

The participants work with the performers in listening and responding between two transcribed conversations recorded at two culturally distinctive locations, both of which explore different concepts of community, cosmology, temporality, psyche, mortality, etc. The session concludes with an improvised performance that stems from the ways in which the participants produce affiliation in sounding/listening through/within one another.

Perform by

Krõõt Juurak & Anat Stainberg

Transcribed and translated from Mandarin Chinese. July 2013, Taipei, Taiwan

Hong-Kai Wang: We were just talking about that history makes us like a ship.

Chang Yong-Chih: Yes, our island is a concept. We have been governed by different regimes over the past four hundred years. Deep down, there must be a resolute faith, which cannot be replaced by anything, whether political or religious. I am not suggesting that we as a people are more spiritually advanced, but I believe that everybody understands the invisible.

W: The invisible powers.

C: That's right, those invisible powers.

W: That would impact how we perceive the idea of burials, which many believe is the perpetual return.

C: Certainly. There is an invisible core in our interiors, our bodies and our spiritual spheres. How shall I put it? I think we live in a place of hybrid culture.

W: A hybrid culture of all sorts of cosmologies.

C: And a great deal of openness. We are a ship and are bound to travel in the oceans constantly.

W: But where is the site of burial for a ship that is in a constant movement? Don't we need a strong sense of belonging to the lands? In my family, the earth burials were used for many generations until my grandparents - both of their ashes are placed at a columbarium.

C: Columbarium is actually a form of earth burial.

W: From horizontal to vertical relationship to the lands.

C: Yes, it is a multistoried building for our ancestor's cinerary urns. In the form of ash, a columbarium enshrines the memories of our ancestors. This enshrinement is not that different from our worship to the God of Earth (Tu Di Gong). Have you noticed you can spot a small God of Earth shrine or a big God of Land temple wherever you go?

W: Yes, whether you are in a city or in the country.

C: I think there is a collective belief in the invisible power in both the visible and invisible worlds, and that's where we could find the perpetual return. There is a strong bond of consciousness among us - this connectedness has to do with our conception of "ancestor". And this hasn't ever changed.

W: It seems that such ancestral worship hasn't been instrumentalized by the state power.

C: It goes beyond that. We have a lot of mountains. The presence of mountains seems to create a sense of enclosure and encompassment. When the only visible open space is the sky, certain rituals are engendered. The inhabitants in turn inherit these rituals and pass them on from one generation to another in order to communicate with the cosmos and the invisible power...

W: Our grief at the dead is based on a perceived linearity of time. Deaths and loss happen because the clock time is always moving forward and never turning back. If we believe in a world of more powerful invisible power, perhaps it's possible to rethink the ways we make up the memories of our loved ones who are forever gone.

C: That's a constant, continuous kind of memory construction. For instance, here nobody questions the idea of 'samsara' (reincarnation), except that Christians and Catholics believe in "one life". The other day, I visited a small village Chie-Ding, where each of the four Taoist temples would take turn to host the 'sacrificial ceremony' every 3 years. So one cycle takes 12 years to be completed, and everybody participates in the "burning the king boat" ritual led by hundreds of processions. It is a fishermen's sea culture. Nobody knows when a boat would return once it has sailed off. There seems to be a kind of disconnect that everybody is accustomed to.

W: A memory condition with many ruptures.

C: This is natural. How can we connect with those who have departed and who we can't reach or touch? So we inhabit a deeper belief system. For instance, fishermen all believe that Matsu, the Goddess of Sea, is always out there watching over them. This is a very distinctive belief system; it stores a lot of disembodied memories, because the sea doesn't keep any physical traces.

W: Sea locks up our history of colonialism and turmoil over the past four hundred years.

C: You see, we have been aborigines, Chinese, Spanish, Dutch and Japanese. What kind of collective memories do we inherit? We have to constantly negotiate between all the disrupted fragments of history.

W: I believe that each person's memories are made of multiple temporalities. If we remember in a larger historical framework consisting of many disrupted moments, how can we remember collectively?

C: My late maternal grandfather was a Hoklo, a Southern Fujianese from Mainland China, and my late maternal grandmother was a Hakkanese. At their respective funerals, our relatives all wanted to contribute their own memories and funerary traditions in order to put together a "complete and proper" funeral. According to Hakkanese rituals, all guests must kneel down from a distance, and all family members must respond by kneeling down and weeping.

W: Did your family hire any professional weeper?

C: No, we didn't. My uncle is a Taoist priest, like a medium. He had to respect those fragmented memories and different belief systems, because all of the concerns and suggestions were out of respect and good will.

W: So in a way he organizes people's memories of the departed and their disparate beliefs.

C: Yes. This involves a lot of negotiations and compromises, and requires a great deal of generosity. Nobody can be sure of or 100% responsible for what the most authentic ritual is in a culture like this.

W: So what might come out of it is a hyper hybrid ritual.

C: We don't have a definite or "singular, authoritative" reference point. What matters most is how we remember the departed in an invisible capacity.

W: Actually, most of us believe that we live together with the invisible powers. For instance, the entire town of my hometown Huwei would be mobilized on the 'Day of Crossing', which is celebrated every lunar July 15. Huwei was completely wiped out by a plague in mid 19th century and later rebuilt from scratch, so the commemoration of the dead had since become an important part of the local collective consciousness.

C: In our culture, we all wish that when our loved ones passed, they would become a kind of deity. This again has to do with our ancestral worship. In my family, our ancestors' memorial tablet is placed in our 300-year-old house.

W: This again has a lot to do with our relationship to the lands.

C: You know we have the tradition of "picking bones" of the buried. When it was the year my family had to pick bones from my grandpa's grave on the day before the Tomb Sweeping Day, I dreamed of being back in the 300-year-old house I grew up at. In the dream, all my family was very joyful, and so was my grandpa. He appeared as if he was still alive. When he was still around, he always put out a poker face to everybody but me and always allowed me to play around with him. In the dream, he pointed out a photo of him on the wall and told me: "I don't like this photo. I looked too thin. Ask your uncle to have it replaced!" He passed away when I was in high school. Before I converted to Buddhism, my love for grandpa was almost a religious kind. I often dreamed of him whenever I was depressed or frustrated; in the dreams, he would stroke my head, giving me lots of strength, almost like an incantation...

W: Did you develop this relationship with your grandpa after he passed?

C: Yes after he is gone. So after that dream, I relayed his words to my mum and uncle. Strangely, the next day they found a crack on the photo at his gravestone. So they carefully replaced it with another, and that replacement even had to be approved by a Taoist oracle!

W: After my grandpa passed away, I was the only one in my family who had dreamed of him. In the dream, he looked healthy and radiant, and asked me to tell my grandma that he was now very well. Of course my grandma believed that the dream spoke of the truth, because it replaced the old reality as well as the old memories.

Transcribed and translated from Italian

June 2015, Baselice, Italy

Angelica: This afternoon, we were in a workshop on various kinds of ritual in ancestral worship in Taiwan, is this right?

Daniela: Yes, it is. After reading the transcript, we had to discuss this and talk about our ancestral worship in Baselice. I think that only a few people got to talk about this, because we often went off the topic. In fact, it ended up not about the ancestral worship anymore, just personal experiences.

Angelica: Yes, but I think it was very interesting to know about the Taiwanese rituals because they are very different from ours. The first thing we talked about was the grief and the loss of a loved one. We have this point of view in common, because we see departure as detachment and not as a joyful event as our religion teaches us. Catholicism teaches us that real life is not on the earth but after death. We are sad because we miss our loved ones. I think this was the most important topic, however some other topics went well beyond the scope of the discussion.

Assunta: I agree with you, the most important thing we have in common is seeing departure as detachment. For example, in Taiwan, spirituality seems deeper than here probably because of their belief in reincarnation and so that they continue the relationship with the departed and with the invisible power in a different way. The most important difference is that we believe we'll reach our relatives after death. We need to find a link between us and the departed. We need to think that it is not all over. When a person dies, the physical body ceases to exist but his spirit is still alive, and so is his invisible core.

Angelica: The strong Catholic belief is that one day we'll reach our loved ones, allowing us to overcome these moments of pain. We are able to do this because of our belief in the afterlife. Taiwanese on the other hand believes in perpetual return.

Assunta: We discussed dreams a lot, maybe because everyone tries to get to the afterlife. So above all by dreaming of our loved ones, we connect with them.

Angelica: Yes, a participant in the workshop stated that she had even gotten to know some relatives through dreaming of them. She didn't know them because she had never seen them; they died when she was a baby and she only knew that she looked like them. A lady told us that in another dream of hers, she was in her old house where she was born. When she was going to the basement, down there it was foggy and so crowded, she saw a bride and she recognized this girl. She was a young girl from Baselice who died some years ago. The lady was scared and she wanted to go out but she couldn't find the door. Then she met a man with a green cape and she asked him to help her get away. Finally, she arrived at the exit and saw a woman sitting on the stairs. This woman was her son-in-law's mother. The lady asked the woman if she needed something. This woman answered she couldn't speak and was suffering. Three weeks later her son was seriously injured in a car accident.

Assunta: We could think that the woman knew what was going to happen to her son, so she was already sad. The participants often talked about their premonition dreams, because everyone deeply believed in their dreams. We can say that we unconsciously communicated with our ancestors through dreams.

Daniela: Although we live in the same village and we believe in the same religion, a few ladies have different perceptions of Hell, Heaven and Purgatory. They see them as physical places, but I don't agree.

Angelica: You're right.

Assunta: It's true. Hell, Heaven and Purgatory are places where there is no time, no space. These religious dogmas are sometimes influenced by the culture and the environment, so probably each person sees them in a different way because of their personal experiences.

Angelica: Another odd dream was about a cemetery. The lady said that she was at a graveyard and saw dead people coming out of the cemetery and headed for the village. Then suddenly the cemetery closed and she couldn't go out anymore...We have a different relationship with death in our dreams; sometimes we have premonition dreams based on reality and sometimes instead we have fantasy and grim dreams.

Assunta: We don't know if it depends on our spirit or maybe on experiences lived in our past lives; that is, Buddhists believe in reincarnation so they can transfer past experiences into their new lives. It's different for us. Maybe we are more influenced by emotions and feelings and the dream could reflect the mood of the moment.

Angelica: We also discussed the ritual of soul purification by paying money. A lady said that several years ago some women prayed to their dead relatives and asked them for money to help with the deceased's soul. For instance, a woman went to her neighbor who in turn threw something in the fire. As the flames were rising up, this neighbor told her husband that he was still in the Hell. The widow paid this neighbor to communicate with her husband's soul, because she believed in her. It's clear that even at such sad events, we see people take advantage of others' misfortunes.

Assunta: The weakness and agony of the moment and also the uncertainty and ignorance about afterlife caused these kind of situations.

Angelica: I think we should have discussed other topics, in particular our ancestral worship and rituals. For example, the wake: a wake is the custom of keeping a vigil or watch over a body from death until burial. It includes prayers for the dead and comforting the relatives of the deceased. We do it to accompany the dead person to the afterlife.

Daniela: Another tradition is the altar: we are used to creating a small altar at home with our ancestors' photos and candles. In Italy on 2nd November we celebrate the Day of the Dead. In Baselice, two weeks before Easter, we go to the cemetery and we call it "the Sunday of the Dead." This ritual is strictly connected to the idea of Resurrection. On Easter Day, we celebrate the rising of Christ with the notion that one day everyone will be resurrected. So we go to the cemetery to remember it and to be ready for the Resurrection Day. But there was not enough time to talk more about it.

Assunta: Yes, you're right; we were fascinated by those ladies' personal tales.

Angelica: Yes, but I was impressed by the idea of reincarnation, and above all that Hong-Kai believed she was a Spanish woman in one of her past lives.

Assunta: And, those people who are able to perceive the past life of each person and observe your life in the dimensions of no space and no time.

Daniela: It's unbelievable, their belief is so different than our own.

Assunta: Indeed, what comes out of this transcript is a well-structured ritualistic system. They have many funerary traditions, and they are in a constant relationship with their ancestors, more than we are.

Daniela: It's a very consistent relationship. In the transcript, when they talk about the ship and nobody knows where the site of burial is for a ship that is in constant movement, I think it has to do with their souls' perpetual return. For example, Hong-Kai in one of her past lives was in Spain and she was born in Taiwan. Who knows what might come next?

Assunta: I have a different interpretation of this concept. I connect the ship to their history of colonialism: as the ship sails across several seas and oceans, they met different people. Being ruled under foreign regimes is similar to being in different countries. Then each civilization brought its own traditions. The people on the island put them together to create one of a kind of worship-- it should be a "complete and perfect" kind of worship because it is formed by many worships.

Daniela: You are probably right.

Assunta: Unlike our culture in which we have only one root, one worship, they take in different traditions and customs, and forge them together.

Angelica: It's not easy to understand it.

Daniela: No, it's too distant from our culture. We should learn more to understand it better. I watched some documentaries on TV about an Asian burial ritual: the deceased were on a boat floating down the river, and as the boat was going away it was burning.

Assunta: Do you mean the fishermen's ritual?

Daniela: Yes, but I'm not sure if it's the same as "burning the king boat" ritual. Anyway while I was performing, it came back to my mind.

Angelica: Another interesting story was about prayers. A lady said that her grandfather had married a witch. I asked her if she prayed for her after her death. The lady replied "absolutely not! She was a bad person!" But as we are Christians, we should forgive and we should not judge. Since the prayer is a way of purification we should pray for everyone and for bad people too.

Daniela: But who knows if she was a real witch or if she was passing herself off as a witch only to gain money.

Assunta: It could be. She was able to frighten people and to earn the respect she wanted. It was easy because of the people's credulity.

Daniela: Let's finish the conversation otherwise the video is too long.

Art Education Research No. 13/2017

Hong-Kai Wang

What Emerges in the Silence of ...

In universities, there are various referents of knowledge. They are usually embedded in social forms of power relation in precluding rather than opening up other knowledges to us. Using 'listening' to a reenactment of two transcripts as a mode of organizing sociality, *What Emerges in the Silence of ...* is a performative session that seeks to disrupt the given references that so often quietly inform our responses, and to possibly forge an emergent knowledge production.

Biography

Hong-Kai Wang is an artist, researcher and educator. Her interdisciplinary practice is concerned with politics of missing knowledges at the intersection of history, lived experience and power, seeking to forge unlikely affiliations beyond received chronologies and geographies. www.w-h-k.net

Was in der Stille von ... entsteht

An Universitäten gibt es zahlreiche Referenten des Wissens. Sie sind meist in soziale Formen von Herrschaft eingebettet, indem sie anderes Wissen ausschliessen anstatt es uns zugänglich zu machen. *What Emerges in the Silence of...* verwendet ein Reenactment zweier Transkripte als Verfahren der sozialen Organisation. Die performative Hörsitzung versucht jene vorgefertigten Referenzen zu stören, die so oft stillschweigend unsere Reaktionen prägen, und so möglicherweise entstehendes Wissen zu gestalten.

Biografie

Hong-Kai Wang ist Künstlerin, Forschende und Lehrende. Ihre interdisziplinäre Praxis befasst sich mit einer Politik des verschütteten Wissens an den Schnittstellen von Geschichte, gelebter Erfahrung und Macht. Unterzogen wird der Versuch, unwahrscheinliche Zugehörigkeiten jenseits allgemein anerkannter Chronologien und Geografien hervorzubringen. www.w-h-k.net