

## ***Textile Practices as Media for Narrating Local Stories***

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2017  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

In this study, the living materials of my hometown and its spatial imaginations will be explored through textile practices, and transformed into the subject matter of designs. Some human images in local places will be investigated, to review the connection between the designer and the places where he/she lives, in order to contribute to the revelation of the deepest longings of human demand for home and for the collective memory of places. Specifically, narratives of Tainan alleys will be manifested in textiles practices relating to creative design. How to give those humble alleys a contemporary vision is an important goal of the study.

Through experimentation with textile materials, textile artists transform their environmental perceptions and experiences, and convey a special intersection between the individual inner (memory) and outer (environment). By confirming the intellectual energy of self introspection through the perceptual expression of textile creations, additional values of the materials are generated. This study explores the importance of contemporary textiles, which can be further developed into creative designs concerning 'memories of local places'. By studying cases of textile practices, the research aims to review the meaning and value of traditional industrial materials used innovatively in Taiwan.

Key words: contemporary textiles, memories of local places, impressions of Tainan

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## Narrating Local Stories in this Research

In this study, I mainly explore the living materials of my hometown and its spatial imaginations through textile practices and I transform them into the subject matter of designs. Some human images in local places were discovered. In this way, I review the connection between the artist and the places where he/she lives, in order to contribute to the revelation of the deepest longing of human demand for home and for a collective memory of those places. Why is the specification in relation to the narratives of Tainan alleys so important to me? In this article, the ‘narrative of Tainan alleys’ was chosen to be expressed in the creative practices of my textiles; it can be suggested as a trip of memory patching. That is to say, I am unfamiliar with my hometown of Tainan; the existence of gaps with regard to the recognition of its geographical environment and the historical memory of my hometown may have occurred in the learning processes of my growing up in relation to my educational background.

In a trip revisiting the places resembling the memory patching, I am like a visitor, leisurely strolling around the business districts, tasting various foods, walking through and meeting different people in the surrounding areas; this results in the possibility of my being led into exploration of the alleys of the traditional city. This can be seen as a special experience of discovery and rediscovery, and all these combinations of resembling a traveller’s experiences were recorded by the viewfinder of my camera (Fig. 1). Through practice with textile materials, these recorded images can finally be transformed; therefore, the textile materials and my art alongside with the places and memories coexist and are juxtaposed. Through this combination, a new attachment may be established, of the author’s (my) sense of touch towards home. This combination may further provide a multiple interaction between the artist (me) and the viewers; it suggests a new implication of the textiles, as well as reflecting a new interpretation of the old alley spaces.



Fig 1. Huang, Shu-fang (photos) , An-ping Alleys in Tainan, 2011.

## Narratives of Tainan Alleys into Art Practices

Narratives of Tainan alleys have been represented in multiple ways in contemporary painters’ works in Taiwan; for example, Chen Cheng-po (陳澄波, 1895-1947) and Chung, Yi-Hua (鍾亦華, born 1945-).



Chen Cheng-po (陳澄波, 1895-1947) was born in Chiayi (嘉義), Taiwan. He studied western painting and graduated from the Tokyo Fine Arts School in 1929; he was known as a pioneer in the development of modern art in Taiwan. He was killed in the Taiwan 228 event in 1947.

‘Travel’ is important for Chen Cheng-po’s life, with regard to the development of new visions for his art creations. The considerable impact that his experiences of moving from one place to another had on benefiting his art works can be seen. For example, in confronting the many trials of his life and for his art creation travelling in Taiwan, Japan, China and other major cities, his major tactile art works were extracted from this accumulation of rich experiences concerning artistic apprehension and energy. Significantly, his paintings conveyed not only his view of the arts and his creative states of mind on those occasions, but also recorded in-depth the traces of the society thereupon (Xue Xue Colors, 2012). In addition to his wonderful performance in the fields of art, what I have learnt from Chen is that he brought his ideas to his homeland attentively, as well as fulfilling his enthusiasm for and dedication to his community.

Chen studied, taught and travelled in Tokyo and Shanghai, and finally returned to and settled in Taiwan due to the changes in the political situation at that time. In his paintings, we can see his eagerness for his homeland; the traces of his art creations can be found from Taipei (Dan-shui (淡水) in the north of Taiwan) to Pingtung (Mao-bi-tou (貓鼻頭) in the south of the country). Especially in the paintings of his hometown Chiayi (嘉義), Chen applied warm colours to interpret the Park of Chiayi and street scenes in Chiayi (Chen, Wei-ting, 2011). For example, painted images of ‘Chiayi Street View’ (Chiayi jie jing, 嘉義街景) (Chen, 1934, in Wu, Hui-fang & Tseng Mei-chen, 2011); ‘Chiayi Street’ (Chiayi jie wai, 嘉義街外, Fig 2) (Chen, 1927, in Li, Qin-xian, 2011); ‘Wenling Mazu Temple’ (Wenling Mazu miao, 溫陵媽祖廟) (Chen, 1927, in Taiwan Soka Association, 2012), and ‘Street Scene on a Summer Day’ (xia ri jie jing, 夏日街景) (Chen, 1927, in Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2016).

The paintings of the street scenes in Chiayi, with brush strokes to show the local environmental characteristics and textures, are the former visions of the artist. We can also find some scenes of Tainan in his paintings, which allow us to see the textures and appearances of the city in his era, such as Tainan Confucian Temple (Chen, n.d., in Art Taipei, 2012). In studying the scenes of Tainan and the other street views in the artist’s paintings, one may be able to trace the steps of the predecessors, in order to review the environmental textures of the old days.



Fig 2. Chen, Cheng-po, Chiayi Street, 1927, oil, Canvas, 64x53 cm.

Narrations of Tainan alleys through the paintings of Chung, Yi-Hua (鍾亦華, born 1945-) have been represented in a different way. Based in Yangon, Myanmar(緬甸仰光), Chung, Yi-Hua was originally from Tongan, Fujian in China(福建同安). Brought up with a Burmese and Chinese bilingual education, he became a new resident of Taiwan (Jian, Xiu-zhi, 2017).

Chung, Yi-Hua lives in Tainan as a new resident and draws many scenes of streets and lanes in the city. He says of the streets and lanes that 'some can be called by name, some cannot. In my eyes, there is nothing that cannot be in my paintings; as long as I painted it, there is no reason for it not to be beautiful.' The artist further states that,

In recent years, I have painted numerous pictures of scenery, the purpose is not for recording, but for expressing (抒發). The real scenes are sometimes unpleasant to look at, there will always be some eyesores, miscellaneous things, such as poles, wires; I do not remove them now, ... but turn them into an accessible form and they become appearances which can be fully appreciated. (Chung, Yi-Hua, 2015)

A painter in the streets of Tainan, he gradually recorded the appearances of the city, such as scenes of the lanes and the streets, historical buildings, ports and culture, as well as living objects. Culture should be seen as a point of connection, from which to extend to the senses of tactility, time, temperature, sunshine, memories and colours around his living, etc. Conceptually, he weaves them together piece by piece, covering them with the colours of his native culture, as well as integrating his feelings of Myanmar in his own subconscious memory, to form his art. Traversing through time and space, the elements of Myanmar and the distance between Taiwan and Myanmar are revealed, which are shaped into a line of imagination as one may suggest, and by which the artist is enabled to express a longing for home. These elements of Myanmar, such as the traditional fabric textures, totems and shapes from temples, and patterns of tiles are extended into and combined with wall textures of Tainan buildings, colour fields of windows, as well as clouds in the sky; finally, they are turned into his canvas painting compositions with points, lines and colour blocks, which become his art (ArtDoor, 2017).

Originally from Myanmar, in this new home country of Taiwan, Chung, Yi-Hua with perceptual and intuitive colours, as well as the textures of pen brushes, portrays emotional expressions embedded in his mind (HereWeArts, 2012). With reference to Batik techniques, the application of layers of colours implies the colour of postcolonial memories. He intermingles his experience of colonial culture and the traditional hues of Myanmar, together with the colours concerning Tainan memories, to produce paintings with a personal style (Lin, Ai-wei, 2017).

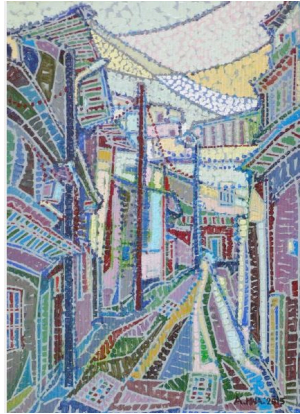


Fig 3. Chung, Yi-Hua, Tainan Alley, 2015, Acrylic, Canvas, 33x24 cm.

### Experimenting with Textile Materials

I record stories and scenes featuring the surroundings of home images or people in my textiles and clothes. By experimenting with textile materials, textile artists transform their environmental perceptions and experiences, and convey a special intersection between the individual inner (memory) and outer (environment). By confirming the intellectual energy of self-introspection through the perceptual expression of textile creations, additional values are generated in the materials.

Why is it significant to me that my textiles and clothing carry these images of Tainan? Walking through the An-ping alleys at different times, visitors will be able to experience traditional impressions of the atmosphere of Tainan. Wandering around these alleys, one may find surprising small worlds, through which the visitor moves from one place to the other, as if experiencing a treasure hunt. As one can see in these alleys, the old buildings with walls which are lower combined with the contemporary buildings are mixed with the various structures of the metal houses and roofs on the top; these assemblages of the old and the new developed naturally. Visitors shuffling around each of them can discover a variety of mixture in these places; brand new cultural orientations become shaped by and full of vibrant vitality, where ordinary people pass back and forth.

With regard to using textile materials as the medium for conveying local images, the impression of specific places can be framed and studied in detail, whereby the environmental images and the texture of memories concerning the people in the locales can be drawn. For example, in Fig. 1, in its particular form, these images of alleyways were finally transformed and attached onto the textiles. My textile works show that these images of alleys provide an unpretentious atmosphere. The story begins with the patched images and materials, in that people's abstract impression of local places is inserted into an opportunity for concretion. I am, like a visitor, meeting people in the alleys, and seeing them interacting with one another. Immersed in the special atmosphere that I perceive in the city, my memory of home becomes refreshed, seemingly clear, but vague. With my footsteps, I practise with textile materials connecting their soft characteristics, the narratives of the local stories are depicted: walking, concentration, condensation.

#### i). Narrating the Memory of Hometown by Digital Treatments with Patched Fabrics

Each recorded image framed my journeys and my routes, and characterised a special relationship between the specific places and me, such as meeting people in a lane at a corner, encountering a nook with hanging clothes, and turning to face an oncoming elderly woman with a kind and smiling countenance on her bicycle (Fig. 4), as well as confronting a man riding a motorbike carrying goods whistling past.... In a particular description, these recorded images represent my physical experiences, which overlapped with my footsteps and also connected with the images of the innermost depths of my memory that I attempting to evoke.

I edited these images by overlaying them with painted colour fields from digital pixels and attaching them onto the surface of fabrics. In a similar manner, coloured hand-made patched fabrics were spliced to receive these picture images, in an attempt to reveal the warm texture of the images traced by the digital elements. The process of making art, by way of visual layouts and material expressions, may reveal the possibility of allowing further comprehension of the works by spectators. Through these manipulations, a kind of profound depth of the experiences can be perceived, which seems to be a juxtaposition and extension of the real city spaces. With reference to the street scenes combined with my art manipulation, the appearance of peoples' lives in the alleys in early times can be revealed to views, and with the fresh spatial perception be continually connected to peoples' new life style; these depicted spaces may extend beyond the digital images and the crafted materials of spliced fabrics.

With regard to the digital images of the environmental impressions, painting with colour fields that seemingly overlaid pixels attached onto the textile surface reflects the forms of the colour patched fabrics. As we can see in my art piece shown in Fig. 4, the manipulation of these depicted alleys was combined into a form of scroll of the city; this suggests the interaction between spectators and their perceptions of the local fields, including the imprinting of all sorts of historical memories intermingled with the new traces of the places, which are full of vitality. Speaking of visual perception, with regard to representation of the traces of environmental memory in the composition of digital elements and in the form of the scrolls, when observing these scrolls we discover a lane connecting with another, one role next to another, as well as the conjugation between the different situations and contexts; there is no continuous setting. Alternatively, one might say that there is a continuity with discontinuity; even more precisely, one might say that the work possesses multiple points of view. In this way it reveals the artist's/my absence of environmental experiences and a continuity with the intermittence of the historical memory of the local places.



Fig. 4. Huang, Shu-fang, *The Moment of Memory Condensation*, 2015, digital output, cotton stitching, each about 68x226cm, National Tainan Living Art Center, 8th March to 26th April, 2015.

## ii). Moments of Staring at My Memories (A series of works 1-8)

This project exhibition took place from 6th August to 12th September 2016 at Fangliao-F3 Railway Art Village in Ping-tung, located in the south of Taiwan. Each recorded image of the alleys in Tainan was framed to represent my routes. The manipulations of these depicted alleys were outputted onto the surfaces of fabrics in order to be arranged and inlaid, and sewn onto dresses. In a normal form, the tops of these dresses were composed by piecing together rag clothing with various colours and varied materials. A series of these dresses with uncomplicated styles was installed in an exhibition space, which was originally a storehouse with a high roof. The visitors were invited into the space, which was created to provide them with the opportunity for image searching within the works.

This installation of dresses of patched textiles and images reveals that the artist uses clothing to carry the creative concept of self; that is to say, my usual collection of rag clothing is what those collaged clothes were composed of. The collaged process of the clothes stitching seems to be the patching of personal memory. With reference to the vistas of Tainan alleys, they can often be recorded and interpreted in a personal way. By footsteps, experiencing myself wandering through the alleyways, the collection of the images these vistas was carried out over a period of time. This observation reminded me of a different story, that the cars drove through the open streets and roared along at speed, where for the compassion of the land the relationship between people and their land is relatively alienated. As a visitor, with my paces shuffling through the alleyways, I discover my footsteps interacting with those of other pedestrians, occasionally finding the comprehensive scenes between the interactive people and people, who may be inhabitants. With my viewfinder, I took some of these records; this process of recording also contains a personal introspection and experience that can be suggested.



The feeling of fuzzy impressions toward my homeland, or, more accurately, the reason why I am unfamiliar with my hometown, may be derived from the absent recognition of geographical environments and the disoriented historical memory toward it, as a result of receiving my education in the process of a growing background. Through my patchwork, a psychological compensation for the absentness and disorientation relating to the recognition of homeland may be suggested; therefore, I returned to picking up and patching my memories through laboured and crafted ways of patching and sewing.



Fig. 5. Huang, Shu-fang, *Moments of Staring My Memories*, 2016, digital output, cotton stitching, spatial installation in Fangliao-F3 Railway Art Village, 6<sup>th</sup> August to 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

## Conclusions

A self-alienation between the mind and the land is suggested.

This study explores the importance of contemporary textiles which can be further developed into creative designs representing ‘memories of local places’. By studying the cases of textile practices, I review the meaning and value of traditional industrial materials used innovatively in Taiwan.

Journey of memory patching.

I use cotton clothing to splice the ordinarily replaceable images, in order to patch up the impressions of the memories of alleyways and the images of my homeland. Splicing these with common images, such as general spaces, ordinary passersby, unassuming figures from the neighborhood (Fig. 4), a humble corner, as well as the street buildings, hangers, scooters and bicycles etc, through the labour of stitching fabric manually, the collage of personal losses concerning historical memory and home images can be recalled.

Connected with the meaning of collective memory.

These dresses, with a clear indication of common characteristics associated with the environment, transmit a subjective identity that can be suggested. The exhibition installation brought the spectators into a spatial exploration, in order to extend their

inherent thinking and imagination of the local places. The application in relation to the expressions of rich materials and the forms of pictorial images conveyed personal memories of the local environment, as well as connecting with the meaning of collective memories.

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Note: All translations are mine unless indicated in *italics*.

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