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essays on criticism from discourses

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Any understanding of contemporary gay cultural formations in Taiwan must consider the role of Western cultural influence on the island. Taiwanese gay and lesbian movements have adopted much of the rhetoric of their western role models. Rainbow flags, pink triangle pins, and buttons stating “chenmo dengyu siwang”(silence equals death) are displayed and sold at Taipei bookstores. “Chu yigui”(coming out of the closet) is a theme often discussed in articles about gay and lesbian life. Yet the emergence of modern gay identities in Taiwan has not been a unified, linear, process whereby western notions have been transplanted, in toto, into the local context. Authors in Taiwan writing on gay themes have drawn from Chinese “tradition” even as they have adopted Westernized discourse surrounding homosexuality. Our attempts to locate a gay presence in fiction from Taiwan must begin with the ironic step of avoiding the use of an essential “gay”identity as a starting point of analysis.

Chi Tawei can be said to be a part of a Taiwanese postmodernist literary movement. A graduate of and Ph.D. candidate at National Taiwan University’s Foreign Literature Department, he was the recipient of an award for his translation of *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, and the United News 17th Annual Literature Award for the short story “The Membranes” (Mo). The short stories in his two books exhibit many of the features commonly associated with postmodernism: multiple, shifting realities, the instability of truth, the use of pastiche. As a postmodernist, Chi Tawei clearly mistrusts claims of a stable, absolute truth. Such a project has important implications for the queer identities created in them.

In the story “Rituals,” truth is an elusive matter, subject to the whims of the human ego. “The Rituals,” (Yishi) is set in contemporary Taipei. The plot revolves around a trio of friends. The story unfolds primarily from the perspective of

1 Chi Ta-wei, *Ganguan shijie*, (Taipei: Huangguan chubanshe, 1995), 53.
 2 *Ibid.*, 66.
 3 *Ibid.*, 84.
 4 Chi Tawei. E-mail correspondence by author, February 25, 1998.
 5 Judith Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, in *the Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*,

Han, the former classmate and friend of Wei and Zhao. Alluding to Chinese history, their names are also those of three allies during the Warring States period who eventually parted ways. In "Rituals," Chi employs direct references to Western intellectuals: "At that time, [Han] had also, as was the prevailing custom, read Freud for no reason."¹ But "Rituals," is not a trite tale of Oedipal desires simply retold in the Taiwanese context. The object of Han's affection is not his mother, but his father. In this queer permutation of the classic Freudian narrative, the heterosexual conclusion is frustrated. The reader is initially provided the "truthful" account of affairs, only to have it reworked and contradicted later. The plot of the story, unlike a conventional narrative, does not advance by successively adding to the reader's knowledge. Instead, the "facts" of the story are set out, then one by one yanked away. Han, now husband and proud father of a daughter just graduating from high school, recalls one evening, back in college, when Wei tried to kiss him. In reaction to this affront on his manhood, he punches Wei in the face. Later, although they are no longer speaking, Wei sends him letters, which he refuses to answer. Even the pleas of a mutual friend, Zhao, are unable to move him. In his memory, Han is absolutely straight, and shuns all propositions by another man. The "real" events of that day are not exactly how Han remember them, however. The troubles begin when Han and his wife go to their daughter's school to attend her graduation. An unexpected encounter with Wei, who turns out to be his daughter's favorite high school teacher, brings on a flood of memories. Unable to wrest himself from a series of flashbacks to his youth, Han walks out of the ceremony in a daze.

Although the reader has been told that Han steadfastly refused Wei's advances, this fact is subsequently thrown into

question: "What he himself considered a safe and sound interpretation could not necessarily be trusted. For example, how could he 'objectively' conclude that before that evening, he had only pure feeling of friendship for Wei?"² But it is not only his recollection of his emotions that throw him into self-doubt. His own actions are also thrown into doubt: Han's sexual history is not as purely heterosexual as he would like to think. During his two-year service in the army, Han had two other men approach him and he did not refuse them. Chi never really divulges a singular, accurate account of events. Ultimately though, the absence of this "truthful" chain of events does not matter. For it is Han's very relation to "truth" itself how he obscures, revises, and alters it—in which the drama of the story lies.

Through this destabilization of truth, Chi challenges fixed notions of sexual identity. "Who knows why [Han] could spend the night with a company commander, but couldn't accept Wei's love? Why did Wei want to kiss Han? Who knows whether Wei gave Han his real love?...As for these questions, those involved in the affair probably couldn't even give a convincing explanation"³. At this point, late in the story, any attempt by the reader to find out what "really" happened will be in vain. Similarly, seeking out the "truth" of Han or Wei's sexual identity is bound to be a futile enterprise. Feminist theorist Judith Butler, whose writings have influenced Chi Tawei⁴, asserts that "it is necessary to consider that sexuality always exceeds a given performance, presentation, or narrative."⁵ In "Rituals," the narrative does not center around the gradual revelation of a determining, underlying sexuality, but rather its inadequacy in fully describing sexuality which expresses the inexplicability of desire. No mere story could ever explain the turn of events between Han and Wei.

Chi's deconstruction of truth extends also to notions of a patriotic, elder generation that embodies Chinese 'tradition.' In "Rituals," Han has a sickly, neglectful mother and a father in the military. Han has never met his father, but through a old black and white photograph of his parents, manages to construct a heroic image of him: 'Father looked as valiant as an eagle, as noble as a swan.' But Han's father is not a patriot to the Chinese nation. In the photo dressed in a white kimono, he "was a glorious samurai that was drafted into the Japanese imperial army."⁶ By drawing on the ambiguous position of the Taiwanese in the conflict between China and Japan, Chi thus shatters the logic that equates the paternal with Chinese patriotism.

Yet even this image of Han's heroic father is only a illusion. In a parallel fashion to the unraveling of Han's heterosexual pretensions of his own past, the 'heroic' father's stature is whittled down and eventually the narrator tells us that he was "only a john who spent his days on Guisui Street and, soon after the Japanese defeat, fled to the interior of the mainland because he owed a shit-load of gambling debts."⁷ Han himself never discovers the disgraceful circumstances of his father's disappearance, and retains a favorable outlook on him, even deciding that 'if he had ever loved another man, that man would probably be the snow-white saint in that black and white photo.'⁸ Thus, Chi compares false notions of heterosexual stability to fantasies of a upright, virtuous fatherhood. Both approaches exist more in the mind than in reality. In "Rituals," homosexual desire is not oppositional to a certain noble fatherhood, but is implicated in the construction of such a fantasy. Chi does not see sexual deviance as outside the family, but rather something that is intimately intertwined in it, shaping all of its relationships.

If for Chi, a stable fatherhood that embodies 'tradition' or 'patriotism' is a fabrication that is actually rife with deviant sexuality, then so is 'nation' itself. In "Rituals," Han's sexual history is finally revealed as containing homosexual episodes. Chi describes one encounter during Han's time in the army: "On that night, with a unspoken understanding, they compared each others bodies which had already been sacrificed to the Republic of China."⁹ Chi's characters' enlistment in the army does not preclude them from engaging in proscribed sexual behavior. In fact, it is the very institution where patriotism is most required –the army –where homosexual desires are fulfilled. Rather than representing opposites, sexual deviance and the nation are inextricable from one another.

Thus the political etymology of gay identities in Taiwan cannot be ignored. The instability of truth is central to Chi Tai-wei's postmodernist narratives, where he inscribes queer deviance. In his stories, queer deviance is all that challenges ideologies, myths, and other fantasies. Chi's postmodern queer deviance, then, is not only a resistance to sexual oppression, but all forms of dominance, including those of 'tradition' and the 'nation'. Reducing the identities of his characters to simply 'gay' elides other lines of opposition and difference that he writes. Without contextualizing the writing of sexual deviance within specific social, cultural and political conditions, we cannot understand its function as a method of critical resistance.

From the beginning, the built environment of Hong Kong has reflected the prominence of private interest. British merchant houses lobbied Parliament to take Hong Kong in the early 1840s. After the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing certified territorial and commercial cession to Britain, the merchant houses replicated their political dominance in the landscape. The Jardine Matheson warehouse was the first stone structure to be erected in Hong Kong. This British trading company, comprised of two families who built their fortune on the traffic of Indian opium to China, made it clear to London that Hong Kong was to be a trading post first. Diplomatic, military, and even colonial interests were secondary. The pride in the grandeur and siting of their merchant headquarters may be read allegorically: 'the nicest houses [in Hong Kong]'belonged not to the governor or the general, but to Jardines. They wrote: '[our] house is separate from the others and is situated on a point which overlooks the greater part of the Town.'¹

Land-use planning also gave great latitude to commercial interests. The history of land-use policy in Hong Kong minimized the role of the government and the public. The British colonial government had no intention of making long-term investments in the territory. Sanitation, housing, and public works projects were belated, ad hoc responses to calamities. They took measures in response to such emergencies as outbreaks of fire and bubonic plague, severe overcrowding, and the inadequacy or lack of public facilities. The residents also shrank away from leading land-use development efforts. Chinese inhabitants argued that British measures would represent impingement upon Chinese custom through the application of Western standards onto Chinese people.² Moreover, most Chinese were refugees, suspicious of bureaucratic interference.³ Because Hong Kong was an outpost

rather a permanent residence, trading concerns centered around short-term profit. The heads of Merchant houses could deflect the responsibility of developing the infrastructure of Hong Kong to the British taxpayers, equivocating their fiscal welfare with that of Britain.

A mixture of colonial neglect, cross-cultural suspicion, and commercial dominance contributed to a laissez-faire approach to land development in 19th century Hong Kong. Capital clout won out, as those with the will and means of implementation won license to form the urban area. As with other policies of the Hong Kong Government, the economic welfare of the Colony was paramount. By 1903, the use of land for building was unregulated by the government, except for some control of the outer limits of properties, known as the building envelope.

By 1974, legislation had been left behind, as economic growth called for the devolution of power and the increase of local accountability.⁴ The absence of an overall planning authority and the neglect of statutory control were outcomes of the default to trading and property interests which existed from the founding of the Colony.

The resulting architectural environment is, in the words of one architect, ‘somewhat characterless, rootless, and faceless.’⁵ Commercial architecture need not be devoid of stylistic value, yet the unique conditions of expatriate merchant development have generated a ‘look’ given over to economic rather than cultural considerations. Though the ‘Modern Movement’ in architecture did not reach Hong Kong, an International Style of sorts took hold. A tripartite mixture of indigenous architecture dating from the Qing dynasty, vernacular urban architecture mixing shop with residential space, and Colonial Style architecture modeled after the British experience in India and Malaysia, gave way to a skyline of commercial and residential

high rises built by expatriate and western-trained architects. Some commercial buildings in Hong Kong have more in common with buildings in London, New York, or Miami than with neighboring buildings.

Hong Kong has been considered the city which pays the least attention to architecture. Today, a handful of mammoth development companies have exclusive relationships with particular architectural firms who are obliged to concentrate on the practical side of their profession, and are chosen for their cost-, time-, and political efficiency.⁶ Firms with engineering and transportation expertise, like Arup Associates and Terry Farrell & Partners, are best suited for winning contracts. The value-enhancing density of the city precludes much scrutiny of the facade, and corporate patronage of architecture demands the cheapest and fastest form of construction. Even the most celebrated buildings, including Sir Norman Foster’s (London) Hongkong Shanghai Banking Corporation Headquarters of 1986, Paul Rudolph’s (New York) Lippo Centre of 1988, and I. M. Pei’s (New York) Bank of China Tower of 1990, are feats in engineering, concentrating on the provision of office space with good views. Design considerations are mainly restricted to the skins and tops of buildings.

The architecture of Hong Kong indicates that the territory is primarily a place to do business. Mass emigration suggests that Hong Kong’s inhabitants do not find it a suitable place to live. Political instability gives rise to a kind of ‘limited investment’ in the territory based on inhabitation rather than aesthetic consideration. Hong Kong, until 1997, was borrowed land, due soon for another change of ownership. Moreover, most residents were refugees to begin with, fleeing warlords (1920s), the Japanese (1930s), the civil war (1940s), or the communists (1950s). The migrant heritage of this diverse populace mitigates

pressures to attach themselves to the territory.⁷ In the mid-1980s around twenty thousand people were leaving per year. From the late eighties to the early nineties, the number of people leaving Hong Kong per year shot up from forty thousand to sixty thousand.⁸ It is estimated that by the year 2000, nearly one-sixth of Hong Kong's population will hold foreign passports or immigrant visas.⁹ Canada, Australia, and the United States were the leading recipients of Hong Kong emigrants.¹⁰

Hong Kong emigres themselves duplicate the commercial ethic of the territory's historically dominant interests. Many held "portfolios" of flats in the Hong Kong property market, which some years offered far greater returns than stock market speculation. Their stake in residential investments in Hong Kong mirrored, on a smaller scale and shorter term, the original 99-year British lease on Hong Kong and the early merchants' developments in Hong Kong. . In Vancouver and Toronto, Hong Kong migrants have financed intensive residential and commercial construction to serve their needs. "Monster houses," a Vancouver coinage, refers to the practice of demolishing two residential lots, to make room for a single, box-like structure which extends to the property edges. Accustomed to the valuation of space by square-footage for resale, these new developers approach residential building like commercial developers.

Commodity trade epitomizes the heritage of Hong Kong. Today Hong Kong is the world's fifth largest financial center. The trade of financial products stocks, bonds, futures, currencies, mortgages, deeds is Hong Kong's contemporary economic role. Trade of goods, capital, and now citizenship finds an ultimate symbol in a new airport, which facilitates the trade of people. The airport on Lantau Island at Chek Lap Kok,

in planning since 1989 and scheduled for completion this year, was intended by the outgoing British government to be "a Rose Garden as the last gift from the colonial master".¹¹ The estimated \$USD 20 billion project includes expansion of the world's busiest container port, the world's longest suspension bridge, five road projects, two major land reclamations, a new town, a new mall, and a new railway.

If Hong Kong has been metaphorically called a "staging ground for emigration",¹² now it will physically symbolize a launching pad for people. While there has been a trend towards the integration of airports with metropolitan life, the new airport takes this integration to an extreme. The railway system, for example, extends airport functions into the heart of the urban area. The Airport Express Railway (AER) provides a facility for specially designated luggage compartments and carrier systems. At the airport AER terminal, railway platforms are connected directly to the departure and arrival halls, and baggage can be transported straight to or from the handling areas of the air side. The rest of the boarding procedure is simply for passport control and security checks. City check-in services by individual airline companies will be found in the city.

Upon landing at the new airport, arriving passengers will be transported by the latest model of people-mover systems to passport control points in a few minutes. Furthermore, if the Mass Transit Railway Company arranges so that AER fares can be collected at the exit station, there will be no need for a ticketing barrier at the airport. The final exit from the airport might then be in the middle of the city, far beyond the physical boundary of the airport site. By the end of this century, the airport is expected to handle 45 million passengers, and by 2040, 87 million. Compared to the current 6 million population of

Hong Kong, in terms of relative population the city will resemble an airport.¹³

The implications of such intense mobility should be clear: those who are perennially ‘passing through’ feel little responsibility to or affinity with their environment. Like the early British traders and the Hong Kong emigres, the traveller in Hong Kong will occupy space but not identify with the place. The first stone structure in Hong Kong was a Scottish merchant house’s storage facility; it was built to receive and disperse products for resale. Like a latter-day version of the opium godown, the airport is a space whose features facilitate and define the social practice of trade.

In the absence of allegiances to a particular place, interest in the built environment will resemble speculation: use for gain. Objects which ‘pass through,’ be they commodities, financial instruments, or people, can distill their ‘investment’ into financial interest. The epithets ‘hybrid’ and ‘third space’ and ‘entrepot’ then apply to culture, territorial status, economic activity, and the built environment as well. These terms which denote different modes of ambiguity (neither East nor West, neither of the United Kingdom nor the People’s Republic of China, and neither the origin nor destination of its production) also describe an investor’s way of looking at different kinds of ownership. Ironically, an international market of finance, architectural services, and even nation-states may perpetuate Hong Kong’s commercial aesthetic of building. If this is so, Hong Kong’s foundations as an expatriate trading outpost have given it a considerable head start in adapting to globalization.

¹Roger Buckley, *Hong Kong: the road to 1997* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

²G.B. Endacott, *A History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1964), 185.

³G. R. Sayer, *Hong Kong 1862-1919: years of discretion* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1980), 57.

⁴Rogers Bristow, *Land-use Planning in Hong Kong*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 143.

⁵Chung Wah Nan, *Contemporary Architecture in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., Ltd., 1989).

⁶Naonori Matsuda, ‘Hong Kong’s Future as an ‘Airport City’ ’in *Space Design*. no. 7(394), pp. 51-60.

⁷Ronald Skeldon, ‘Emigration and the future of Hong Kong’ in *Pacific Affairs* no. 63(4), 501.

⁸Howlett 397.

⁹Sung, Yun-Wing, ‘The Hong Kong Economy: to and beyond the 1997 barrier’ Paper for the Conference on the Chinese and their Future: Beijing, Taipei and Hong Kong, Washington D.C., January 1991, 11.

¹⁰Skeldon 505.

¹¹Peter J. Rimmer, *Hong Kong’s Future as a Regional Transport Hub*. (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University, 1992), 69.

¹²Bruce Mesquita, *Red Flag Over Hong Kong*. (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1996), 7.

¹³Matsuda.

Wouldn't it be nice if you could make New Haven more like Walt Disney World's Main Street, U.S.A.? First, you'd get rid of the big problems like homelessness, crime, and poverty. Singing birds would replace the wail of police sirens. Don't stop there, though. Keep going until all the potholes are filled and, while you're at it, make sure there's never one of those cold, rainy, and downright gloomy days again. You're left with a product that is so perfect, it's completely unbelievable. Places like that only exist at Disney World and other realms of make-believe. It's no wonder that millions of people wishing to experience such an ideal environment spend their precious vacation time flocking to such picture-perfect theme parks.

Yet one theme park in Orlando, called 'Splendid China', prides itself on its accuracy. Through scale models of China's greatest landmarks, the park claims that it presents 5,000 years of Chinese history in one day, bringing Americans closer than ever to the wonders of the Far East. We enter the park through "Chinatown," a street full of brightly decorated stores selling enough Chinese food and Oriental trinkets to satisfy any tourist's needs. Don't dally here; the main attractions are still ahead of us. And the highlights don't disappoint: thousands of two and three-inch bricks make up a 1/2 mile long Great Wall, a 1:15 scale Forbidden City complete with hundreds of the emperor's servants, and there are even some of Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi's terra cotta warriors in another corner of the park.

I forgot to mention that you have to pay almost \$30 for this glimpse of Chinese history. It's certainly cheaper than the airfare to China and doesn't approach Disney's whopping entrance fee. But isn't there something strange about paying to experience another culture? China's culture surely doesn't belong solely to the Hong Kong and Taiwanese investors who

own the park, but they happily market representations of China's greatest structures.

The park is a fairly simple business venture. Like any other entrepreneur, the investors have identified a source of demand for their product. Florida's 'Splendid China' is based upon a successful model, a park of the same name built by the same investors in Shenzhen, China that opened in 1989. In its first four years of operation, Shenzhen's 'Splendid China' recorded 20 million visits mainly by tourists from Guangdong Province (to the north of Shenzhen) and Hong Kong (on Shenzhen's southern border). These visitors share many characteristics with Orlando tourists who can't go to China because of its distance and expense. Travellers from around the world who go to Hong Kong might not travel throughout China due to time or monetary limitations, but they can get a taste of its wonders at 'Splendid China' as part of a relatively inexpensive day trip from Hong Kong. Also, most Chinese are not yet wealthy enough to travel far from their home city, making it popular with Guangdong residents, who live over a thousand of miles from Beijing. Most people wouldn't fly to Orlando just to visit 'Splendid China', but after spending a few days at the area's other more famous attractions, they might tack on an extra day for it.

The parks also serve as a huge advertisement for travel to China, making it logical that China Travel Services (a company specializing in tours to China) is one of the main investors. Ma Chiman, chairman of Florida's Splendid China and also the general manager of CTS, did not hide this goal during a news conference at the opening of his Florida park: '[Ma] said he hopes the park will persuade more American, European and Latin American visitors to visit China to see the real thing.'¹ Given a probable source of demand and the added advertising

benefits of the theme park, supplying it was a logical next step for CTS and its partners. Simple supply and demand economics applies: if there are enough people willing to buy a product at a given price, a firm will enter the market as long as it can make a profit at that price.

All that was left for CTS to do was design and build the park. The design was simple—they just took the Shenzhen 'Splendid China', tinkered with it a bit, and a new theme park was born. Before starting construction, 'Splendid China' had to get the Chinese government's approval to use its landmarks in the Florida park. So Beijing reviewed the plans to make sure the selection of landmarks was to the liking of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Liking what they saw, the PRC proceeded to license out the replication of the country's cultural treasures for consumption in the United States. Beijing then supplied 120 artisans to construct the intricate models that make up the heart of the park.

It appears to be a good deal for Beijing. The park's role as an advertisement for the entire country brings not only foreign tourists and their dollars to China, but also attracts foreign investment. This function also originated with the Shenzhen 'Splendid China'. Shenzhen is one of China's original Special Economic Zones (SEZs), established by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s as part of China's opening to the West. 'Splendid China' is built in the SEZ's 'Overseas Chinese City,' described by the state-run Xinhua (New China) News Agency as 'a center for introducing funds, know-how and personnel from Chinese people residing overseas.'² While Shenzhen's 'Splendid China' catered to Asia, Florida's serves the Americas. So, like any advertisement, the parks present their product (in this case the People's Republic of China) in the best way possible. In this idealized way, it is Main Street, PRC.

But the protesters shouting for Tibetan and Mongolian freedom outside the park's front gate draw us back to reality. We're not in the PRC, but in Florida, where free speech and assembly are protected. These demonstrators, who have made regular appearances outside 'Splendid China' since it opened in December 1993, protest the park's alleged misrepresentation of China's repressed minorities in Tibet and Inner Mongolia. Protesters argue that 'Splendid China' presents idealized images of these lands by including models of the Potala Palace from Tibet and Genghis Khan's Mausoleum and a traditional yurt dwelling from Inner Mongolia. They claim that the park teaches unsuspecting Americans the lie that ethnic minorities from these areas enjoy the freedom to express their culture in the PRC, when in fact the minorities have had their culture suppressed and are currently waging separatist campaigns to break away from the PRC.

The Han ethnic group, who we normally think of as the "Chinese," compose 93% of the PRC's population, with 55 ethnic minorities making up the remainder. While minorities are dispersed over about half of China's territory, many are concentrated in "autonomous regions." These regions, including both Inner Mongolia and Tibet, are provinces of the PRC, reporting like any other to Beijing, but have a few special privileges (such as a lack of enforcement of the one child per family birth control policy).

A similar debate about the status of China's minorities in these autonomous regions is waged among academics. One pertinent question is determining what people and territories represent the Chinese nation. A nation and a state are not necessarily one and the same. The state refers to the group that controls (usually through the military) a certain territory. A nation exists when people within a territory recognize each

other as belonging to the same group with a common culture, history, and interests. In China, the unity of state and nation is especially unclear in the autonomous regions where the minority peoples do not share the language, history, ethnicity and many customs with the ruling Han majority. In this case, should we regard Tibet and Inner Mongolia as part of the PRC? The government would say yes, the protesters no.

To legitimize their rule, governments try to convince their citizens and people around the world that borders of their state match the nation they claim to control. This process is known as nations writing their own history. The state's official history is written to make it appear as if the current rulers have always laid proper claim to the disputed area. Two popular methods of doing this in China are revising textbooks and producing television documentaries on the region's history. The goal is to ingrain the legitimacy of rule in the people until nobody questions it anymore. At this point, citizens will produce texts on their own that take the official stance for granted, at once decreasing the role of government while propagating its message. In Inner Mongolia, the PRC government has tried to use education and propaganda campaigns touting common elements in the culture and history of the Mongolian and majority Han peoples to convince residents of these territories that Beijing is their true government. Through movies and other propaganda tools, Beijing claims that the Communists liberated Tibetans from slavery under the Dalai Lama and then continued to improve Tibetans' lives, thus legitimizing Tibet's inclusion in the PRC. Including exhibits from disputed territories in China-in-miniature theme parks is simply a new and clever method of a nation writing its own history.

Thus we turn to looking specifically at the controversial exhibits at Florida's 'Splendid China' and how they present an

idealized, unified view of the Chinese nation. The Potala Palace, the original located in Lhasa, Tibet, is built on a 1:15 scale as exhibit #37 at Florida's Splendid China. The description at the exhibit reads:

Located in the heart of the Old Lhasa capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region,

the Potala Palace was built in the 7th century by King Songsten Gampo (617-665 AD)

for his bride Princess Wen Cheng, sent to him by an emperor of the Tang Dynasty.

The 13-story palace, standing atop a cliff in 3,700 meters high Lhasa, is the world's highest palace. The Potala Palace has 1000 chambers.³

While the description is historically accurate, it makes sure to focus on the Chinese connection to the palace, through the Tang princess, rather than the importance of the palace to the Tibetan people. The description does not mention that a Chinese army actually burnt down Songsten Gampo's original palace during the reign of his successor. The palace was rebuilt in its current form (it is unclear what the original palace looked like) under the command of the 5th Dalai Lama in the 17th century. It was a very important structure for the independent Tibetan people, containing the remains of the 5th to 13th Dalai Lamas (with the exception of the 6th) and even once serving as meeting place for the Tibetan National Assembly. The current 14th Dalai Lama is now in exile, denied entrance to Tibet by the PRC. In their writing of history, the exhibit's curators try to give the impression that Tibet was somehow always a part of China. They emphasize the positive Chinese connections of its

past and ignore both the anti-Tibetan violence inflicted by the Chinese against the Potala Palace (it was also shelled by China's People's Liberation Army during a 1959 Tibetan uprising) and the many ways the palace served as a symbol for an independent Tibet.

Inner Mongolia is represented by two structures, a yurt and the Mausoleum of Genghis Khan. A yurt, also known as a ger, is a traditional Mongolian dwelling. The structure is similar to a tent, its thick walls made to keep its inhabitants warm during the cold Mongolian winters but cool during the summer. Developed by nomadic Mongolian herding families, it is designed to be rapidly taken apart for easy transport and then later quickly reconstructed. But protesters from a group called Citizens Against Communist Chinese Propaganda feel that 'the inclusion of a icon of nomadic life, a truly non-Chinese lifestyle, is a sick joke.'⁴

Indeed, the inclusion of a yurt is an example of the park trying to teach visitors that Mongolians living in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, like other ethnic minorities, are not only part of the Han-dominated Chinese nation but can express their culture within it through traditional structures like the yurt. But recent events chronicled by the human rights group Asia Watch contradict the idyllic and inclusive China presented by the 'Splendid China' exhibit. The accusations include an early 1990s 'secret campaign of repression against ethnic Mongolian intellectuals' in which 'any word or deed that upholds ethnic interests or shows dissatisfaction with the status quo would be labeled by the authorities as 'creating national splits' or 'undermining the unification of the motherland and the unity of nationalities.'⁵ The labels used by the Chinese authorities clearly show their goal of maintaining a unified state.

The protesters and other parts of the Asia Watch report argue that the suppression of Mongolian culture appears to mean that inclusion will be done through sinicization. An example is the proposal by Chinese authorities at the 1990 Conference of Education Work in Inner Mongolia that all ethnically Mongolian schoolchildren be taught Mandarin Chinese while phasing out the use of Mongolian in minority education. More recently, a Reuters report on protests in Inner Mongolia describes how students and teachers from universities in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia, calling for the release of two political prisoners ‘raised pictures of 12th century Mongol ruler Genghis Khan and sang Mongolian nationalist songs.’⁶ The lone yurt sitting in the Florida sun gives no hint of this rising nationalism among ethnic Mongolians.

The Mausoleum of Genghis Khan exhibit at Splendid China combines both the elements of rewriting history and distorting the present situation. Located in Dongsheng, Inner Mongolia, the mausoleum houses the remains of the great Mongolian leader who conquered China and established the Yuan Dynasty in 1271. It was built in 1954, virtually destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and then later restored. Today the image and legend of Genghis Khan is the focus of Mongolian nationalism, a rallying point for a people who have become a minority in their own land (ethnic Mongolians only make up 15% of Inner Mongolia’s population) and have lost true power to the dominant Han people. For Inner Mongolians, the symbol of Genghis Khan evokes feelings of a time when they were great and ruled China, not the reverse, current, situation:

The symbolism of Chinggis [Genghis] Khan functions as an increasingly salient

identity boundary marker that sets them off from the dominant Han group in today’s

Inner Mongolia, where due to the overwhelming Han presence in social, political, and economic structures, formal/physical boundaries between the two groups are becoming more and more arbitrary (while, as a result, symbolic boundary markers are increasingly important).⁷

So a symbolic site such as the Genghis Khan Mausoleum has become a destination for both Inner and Outer Mongolian pilgrims who have raised Genghis Khan to a near God-like status.

Thus protesters at “Splendid China” feel that China has co-opted the symbol and meaning of Genghis Khan as their own:

As part of a heinous policy of cultural genocide, the Chinese Communist government has usurped the historical meaning of Chinggis Qan [Genghis Khan] to the Mongol people, and turned him into a hero of the Chinese people. This is something akin to the KKK suddenly declaring Martin Luther King their honorary President.⁸

Although their language is quite strong, the protesters accurately point out that this is a rewriting of history. Inclusion in the park gives the impression that Genghis Khan was a great Chinese, not Mongolian, leader. By blurring the lines between

Mongolian and Chinese history, the exhibit makes the inclusion of an Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region into the PRC plausible.

In spite of such protests, ‘Splendid China’ has always denied that it has a political agenda. But it couldn’t innocently place Chinese culture in a tiny, cute package and try to sell it without arousing the ire of China’s detractors. Intended or not, its product has made a strong political statement. The PRC has successfully brought its nation-building campaign to Central Florida.

Isn’t it ironic that the Chinese Communists have used the theme park (a capitalistic venture inspired by Disney World) to further their political agenda? It is simply an example of how communist ideology is largely dead in China. In the PRC, the government is adopting a free market system to improve the people’s standard of living. Officials then use the claim that they are improving people’s lives to legitimize their rule while their only reference to Marx is that this method is ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics.’ Although ideology has lost out to such a great extent that the Chinese government has reduced itself to competing for the same tourists as Disney World, its use of Western free market ideology is still working to strengthen the totalitarian government’s rule. Maybe this is what officials mean by practicing socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Can we leave decisions about the content of our cultures to the invisible hand of the marketplace, or is a nation’s culture too important and shared by too many people to allow a small group to make a mockery of it? China is changing rapidly, and those changes will surely touch many aspects of its culture. Hopefully, its 5,000 years of history will not be sold off to the highest bidder.

1 Chinese Theme Park to Open in U.S. Xinhua News Agency. 15 December 1993.

2 Overseas Town in Shenzhen Thriving. Xinhua News Agency. 16 August 1996.

3 Source: WWW url:
<http://www.afn.org/~afn20372/pol/ex37.html#top>

4 Source: WWW url:
<http://www.afn.org/~afn20372/pol/ex25.html>

5 Asia Watch report. Continuing Crackdown in Inner Mongolia. 1991. Source: WWW url:
<http://www.afn.org/~afn20372/pol/fm.html>

6 Irja Halasz. Unrest in Inner Mongolia. Reuters: 28 February 1996. Source: WWW url:
<http://www.afn.org/~afn20372/pol/fm.html>

7 Almaz Khan. Chinggis Khan: From Imperial Ancestor to Ethnic Hero. Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers. Ed. Stevan Harrell. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995. 248-249.

8 G. Tsengelt, Erkh Botjiged, Sanj Altan. Statement on the Mausoleum of Genghis Khan at the Splendid China Park. August 1996. WWW url:
<http://www.afn.org/~afn20372/pol/mn1.html>

