicated in this White Paper is that, despite the past focus on Han culture in the country’s cultural policy, it is crucial to utilize the multicultural strength long existing in Taiwanese society to enrich the citizens’ cultural life (Council for Cultural Affairs 1998, in Su 2004: 70). Later, in 2004, the Council for Cultural Affairs refined its own agenda and brought forth the concept of cultural citizenship, which highlighted the responsibility of the government - central and local - to fulfill the citizens’ needs for the arts. However, also called for in the concept was the citizens’ responsibility to join, support and sustain artistic activities. Ultimately, the concept seeks to build a ‘nation of culture’ by improving citizens’ sense of aesthetics (Chen & Liu 2005). Public art and community building
are closely related to multiculturalism because multiculturalism is embodied in the appreciation of diverse characteristics of different communities - a core feature of community building - and art is considered an effective means to make concrete the abstract concept of community building. Distinctive cultures and histories of a given locality are manifested through art (re)presentations, whether in the form of performances, festivals, exhibitions or installations (Lacy 2004, Liao 2007). Art is also viewed as having the effect of drawing crowds, which is essential to the success of any public event or activity (Chang 2007). Furthermore, central to the idea of multiculturalism in Taiwan is the acknowledgement of the past political inequality among the various cultural and ethnic communities. Multiculturalism is therefore a part of the sociopolitical movement that seeks to create a new political legitimacy and social justice based on ethnic equality during democratization since the 1980s (Wang 2004). This is substantiated by the campaigns of public art and community building, both with the goal to encourage citizens’ participation in public spheres and, ultimately, especially from the perspective of grass-roots artists and community activists, to establish a vital civil society as the foundation of Taiwan’s democracy (Chou & Chen 2008, Tseng 2005, Wu 2006, 2007).6

DILEMMAS OF MULTICULTURALISM

The Kaohsiung MRT public art project reflects many of the aforementioned emphases. Yet, a close look at the project itself also reveals contradictions in the way it was envisaged, planned and executed, as well as the different views with which Kaohsiung City denizens perceive the final, chosen public artwork (cf. Beunders 2007). All of these, we argue, exemplify the larger predicaments in the development of multiculturalism in Taiwan. Specifically, despite the fact
that multiculturalism in Taiwan represents the recognition of diverse cultural or ethnic identities as a basic political right, it is primarily - or, at least, initially – ‘a product of indigenization (Taiwan for “native Taiwanese”) as the principle of ethnic equality’ (Chun 2002: 104), although over time, it has also ‘presented a new national identity in an attempt to resolve the conflicts between Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese consciousness’ (Wang 2004: 304). This is evidenced in the grass-roots efforts of the artists involved in the Kaohsiung MRT public art project, which often hinged on identity building based on local culture and community history, and which in turn became intertwined with the country’s struggle for national identity. The aim and results of these efforts could thus be partial and exclusive. How to integrate local specificities into the attempt of assert equal, universal citizens’ rights was therefore a great challenge faced by these artists, and illuminates the identity politics and tensions surrounding the Kaohsiung MRT public art project.

The artists in Kaohsiung face a second and far more formidable challenge. Multiculturalism in Taiwan has been primarily an ‘inward’- looking concept (Chun 2002: 105). That is, as opposed to referring to some universal, world values, it has invoked ‘something much more localized, whose meaning is largely a function of the speaker’s local frame of reference or some ongoing discourse [determined] by place-based values in a domestic context’ (Chun 2002: 104). Yet, lately, the discourse and practice of multiculturalism in Taiwan have become increasingly susceptible to the influence of global economic forces, namely the worldwide trend of place making as an economic development strategy, particularly in urban areas (Miles 1997). In cities of the postindustrial world, such as those in North America and Western Europe (and, increasingly, Asia Pacific), where local manufacturing industries have by and large disappeared,
and the government and financial sector have periodically been infected by crises, culture - in the form of, for example, museums, art galleries, blue-chip architecture, public art, aesthetized heritage sites and spaces - is becoming more and more ‘the business’ of these cities; it is the basis of their tourist attractions and lure for new businesses and corporate investments (Chang 2000; Miles et al. 2000; Zukin 1982, 1995). Multiculturalism, in the sense of both cultural diversity and emphasis on local culture and history, thus takes on utilitarian meanings and presents a rich source of economic opportunities in this context (Urry 1999; Yeoh 2005); and art is seen as a convenient solution to the problems of urban regeneration (Miles 2007). In essence, multiculturalism has become the logic of late capitalist development (Ong 1996: 759; also see Mitchell 1994, 1996).

Given that Taiwan was undergoing economic restructuring - mainly capital outflow and deindustrialization (Lee 2004) - while experiencing rapid political democratization, and that the country was urgently in need of new economic policies for other sectors than its traditional export-oriented manufacturing, it seems inevitable that culture would be taken on by the Taiwan government, at both the central and local (county and city) levels, as a means of economic revival. As a matter of fact, multiculturalism, along with public art and community building, is increasingly conflated with cultural industries in the literature published by the Council for Cultural Affairs (cf. Chang 2007: 278-9; Tseng 2007). It is in danger of losing its political potency, both discursively and in practice, and it is being reduced to an ideology that helps to legitimize certain economic policies and business exercises (cf. Jansson 2002; Yeoh 2005; Zukin 1991, 1995).
Our concern, however, goes beyond a simple dichotomization between the ‘global’ focus of the Kaohsiung City government and the Kaohsiung MRT Corporation and the ‘local’ emphasis of Kaohsiung-based artists. We do not intend to privilege one approach (particularly the latter) over the other, but seek to find a common denominator to comprehend the co-presence of both approaches to Kaohsiung MRT public art. Given the aforementioned economic situation in Taiwan (which appears to have only been worsened by the current global recession created by the recent financial crises in the United States), it seems to us that the contestation between the visual presentations advocated by these opposing standpoints exemplify two possible directions Kaohsiung could take to steer its economic future - that is, to reinvent the city into one based on commercial activities, cultural and tourist industries, on the one hand, or to revitalize its traditional manufacturing sector that until recently has supported a large working population and their families in the city, on the other. Yet, neither seems to have proven a sure solution at this point. We see that, symbolically, this economic uncertainty - and the ensuing anxiety it has generated - is embodied in the Kaohsiung denizens’ ambivalent attitude towards Kaohsiung MRT public artworks. The very presence of public art, especially those internationally commissioned art installations and architectures, may be a welcome indication of the changes that have been made or that have occurred in Kaohsiung City. However, as there seem to be no clear signs as to how these cultural ventures have been (or could be) translated into tangible economic gains for ordinary citizens - many of whom may lack the necessary skills to ensure their employability in a postindustrial (but not manufacturing-based) economy - the vast investment in the Kaohsiung MRT public art seems to be a waste of money that could have been better used.
SNAILS AND MUSHROOM: CULTURE-LED URBAN REGENERATION IN KAOSIUNG

The multiple yet often contradictory connotations that the Kaohsiung MRT public artwork evoked among the different constituencies in Kaohsiung City is best captured in a story we were told by an artist and community activist who has had a close working relationship with the Kaohsiung City Bureau of Cultural Affairs:

The other day I hailed a cab and told the driver to take me to the Kaohsiung MRT’s Meili-tao [Formosa Boulevard] Station. The driver didn’t register what I was telling him right away; it took him a few seconds before he took in where I wanted to go. As soon as realization dawned on him, he said: ‘Oh, Miss, you want to go to the Snails!’ ‘What?’ now it was my turn to be in total incomprehension. ‘What snails are you talking about?’ I was completely lost. ‘Don’t you think the [architecture of Formosa Boulevard] station is shaped like snails? They each even have two tentacles on the top of their heads!’ The driver continued to tell me that Aozihdi Station [another Kaohsiung MRT station with a distinctive architectural style] is known among taxi drivers as the Mushroom [Figure 10.1]. Mushroom?!? I couldn’t help but think how the architect would have reacted had he heard this comment. I asked my cab driver how he liked [the architectural designs of] these stations. ‘They are good.’ He said Kaohsiung was ugly before, but the city is much prettier now that it has all these new buildings and fancy architectural projects. He liked them.
The ‘snails’ are actually the four exits of Formosa Boulevard Station - the Kaohsiung MRT’s largest and likely most important station, located at the meeting point of its two lines, which is also the intersection of the two main (Chung-shan and Chung-cheng) boulevards of Kaohsiung City (Figure 10.2). It is also where the Kaohsiung Incident - or Meili-tao [Formosa] Incident - took place in 1979 (Rubinstein 2006). The exits - the snails - stand at the four corners of the intersection; they are of identical shape. Entitled ‘Praying’, it is the work of world-renowned Japanese architect Shin Takamatsu and one of the ‘Special Stations’ highlighted by the KRTC (Figure 10.3 and 10.4). It is a remembrance of the Formosa Incident, a symbol of peace and prosperity:

Formosa Boulevard Station is where [the Kaohsiung MRT’s] Red Line and Orange Line meet. As such, we envision its architecture to capture both the historical focus placed on the Red Line stations and the ocean motif emphasized by the Orange Line stations; it will be the embodiment of our inspiration to create a new landmark for Kaohsiung City. The architect of the station exits, Shin Takamatsu, based his design on the concept of ‘praying’. The station symbolizes the ‘Heart of the Kaohsiung MRT’, and the exits -
shaped like four hands coming together to pray - are where the crowd of passengers congregate. Together, it represents the Kaohsiung denizens’ wish for the prospects of their city. A wish that all can feel they belong here and work together to build a future of dream and hope.⁹

Altogether, Formosa Boulevard Station is considered by the KRTC and the Kaohsiung City government as one of the jewels - and a strong selling point - of the Kaohsiung Rapid Transit System.

Figure 10.2 ‘Snails’ (KRTC Formosa Boulevard Station)

Source: Chen Wei-tsung
Although the architectural design itself is widely praised, quite a number of artists who live in or recently visited Kaohsiung have expressed their concern about the mismatch between the station architecture and its surroundings. In the opinion of a well-established Taiwanese artist whose work is displayed both in Taiwan and internationally, the buildings and structures around the huge traffic circle where Formosa Boulevard Station is located are too unplanned and obsolete - and the cityscape too cramped and ugly - to accommodate this grand architecture. Her words were echoed by a local cultural consultant involved in the early planning of some of the Kaohsiung MRT stations, who informed us that the architect originally developed the design concept for a wide space in Hokkaidō, Japan, where the openness of the landscape and the crispness of the climate were ideal for his creation. However, when transplanted to Kaohsiung, this cultural consultant indicated, the architecture was simply too majestic for Kaohsiung’s existing built environment, at least at that particular site. The owners of shops and businesses surrounding the Chung-shan and Chung-cheng Boulevard traffic circle, as well as the residents of nearby houses and apartment buildings, have something else to say, however. It is not the
Artistic value of the architecture, or its compatibility with the surrounding built environment, that was uppermost in their minds. They were blinded by the prism produced by the station exits’ glass panels around noon every day. ‘Some of us even have to wear a hat to block away the light while in the store. We lose three to four business hours daily because of this “light pollution”!’ one shopkeeper complained to the journalist whose article brought this problem to the attention of the general public.10

Architecture is not traditionally included in the category of public art. However, it has been increasingly considered essential, along with public art, in the current global trend of culture-led urban regeneration (Miles & Paddison 2005). As a matter of fact, the Council for Cultural Affairs included architecture and building structures in the category of public art in its most recent amendment of the Regulations Governing the Installation of Public Artwork in 2008 (Dimension Endowment of Art 2008: 25). Whether this is a move that reflects the Council for Cultural Affairs’ recognition of global development, or a response to problems in public art project execution in Taiwan - or both - remains to be seen, however. Culture-led urban regeneration is a strategy actively pursued by the Kaohsiung City government in recent years in its attempt to revitalize the city’s economy, which was hit hard by Taiwan’s recent economic restructuring. Centering on the Kaohsiung MRT, the Kaohsiung City government has been pursuing a series of urban renewal projects, including greening the lands adjacent to the Kaohsiung MRT, cleaning the river that cuts across the heart of the city, renovating the harbour area into a pedestrian-friendly waterfront, and using vacant port facilities as artists’ colonies (Lin 2006).
Art plays a significant role in this process. The KRTC, in collaboration with the Kaohsiung City Mass Transit Bureau, emphasizes the design of Kaohsiung MRT stations. It is stated on the latter’s website that eight stations located near major intersections and expected to be used by a large number of passengers were chosen as ‘Special Stations’, each of which would have a distinctive architectural style with a design taking into account the ‘environmental elements including the historical background, cultural characteristics, and future development [plans of the area where the station is located, in order] to create a particular expression for the people’. Furthermore, the KRTC commissioned several world-renowned architects and artists to design, or incorporate their works into the structure of, Kaohsiung MRT stations. ‘Emerald Laminata’ (ningju de lubaoshi) (Figure 10.4), a work of two large sculpted glass walls – titled ‘Tree of Life’ (sheng ming zhi shu) and ‘Infinity’ (Wuqiong wujin) - by Canadian artist Lutz Haufschild (esteemed as ‘Master Lo-tsi’ [Lezi dashi] in KRTC’s news release) is now installed at Kaohsiung International Airport Station. It is the largest three-dimensional glass sculpture in the world. The artist stated that ‘Emerald Laminata’ was inspired by ‘the exquisite carved jade artworks seen at the National [Palace] Museum in Taipei and the ocean environment of the island of Taiwan’. For the KRTC, ‘Emerald Laminata’ symbolizes water, the origin of life and civilization: we treasure life therefore we treasure our water resources.
‘The Dome of Light’ (guang zhi qiongding) (Figure 10.5), an arched glass work that is installed in the ceiling of the grand concourse of Formosa Boulevard Station, is designed by Italian artist Narcissus Quagliata, revered in KRTC’s literature as ‘Maestro Narcissus’ (Shuixian dashi) because of his internationally acclaimed architectural art glass works. The world’s largest single piece of glass artwork, ‘The Dome of Light’ is 30 m in diameter, consisting of glass, coloured drawing, and lighting. It is composed of four themes – ‘water, earth, light, and fire’ - which respectively signify ‘birth, growth, glory, and destruction’. Together, ‘The Dome of Light’ symbolizes the cycle of life. It pays homage to the Formosa Incident, ‘a historical event that documented Taiwan’s pursuit of freedom [and democracy], with a message of rebirth and tolerance for its audience to look up to’. The art design also takes into consideration the connection between Kaohsiung and its ocean, and the species inhabiting its natural environment. Before the creation of his art design, the artist made a trip to Kaohsiung and stayed for a week. ‘We arranged for the maestro to stay at a hotel near the bank of Ai River; and we took him...
around to see [different parts of] Kaohsiung’, a KRTC staff member working on the public art project informed us.

Every morning the maestro would wake up early, and [before his scheduled official visits] go to the riverbank to talk to people exercising there. He doesn’t speak Chinese, but this didn’t deter him. He was eager. Sometimes people were shy and tried to walk by him or pretend they didn’t see him or understand him. [In that case] the maestro would chase after them or grab them to catch their attention [laugh] … He talked to all kinds of people but especially old men and women [while in Kaohsiung]. He said [talking to people] is important, because it helps him to better understand the place where he is commissioned to design an artwork.

‘As a matter of fact’, this staff member added, ‘all our [international] artists and architects came to Kaohsiung [to get to know the city and their sites].’

*Figure 10.5 ‘The Dome of Light’ (KRTC Formosa Boulevard Station)*

Source: KRTC
‘Floating Forest’ (ban ping shan zhi hun) (Figure 10.6) at Half Cliff Mountain/World Games Station, designed by American artists Ron Wood and Christian Karl Janssen, features windows with art glass panels of varying transparencies at both the concourse level and the roof of the station.  

According to the artists, ‘Floating Forest’ is a canopy design that ‘celebrates human conservation effort and the advance of the forest’. It highlights a ‘Rainforest Canopy [that] reclaims the place where it once flourished. Colored light washes down from above. [This design] embraces both the architecture and the freedom of the leafy world it represents. As a compass for the traveler, color continuum extends from the Cool polar north to the Warm south.’ The architecture of the station, entitled ‘The Vessel’ (haishang xiongshi) (Figure 10.7), is literally shaped like a vessel. This architectural design, according to former Kaohsiung City Mass Transit Bureau Director-General Chou Li-liang, whose term (1998-2004) covered the inceptive and defining period of the Kaohsiung MRT construction, takes into account Kaohsiung’s topography, which is largely flat, with only a few low hills standing on the fringe of the city including Half Cliff Mountain. As the MRT station is built against the mountain, viewing from afar, ‘The Vessel’ evokes the sensation of a ship whose sails are fully charged and ready to cruise; it is an attempt to symbolize both the past history of Kaohsiung as an important harbour and the vision for Kaohsiung to maintain its status as a world-class port city.
Figure 10.6 ‘Floating Forest’ (KRTC Half Cliff Mountain/World Games Station)

Source: KRTC

Figure 10.7 ‘The Vessel’ (KRTC Half Cliff Mountain/World Games Station)

Source: KRTC
The artists who created these three pieces of artwork all used glass as their medium and light as their tool. Together, these public artworks present the theme of ‘A Symphony of Light, A Story of Love’. As highlighted on the KRTC Public Art Center website:

Through light [these artworks convey] the message of LOVE, from the love of our Water to the love of our Mountain and our Land, from the love for ourselves to the love for our children. Transmitting the message of love through glass and light in various forms and layers, the artworks will uplift the viewers’ spirit in grace and beauty.²¹

Furthermore,

the KRTC believes that simply building a rapid transit subway system for the convenience of public transportation is not enough for our beloved Port-City. The KRTC hopes to take the lead by using public art as a vehicle to inspire and transport people to a new millennium. *It shall be a millennium filled with light and love!*²²

The only Special Station public artwork that was commissioned from a Taiwanese artist, Chu Pang-hsiung, is installed at Ciaotou [Kio-A-Thau] Station, near the location of the now-defunct Ciaotou Sugar Refinery. This refinery was the first modern sugar refinery in Taiwan, established in 1901 by the Japanese colonialists. It served as one of most important sites for Taiwan’s sugar production for nearly a century, until its closure in 1999. Entitled ‘Divine Labor Leads the Industrialization’ (tian gong kai wu) (Figure 10.8), the 9 m wide, 12 m tall ceramic relief mural mounted on the wall of the Passengers Hall of Ciaotou Station thus tries to capture this important part of the industrial history - and the history of modernization - of Taiwan.²³ Yet, curiously
enough, although stressed on the KRTC Public Art Center website, this relief mural is the only public artwork without an elaborate explanation on the website.

*Figure 10.8 ‘Divine Labor Leads the Industrialization’ (KRTC Ciaotou [Kio-A-Thau] Station)*

On the whole, public art - or culture in general - is consciously deployed by the KRTC (supported by the Kaohsiung City government) to help create an aura, so that the Kaohsiung MRT not only brings convenience and prosperity to Kaohsiung but will also facilitate its elevation to a city of art and humanity. All of these, in sync with the worldwide trend of place making (and brand marketing), indicate the Kaohsiung City government’s attempt to transform Kaohsiung into an attractive investment and tourist destination as a means to revive the city’s economy.

**DISSENT FROM THE KAOHSIUNG ART COMMUNITY**
This effort of the Kaohsiung City government and the KRTC, however, failed to win wide support among Kaohsiung-based artists, cultural workers and community activists, many of whom have been active members of political and social movements, in Kaohsiung and nationwide, since the end of martial law in the late 1980s. To them, the questions of whether and/or how to distribute the Kaohsiung MRT public art funds among the subway’s stations and what criteria to use in soliciting public artwork were critical, not simply because of the material gains they might obtain but also because the answers were directly related to their ongoing efforts to use art as a medium to foster citizens’ participation in community affairs, a step they deemed crucial to the establishment of a truly democratic society in Taiwan. Yet, even though the Kaohsiung MRT has 37 stations in total, NT$110 million of its NT$185 million public art money were spent on the artwork in only a few stations (including the aforementioned ‘Emerald Laminata’, ‘The Dome of Light’ and ‘Floating Forest’), leaving the other 30-plus stations to share the remaining NT$70 million for installing primarily the works of Taiwanese artists.  

In July 2005, the Kaohsiung City Modern Painting Association (Kaohsiung City xiandaihua xiehui) and Taiwan Field School (Taiwan tianye gongchang) - a grass-roots cultural organization associated with Kio-A-Thau [ciaotou] Culture Society (Qiaozaitou wenshi xiehui) co-sponsored a public hearing on the Kaohsiung MRT and public art, particularly on the issue of how the KRTC acquired public artwork. Immediately challenged by the participants at the hearing was the corporation’s preference for international over Taiwanese artists and, as a consequence, the exceedingly unequal distribution of funds among different Kaohsiung MRT stations. Organizers of the public hearing argued that the main objective of the original ordinance,
the Statute for Encouraging the Development of Culture and the Arts, on which the Regulations Governing the Installation of Public Artwork were developed, was clearly to promote art and cultural production within Taiwanese society. As the Kaohsiung MRT was a project of metropolitan Kaohsiung, it seemed only right that the allocated public art funds should be used to support artists in Kaohsiung (or southern Taiwan). This was particularly salient given the long-lasting south-north disparity (Lee 2007).^{28}

More crucial than the unequal distribution of resources, however, was the lack of due process in the KRTC’s decision making. By law, to ensure transparency and fairness, a panel of judges should be established to review and select the artwork of any give public art project. Yet, the commissioning of a few foreign architects and artists, which cost most of the Kaohsiung MRT public art money, seemed to be done by one single individual, not a panel of judges, who had been under investigation for corruption charges since August 2005, because of the way she handled these few artworks.^{29} The case was dismissed in April 2008, after the defendant and her associates were found not guilty.^{30} Nevertheless, during the process, from the beginning to the end, denizens of Kaohsiung were simply told by the KRTC that these artists were internationally celebrated; neither the future passengers who would be using Kaohsiung MRT stations nor the residents living in the areas around these stations were consulted. The ‘public’ in public art, in the sense of public involvement, was thus dismissed.

The reason that the KRTC was initially able to circumvent the legally required oversight for the Kaohsiung MRT public art selection was because the latter is a ‘build-operate-transfer’ (BOT) project,^{31} which is a Taiwanese version of public-private partnership in which the government
not only grants the planning and construction of a public work project to a private company, but also allows the private company to operate the public facility for profit for a contracted period. After the contracted period, the private company will transfer the right of operation back to the government, which then has the option of whether to find another (or the same) private company to run the public facility or to keep it under government management. ‘Build-operate-transfer’ projects were adopted after the mid-1990s by the Taiwan government to attract private investment in order to help fund large-scale public work projects in a time of deteriorating government revenues. It also resonates with the worldwide trend of appropriation and privatization of public goods by corporate and commercial interests, which, once again, attests to the susceptibility of Taiwan to global economic forces. None of the ‘build-operate-transfer’ projects in the 1990s and early 2000s, including the Kaohsiung MRT, however, were entirely financed by private capital; the government remained a major fund provider. In the Kaohsiung MRT case, the KRTC is the private company under the ‘build-operate-transfer’ contract with Kaohsiung City Mass Transit Bureau whose investors include major corporations in Taiwan’s manufacturing, retailing and construction sectors, and the National Development Fund under the Executive Yuan, a central government agency whose capital comes from tax payers. Therefore, even though the KRTC is supposed to be a privately funded company, public money is in fact a major part of its assets. Furthermore, within the Kaohsiung MRT budget of NT$180 billion, the KRTC contributed NT$30 billion, the Kaohsiung City government, with the help of the central government, provided the remaining funds that accounted for more than 80 percent of the total construction cost (Wang 2007: 105).
It is this combination of public money and private capital, however disproportionate the individual contributions may be, that created the legal ambiguity that allowed alternative interpretations. In its defense, the KRTC argued that the Kaohsiung MRT public art project did not need to comply with the Regulations Governing the Installation of Public Artwork because it was a project of a private company, not of a government agency, and the KRTC was actually doing the Kaohsiung City government and Kaohsiung City a favour by devoting a large sum of money to public art, in spite of the fact that this money would come from the NT$150 billion pot of the Kaohsiung City government but not from the KRTC itself. How it selected and acquired the Kaohsiung MRT public artwork was thus at the company’s own discretion. This was actually legally defensible, because ‘build-operate-transfer’ projects as a new kind of public work projects were not included in the Regulations Governing the Installation of Public Artwork until 2005. By then the few Kaohsiung MRT public artworks in question were already under contract. Furthermore, the Kaohsiung City Bureau of Cultural Affairs - properly the primary government agency supervising the commissioning of public art for public work projects in Kaohsiung City - was established only in 2003. As a result, there was no one single city government agency with clear jurisdiction to oversee the planning and implementation of Kaohsiung MRT public artwork at its early stage. In spite of the judicial ambiguity, in the contract that the KRTC signed with the Kaohsiung City government, it was agreed that the corporation would follow the procedures instituted in the Regulations Governing the Installation of Public Artwork and have Kaohsiung MRT public artwork approved by one Kaohsiung MRT Public Art Deliberations Committee (Kaohsiung jieyun gonggong yishu shenyi weiyuanhui). However, this committee was not under the charge of the Kaohsiung City Bureau of Cultural Affairs but an ad hoc committee nowhere under the formal organization of the Kaohsiung City government.
Although legally defensible, the lack of due process in the KRTC’s handling of the few Special Station public artworks remained an issue. It was not only criticized by artists but eventually taken on by the Kaohsiung City Council, which passed a resolution in October 2005 not to refund the NT$110 million the KRTC had spent on the (internationally commissioned) artwork.\(^{34}\) After a long legal and political process, in July 2007 the corporation agreed to add NT$50 million of its own money to the Kaohsiung MRT public art fund so that the budgeted amount allowed for public artwork at the 30-plus ‘non-special’ stations would be increased to NT$125 million (instead of the original NT$75 million); and this money would be used primarily for commissioning Taiwanese artists.\(^{35}\) In exchange, the Kaohsiung City Council approved the reimbursement of the money that the KRTC had already used on the few previously commissioned public artworks.\(^{36}\)

However, a Taiwanese artist is not necessarily more suitable than an artist of foreign nationality to carry out a Kaohsiung MRT - or any other - public art project. Also raised by community activists in Kaohsiung, as well as heatedly discussed in the larger circle of artists and art critics in Taiwan, was the issue of site-specificity (cf. Kwon 2004). To quote the words of Chiang Yao-hsien, a Kaohsiung-based artist, writer and community activist, and one of the masterminds behind many of the grass-roots campaigns in southern Taiwan and the 2005 ‘Kaohsiung MRT and Public Art’ public hearing:

Art should be rooted in life, not the market, and [the possibility of] creation should be based on lived experience, not resource distribution. A civil society should derive its aesthetics from the citizens’ consensus (Cheng 2007: 113).\(^{37}\)
Creative work should be evaluated based on whether it reflects the image and concept of a particular space, not on whether it is the work of a native [or local] writer or artist (Cheng 2007: 119).

To reconstruct [an object used in the life of our predecessors] is not simply to replicate the object. *It is also to reconstruct the social relations of a community and the culture of people in this community.* The aestheticism has to be localized (Cheng 2007: 122; emphasis added).

Yet, in a real-life situation, like the Kaohsiung MRT public art project, how do we know - or how can we be sure - that the commissioned artists, Taiwanese or foreign, truly understand the distinctive history, culture and environmental-ecological features associated with their respective stations and create their artwork accordingly? Who or which party is the most qualified and has the best judgment on the issue? Can we rely on a panel of judges, comprising of experts in art criticism or various art-related professions and invited by the government agency or the art/cultural consulting firm in charge of the commissioning, to make the decision? Or should we entrust the artists themselves with the task? More fundamentally, is there one distinctive culture or history of Kaohsiung that should or could be highlighted and then visually presented?

RESPONSES FROM THE CITIZENS

If we see the Kaohsiung MRT public art as a three-part story involving the government, artists and ordinary citizens in Kaohsiung, to understand the city residents’ responses to and perceptions
about Kaohsiung MRT public art appears to be our greatest challenge. This is primarily because the voice of ordinary citizens is often muted - or, at least, passive - compared to the ability and effort of both the Kaohsiung City government and artists to shape the discourse and steer the direction of Kaohsiung MRT public art. More fundamental, however, is the difficulty in soliciting the city residents’ opinions about art that may require more than a simple answer of approval or disapproval but the capacity (or vocabulary) to articulate aesthetically why one likes or dislikes a particular piece of artwork.

There is a general lack of information about the public’s attitudes towards public art. Although not about Kaohsiung per se, the 2008 ‘Survey on the Understanding of Public Art by Residents of Taipei County’ (Taipei xian min gonggong yishu zongti renzhi diaocha), the first-ever opinion poll in Taiwan of popular sentiments in a single administrative area conducted by the Dimension Endowment of Art (DEOA), may shed some light on our current concern of Kaohsiung City. The DEOA survey indicates that, by and large, people [of Taipei County] had a poor understanding of public art. When asked about the function of public art, ‘the vast majority of respondents got no further than “environmental beautification”’ (Chang 2008: 37). In answering questions about places where public artworks might be located, ‘most people chose public “parks” and other areas where people take a break or rest. When it came to artistic forms, most of those interviewed could think of nothing beyond relatively traditional art such as architecture and graphic art’ (Chang 2008: 37). These findings echo the statistics presented in a previous Council for Cultural Affairs publication, Public Art in Taiwan Annals 2003, which ‘identified a widespread indifference to “public art” and noted that people basically failed to recognize the existence of such work in their own living environment’ (Chang 2008: 38). However, despite the
fact that most people who answered the 2008 Dimension Endowment of Art survey never participated in any public art activity, there was a broad interest in government-sponsored programmes such as art education classes or guided tours of public artworks (Chang 2008: 38). In other words, there is a general demand for public art and related activities.

Our ethnographic field observation dovetails with the last finding indicated in the DEOA survey. Upon the grand opening of the Kaohsiung MRT Red Line in March 2008 - the Orange Line was then under construction and was completed and open for public use in September 2008 - the KRTC, in collaboration with the Kaohsiung City government, held a series of promotional activities focusing on ‘The Dome of Light’ at Formosa Boulevard Station. The station was closed to the public at the time due to the ongoing construction of the Orange Line, but the inauguration ceremony of ‘The Dome of Light’ was held on 7 March; both President Chen Shui-bian and the artist Narcissus Quagliata attended the ceremony. Kaohsiung City residents were also invited to preview ‘The Dome of Light’, via a guided tour, on 8 and 9 March. Although the Kaohsiung RT Corporation originally planned to conduct the guided tour for only two days and limited the number of citizen spectators to 2,000, owing to the wide popularity of ‘The Dome of Light’, the company continued to offer guided tours every weekend throughout early April, to include more people. 39 When the Orange Line was eventually in service in September 2008, and the general public had unrestricted access to Formosa Boulevard Station, ‘The Dome of Light’ attracted large crowds. The reception that we witnessed was generally enthusiastic and positive. A certain Mr. Chang, who taught dance for a living, was reported to have repeatedly expressed to the KRTC Public Art Team that he was so touched by the artwork that he ‘was nearly moved to tears’. 40
BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION: WHAT IS KAOHSIUNG?

In a discussion about the recent changes in Kaohsiung we had with an artist and art educator born and raised in Kaohsiung, our interlocutor reflected on a conversation she had with a fellow artist who recently relocated from Taipei to take a teaching position in Kaohsiung:

[My colleague] asked me as a Kaohsiung native how I thought about all the new, fancy, glittering architecture we have been getting in Kaohsiung. I think she felt a little awkward about posing this question, but she said: ‘Don’t you think they seem to be very out of place? They don’t really represent Kaohsiung.’ In return, I asked her, in her opinion, what represented Kaohsiung. She didn’t explain it explicitly but said, ‘After all, Kaohsiung is a working-class, industrial city.’

If this is her image of Kaohsiung [as a transplant from Taipei] … What she said actually makes me think of hei-hua [literally “black painting”], advocated by a group of Kaohsiung artists 10 or so years ago. Behind hei-hua was also the idea that Kaohsiung was a city of heavy industries. Black was its color because it was heavily polluted; and [the density of] the black color captured the soul of the city’s population that was predominantly hard-working, blue-collar labourers.

I understand [the hei-hua artists] tried to depict Kaohsiung City and its people in their most true light while at the same time use their art was a way to underscore the injustice Kaohsiung had endured - and the high price Kaohsiung had paid - as Taiwan’s heavy
industrial base. I used to agree with them and their artistic expressions. However, more and more I feel otherwise. Times are always changing; and the city is changing… rapidly. Even if Kaohsiung has been an industrial city and the city’s residents have had a working-class culture and identity, it doesn’t mean that they will always be so. Who is to say the new architecture doesn’t represent Kaohsiung or exemplify its working-class identity? Maybe Kaohsiung people genuinely like the new architecture. Are we then to say they are not true to who they are for liking such architecture?

Multiculturalism as a theoretical concept and/or a political strategy, as shown in the Taiwanese case, is often criticized by scholars as an ideological construct in which culture is essentialized as an entity of a clear boundary that does not mix or change (Kuo 2003; Wang 2004), even though culture is neither pure nor fixed in reality. Culture can and does have different meanings and implications for different individuals depending on their lived experiences and socioeconomic positioning. While we recognize culture as a hybrid that allows constant crossing and trespassing, we are most concerned about the ambiguity and complexity of individual as well as group identity that is shaped by often contradictory forces. We understand subject formation not only as a process of fluctuation but also of indetermination. That is, identity is not simply situational, depending, for example, on varying historical (diachronic) moments or sociopolitical (synchronous) circumstances. Within the same moment or circumstance, one’s own identity - or a group identity - could also be in contention and thus undefined. This is manifested in the Kaohsiung MRT public art case, in which Kaohsiung City residents as the audience of the public art are undetermined, even though the Kaohsiung City government and the KRTC and Kaohsiung-based artists have relatively well-defined agendas. We see that the
opposing visual presentations supported by these two latter groups exemplify two possible
directions Kaohsiung could take to steer its economic future: to reinvent the city into one based
on commercial activities, cultural and tourist industries, on the one hand, or to revitalize its
traditional manufacturing sector that until recently has supported a large working population and
their families in the city, on the other. Yet, neither seems to have proven to be a sure solution at
this point. The Kaohsiung denizens’ ambivalent attitude towards Kaohsiung MRT public
artworks is thus an expression of this economic uncertainty and the ensuing anxiety it has
generated.

Notes

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Markus for his editorial comments.

2 We are keenly aware of the danger of lumping artists into one single category for, as a matter of fact, they are a highly heterogeneous group of people who have diverse notions about public art among themselves as well as at different phases of each of their individual careers (cf. Dimension Endowment of Art 2008: 37-40). Our goal for this chapter, however, is not to give a comprehensive picture of public artwork in Kaohsiung but to highlight the difference in ideological construction among various constituencies. For this purpose, we do observe an overall contrast between the ‘global’ emphasis of the Kaohsiung City government and the KRTC, on the one hand, and the ‘local’ focus of Kaohsiung-based artists, on the other.

3 Although within the context of this chapter we see the rise of multiculturalism in Taiwan as closely related to the country’s democratization since the 1980s, we also recognize that, since then, it may have taken on new and broader meanings, corresponding to the sociopolitical and demographic changes in Taiwan. The very occurrence of the conference from which chapters in the current volume were first presented, and the diverse topics covered by these chapters, attests to this recent development (or, at least, the acknowledgement of the need to reconceptualize ‘multiculturalism’).

4 This definition, obviously, is very different from the one used by, for example, Renato Rosaldo (1994, in Ong 1996: 738), who views cultural citizenship as ‘the demand of disadvantaged subjects for full citizenship in spite of their cultural difference from mainstream society’, or by Aihwa Ong (1996: 738), who uses the term to refer to ‘the cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its
hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory’. Both of Rosaldo’s and Ong’s definitions are closer to those employed by other authors in this volume.

5 When Chen Chi-nan wrote this article, he was the Minister of the Council for Cultural Affairs. This article, therefore, could be considered as a cultural policy declaration of the Taiwan government. Chen is also the mastermind behind many of the current cultural policies in Taiwan, including community building (or empowerment).

6 As evidence, to put cultural citizenship in daily practice, Minister Chen Chi-nan advocated a citizen aesthetics movement (*gongmin meixue yundong*), which seeks active collaboration between the government and local community empowerment organizations to promote community building and empowerment, and citizen aesthetics through art and cultural activities (Chen 2005).


‘Tree of Life’ (Shengming zhi shu) is 15.3 m wide and 3.3 m tall; and ‘Infinity’ (Wuqiong wujin) is 14.7 m wide and 3.3 m tall (see http://www.krtco.com.tw/news/newspaper_(9510).htm#3, accessed 26 October 2007).


See note 8.


26 Both Kio-A-Thau Culture Society and Taiwan Field School are based in the now-defunct Kio-A-Thau Sugar Refinery, the first modern sugar refinery in Taiwan established during the Japanese colonial period.
Yet, the Taiwan government continued to consider ‘build-operate-transfer’ as potentially beneficial because it reduced government spending on construction as well as the associated personnel budget. Government officials also claimed that, given proper supervision, a private company would complete the task in a shorter time and with greater efficiency, even though the reality is often more equivocal (Chang 2005; Tung 2006; Wen 2001). It was only in the past few
years that Taiwanese society began to seriously consider the (negative) political implications of such projects, and the thinking of government officials has begun to sway in a different direction.

33 The chief KRTC investor is China Steel Corporation, formally a state-owned enterprise that was privatized only in 1995. Other private investors include RSEA Engineering Corporation, Far Eastern Group, Uni-President Group, Southeast Cement Corporation, and Siemens, online at http://www.krtco.com.tw/en/about/about-1.aspx (accessed 8 April 2008).

34 Nownews, ‘Wailao bian, 1.6 yi jieyun gonggong yishu weisongshen, gaoshi fu jufufei’ (The KTRC foreign worker incident investigation: 0.16 billion worth of public art was not rectified by the Kaohsiung City government; the city government refused to pay), 8 October 2005, online at http://www.nownews.com/newsflash/print.php (accessed 15 December 2008).


37 The quotations came from an interview - or dialogue - that Chiang had with Cheng Huang-erh, an architecture professor at Tamkang University. Cheng had talks with 13 prominent community leaders and activists on the issue of citizenship and aestheticism, which he subsequently published in his 2007 book, Cheng shi yi xiang. All translations are the authors’.

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