

*Exploring Inter-island Cultural Narratives: Transcending Boundaries With
Resident-Based Performances and Authentic Storytelling*

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Abstract

Matsu Island served as a frontline for Taiwan and was under military administration from 1956 to 1992. After the end of military control, the island gained local autonomy and began developing its tourism industry and public infrastructure to attract visitors. More importantly, Matsu Island has actively promoted cultural development through art and culture-driven policies and activities to establish its identity and preserve its heritage. The Matsu Biennial is a key event that not only introduces the general public to Matsu Island but also strengthens local engagement. This study explores the Drinking, Seven Cups of Wine (DSCW) project in Matsu as a resident-based community theatre initiative during the Matsu Biennial. It examines how the project delivers cultural narratives from a bottom-up perspective, breaking inter-island boundaries by overcoming environmental and local resource limitations. The research employs qualitative methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, to provide an overview of the DSCW project and the cultural narratives it conveys, which are deeply rooted in the island's characteristics and personal stories. The findings highlight the fluid inter-island and bottom-up influences in this case and the critical role of local residents in the Biennial, allowing them to share their authentic stories.

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Introduction

Matsu—an island preparing to take flight as an island of art.

Matsu Island, an offshore island of Taiwan located near Mainland China, has been actively involved in the Biennial since its second session in 2022. The island is developing new avenues for culture-driven initiatives to engage the public, shifting away from traditional package tours that lack innovation. In the past, Matsu Island has struggled to define its identity, evolving from its historical battlefield image to the natural phenomenon of sea sparkle and now to the Matsu Biennial. This small island, shaped by multiple historical periods, has cultivated a rich cultural landscape.



Figure 1: Map of Taiwan
(Source: BBC, 2015)

Historical Context

Before 1956, Matsu Island thrived as a seasonal fishing hub, attracting fishermen from various regions of Mainland China who temporarily resided on the island before returning home to sell their catch. This practice continued for centuries until the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, when the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to Taiwan, and Matsu Island became a military frontline. From 1956 to 1992, the island was under strict military administration, restricting movement and prioritizing military needs over civilian life. During this period, approximately 30,000 soldiers were stationed on Matsu Island, constructing military infrastructure such as bunkers, strongholds, tunnels, and ports. The military presence generated economic activity for villages near army bases but disrupted traditional fishing industries. Fishermen were unable to ship their catch back to Mainland China, and the lack of refrigeration technology meant unsold fish quickly spoiled, leading to significant waste. This is part of lifestyle in Matsu Island in military administration era (Wel-Ping, 2021).

After military rule ended in 1992, Matsu Island began to redefine its future. The initial focus was on tourism, inspired by the similar historical background of Kinmen Island, another former military frontline. However, despite years of development, tourism remained moderate until the sea sparkle phenomenon gained online popularity around 2014, boosting visitor numbers. Yet, this reliance on a single attraction was unsustainable, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. As tourism declined, the government shifted its focus from

tourism-driven policies to cultural governance, leading to the establishment of the Matsu Biennial.

In these years Matsu Island is strength the identity by dedicate to cultural event and festival, meanwhile, research to the heritage from military administration in order to transform for revival preservative.

Regarding the context elaborated above, it can be seen Matsu Island experienced variable eras and remains diverse in culture, such as fishing culture, frontline culture, and Mindong culture, and its rich foundation for performance art to creation.



Figure 2: The Map Between Matsu Island and Taiwan

(Source: <https://www.lamigo.com.tw/products/group/mold/LZN5F>, generated by author)

Matsu Biennial and the DSCW Project

In these years, Matsu Island has strengthened its identity by dedicating itself to cultural events and festivals while simultaneously researching its military heritage to preserve and transform it. The Drinking, Seven Cups of Wine (DSCW) project emerged in this context, expanding Matsu's cultural landscape. Before DSCW, Matsu Island had years of experience with community theatre. Since 2014, the Taipei Philharmonic Foundation for Culture and Education has supported local theatre groups, fostering growth and collaboration. The foundation works with the community to create a drama every two years. By 2023, director Hsieh Shu-Ching conceptualized the DSCW project as a series of community theatre performances, following up on the second session of the Matsu Biennial theme, Ruby Red of Summer.

DSCW spans across four townships, engaging local community theatre groups with diverse performance styles and integrating a wide range of human resources. (謝淑靖, 2023). The project focuses on immersive cultural experience theatre, incorporating sensory elements such as the fermentation of old wine and performances in the Mindong dialect. The experience is intimate, real-time, and warm, breaking the boundary between performance and audience. DSCW expands cultural fields inter-island and increases the number of performances and audience members.

Furthermore, it concentrated the keywords as perspectives to explore DSCW project. The first one is the resident-based community theatre, they are a performance group of local people, and who perform in important activities or festival occasions also none of them had professional training initially, however, they are a bunch of residents passionate about performing local culture and story, eventually, they become official performance group and register an organization, dedicating themselves in performance art in Matsu Island. The second keyword is cultural narrative, through introduction could be seen that Matsu Island has a unique cultural context full of diverse aspects, however, the fundamental of the resident-based community theatre is cultural narrative in order to share value and culture in Matsu through them as the media and medium, influence their community identity and personal identity. Finally, authentic storytelling is when resident-based community theatre has a strong identity as context to share cultural narrative, the action is playing performance art with authentic storytelling, the more authentic it is, the more touched and resonated performed in the show.

Besides, inter-island is a special case to conduct performance art due to the unique geography, and most importantly, each island is a small unit and independently, in DSCW projects gathering four small islands and working inter-island and delivery of the culture, overall, it is sparking light and reason for exploring DSCW project.

Literature Review

According to island studies, islands are small compared to continents. Their unique characteristics stem from their isolation, which allows them to serve as independent research units. (Grydehøj, 2017) Lately, island study or claimed “Islandness” are booming in social science field, it shown as visual art, poem... etc., those creativity approach become narrative why to address story and value in the humanities (James, 2021).

Language is a key component to evolve or reinforce sense of place and identity in small island.(James, 2021) and its connect into island society, culture, politic... etc. aspects to shown the deeply influence for language in an island, moreover to developing sense of place, there are many research have been dedicated.

In some research and artist who are dedicated into island study, they emphasis that island not only limited geography as land but also including sea, the boundary doesn't identify by land (Marian Crawford, 2020; Kacaw, 2023) especially doing art and create driven, every island has their own story intertwine with land and sea. Owing to multiple content and type of the artwork have been contributed to island, it's a medium resonate to re-contextualize or regeneration by explore the un-known or artist's perspectives.

As this research had been inquiring the power of art in community, in Asia, it must t research to the famous cases in Japan. According to literature by many of research contribute into cases such as The Setouchi International Art Festival to strengthen multiples point of view. Conducting art festival as an approach, investigate the beauty of the rural by artists and designer those diverse roles in creative industries in order to place an authentic festival and highlight the local characteristic to attract tourist and reinforce local sense of belonging, moreover booming local economy development and support the youth settle down (Qu, 2019).

Regarding to literature reviews, the DSCW project is the case to explore the performance art conduct in inter-island through resident-based community theatre and deliver cultural narrative by authentic storytelling, the resident are the main roles to tell their story and speak Mindong language in Matsu Biennial. It's cultural study in islandness field.

Method

This study has utilized qualitative method which including participants observation and in-depth interview with project's director and the leader in one of community theatre group in Baigan township in Matsu Island. During the Matsu Biennial, DSWC perform seven-time inter-island of Matsu. Owing the character in DSWC, these performances operated by specific community theatre, every once time are uniqueness and nature. Regarding to the aim of the research, dedicate participant observation is a method to approach and be part of the site and collect the wider data relevant to the context they made moreover, to observe the interaction between community theatre and audiences in order to investigate the narrative they delivered (Guest et al., 2013). In additional, to understand the initial idea and preparation process, the study conduct in-depth interview with director of the program and one head of the community theatre in order to gain more detail about the meaning for DSWC and the core value has been delivered, on the other hand, the head of community theatre share her experience to being a local actress in the beginning until now, the meaning for her to be part of it.

The data from participant observation and in-depth interviews have been shown as video materials and fieldnotes as the rough data in an effort to collect the performance with full sensory and the chemistry between community theatre and audiences. The fieldnotes would be the researcher's perspective from the observation on the site.

Finding

The findings indicate that the DSCW project successfully transcends multiple boundaries, engaging inter-island communities and enhancing cultural storytelling through local participation.

Yet the authentic storytelling is a key reason that makes the DSCW project outstanding in Matsu Biennial, every performance represents one section of Matsu Island, such as the fishing industry in the past, the tourism industry, postpartum care culture, farewell culture, cuisine, wedding, faith, etc. Furthermore, each one has the key person in the main storyline's section performer personal story. The reason made the performance with a sincerely warm vibe and authenticity, and it elicited audience emotion directly. For the local audience, it triggers its memory from themselves or people they know; on the other hand, for the audience who are not in the same background context, it creates a highly engaged environment together and is a significant experience to feel authentic culture in Matsu Island. Every piece of content in each performance is co-created with every resident-based community theatre and DSCW team; it shows the power of bottom-up to speak up their story authenticity and become a big picture of cultural narrative. The content was touched; local people demonstrated its authenticity; besides, each island under Matsu Island has its own distinctive story owing to different backgrounds.

In the diagram has shown every performance including which group and located in host in which island and theme was going to convey to public. It had shown the diversity of this

project and break multiples boundaries for contribute art in Matsu Island and it's very difficult owing to integrated massive of recourse together not only overcome geographically changing inter-islands both human resources and environment resource but also collocate with stakeholders from bottom to top such as community, organization, the representative in village, each community theatre, governors from multiple department, Matus Biennial operating group, the supporter from Taiwan, music production house form Taiwan, and performance equipment supporter...etc. It requires significant adaptability and integrability in order to create the authentic performance with inter-island scope, even many members are work more than one performance in DSCW project, it broke a recorded performance in Matsu Island.

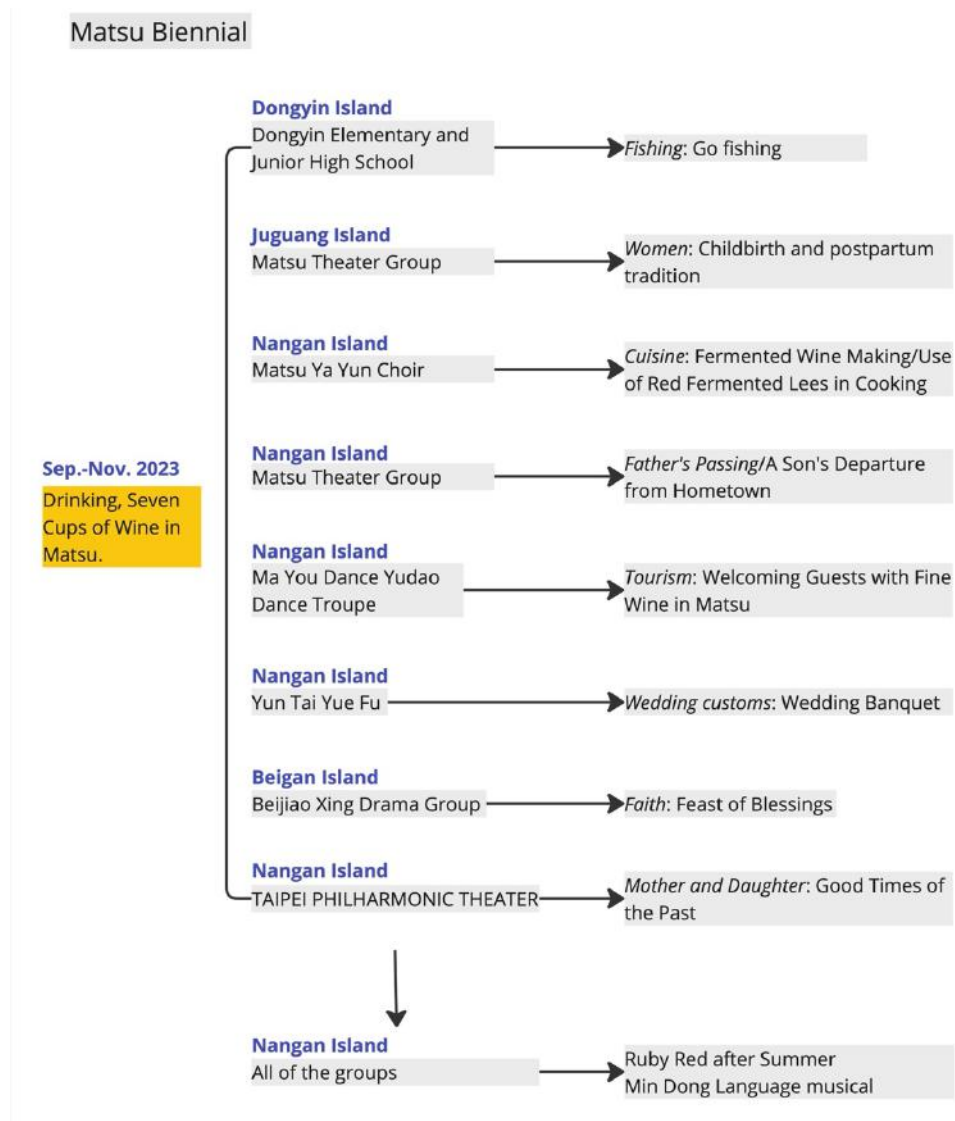


Figure 3: The Flow and Introduction to the DSCW Project
(Source: Designed by author)

The DSCW project highlighted the following key areas of boundary-breaking within the Biennia.

Talent Integration Across Islands

Generally, a performance generate is make script first then find appropriately actors for prepare the show, however Director. Hsieh has mentioned that it's repetitive in members and always the same group of people engage to it, this time extend the scope for people including onstage, backstage and behind the scenes. Due to Matsu Arts Center is going to be done, it can be seen that the necessity the local talents contribute to performance art industry.



Figure 4: The Picture From *Ruby Red After Summer Performance*
(Source: photo taken by the author)

Authentic Inter-island Narratives

In DSCW every performance is tailored due to the background of each island and community theatre in order to elicit maximum effect. It's essential to understand their distinctive and should have strong foundation with local and knowledge for the context, because each online stockholder and recourse are different.

Fishing: go fishing is collaborate to Dongyin Elementary school students and art teacher Ms. Chen, the content based on the picture book *The legend of golden island*, describe the glorious golden time- yellow croaker season! Every elder have many of personal story during the time and how prosperity it was. Due to the pandemic, Ms. Chen has designed marine ecosystem picture book course with high-grade students. From the context and visual are co-creation between Mr. Chen and students, those meaning not only support students to explore the family story and trigger creativity but also being a part of the people contributed to island for recorded more valuable history and will going inherit to the next generation. At the point, the first DSCW performance has designed start from Dongyin island, the stage utilized the place where has been redesign by local youth design group as a part of Matsu Biennial as design intervention case. Meanwhile, the performance story based on *the legend of golden island*, the students work with two professional dancers co-create and bring the story in picture book into reality show, besides, students spoke line in Mindong language, acted as fisherman and yellow croaker in drama style. The performance attracted not only local people but also tourists.



Figure 5: The Picture From *Fishing: go fishing*
 (Source: photo taken by the author)



Figure 6: The Picture From *Fishing: go fishing*
 (Source: photo taken by the author)

In addition, the one highlight is *Father's Passing*. The performance is designed to run in multiple scenarios outdoor shown perspectives in multi-level in order to create the storyline for the son received father pass away and going to take flight, however the flight is cancelled, sadly transfer to take ferry carry on anxiety and desperate emotion. The storyline is based on the actor his family story recently, the performance is a way to say goodbye with father, moreover interpreter Matsu local people faced family members who pass away and stuck in another place far away with Taiwan Strait. The highlight is not only the actor affectively acting by touched himself but also sing the original Mindong song "Father Farewell", due to the power of the song create sad with tears in eyes atmosphere now and make the performance into the next dramatic level. The performance also adds on Matsu ritual ceremony in the end for the performance for bring good luck for audiences. This performance

has taken people by storm by the whole process, the actor, even “Father Farewell” as well. This time is the actor Mr. Liu start show in performance art; however, his sincere performing gets everyone’s thumbs up.



Figure 7: The Picture From *Father’s Passing*
(Source: photo taken by the author)

Cross-Genre Performance

Each community theatre has plentiful type of performance such as drama, musicals, choir, environmental theatre, dance, comedy duo, meanwhile developing diverse performance art in Matsu Island and foster community theatre dedicate to convey content with diversity.



Figure 8: The Picture From *Cuisine*
(Source: photo taken by the author)

Overcoming Environmental Challenges

Matsu Island is far away from Taiwan 210 kilometer roughly, its a weakness for develop performance art owing the main resources is in Taiwan, ever more, Matsu Island has four township and it's very difficult to educate talent and reinforce art appreciation ability in local people inter-island even host in every township. It's not hard to image that most of performance would be host in most powerful island which is Nangan township and it's also county government has located and have highest population inter-island. As the point, DSCW is one of kind project to integrated everything and also run performance into four townships in order to get close to the audience with locals and tourist.

On the other hand, regarding to each performance's characteristic by type of the performance and the environment, many of the performance are setting in outdoor interacting to natural at the same time, how to choose appropriate place and enough space and designed the flow also considering the level of sounds and distance with audiences. It's challenging operate team's adaptability and creativity.



Figure 9: The Picture From *Wedding Customs*
(Source: photo taken by the author)



Figure 10: The Picture From *Fishing*
(Source: photo taken by the author)



Figure 11: The Picture From *Woman*
(Source: photo taken by the author)

Bridging Intergenerational Memory

According to interview with a head in community theatre, there is one key message taken from her is, they are part time performer without professional train in the beginning, however, they delivery themselves in performance type of way, being themselves which means the content with authenticity and the story might be familiar in their generation even from someone they know. By time to time, they have been performance for many years and had experienced to convey culture to audience trigger their emotional touched and received joyful at the same time as a two-way gift by the community theatre performance. Besides, when the group getting build up, new members comes naturally and it's a good intergeneration experience to deliver culture for the young generation or even new resident who just move into Matsu Island. Not only they deliver culture and history to audience, but also during the performance from backstage to frontstage they are also creating and be part of it.

The DSCW project fosters intercultural exchange by incorporating both seasoned and new performers, ensuring that cultural knowledge and skills are passed down in a structured, experiential format.



Figure 12: The Picture From *Faith*
(Source: photo taken by the author)

Discussion

The findings indicate that resident-based community theatre can play a significant role in preserving and sharing authentic cultural narratives across inter-island settings. Through the DSCW project, participants not only shared cultural stories but also gained experience and skills that deepened their engagement. For the Biennial's operating team, strong community relationships and an understanding of local heritage and natural settings were crucial for managing the unique challenges of an inter-island project. Their expertise in performance art and community theatre contributed to the project's overall impact, including training local people to be part of the performance art in diverse roles in performance art and organizing the ability to work inter-island. On the other hand, through performance to unite local people's relationships and confidence to do cultural deliver.

This study demonstrates that resident-based community theatre effectively bridges various levels of community involvement—from local performers and officials to the Biennial's organizing team and key stakeholders. As seen in DSCW, such projects can overcome geographical barriers, empowering local voices in the cultural conversation. Besides, authentic storytelling is the valuable content for this performance art to convey cultural diversity.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of authentic storytelling as a central method of conveying cultural narratives within the Matsu Biennale. Through the Drinking, Seven Cups of Wine (DSCW) project, residents successfully overcame the challenges of inter-island collaboration, ensuring that their personal stories became a defining highlight of the Biennale's cultural expression. These performances enriched the event by emphasizing resident perspectives, ultimately strengthening the bonds between islands and reinforcing the community's identity.

Despite these valuable insights, the study faces certain limitations. First, the focus on a single case in a small island context—together with limited prior research on resident-based community theatre in similar settings—restricts the broader applicability of the findings. Second, participant observation is inherently qualitative and subjective: variations in performance duration, logistical constraints, and overlapping performers across community theatre groups sometimes made it difficult to gather uniformly comprehensive data. Additionally, Matsu's unique geographical and cultural conditions influenced both the depth of observation and the availability of performance-related resources.

Nevertheless, the DSCW project demonstrates how a bottom-up approach to storytelling can transcend inter-island barriers and showcase the richness of local voices. Future studies may consider exploring comparable community theatre initiatives in other island or rural areas to further understand how resident-led cultural narratives contribute to both cultural preservation and innovative cultural development.

Future researchers examining similar resident-based community theatre initiatives in island or rural contexts may benefit from adopting a multi-sited participant observation approach to capture the nuances of performances across various locations. Establishing trust and strong relationships with local collaborators is essential to gaining deeper insight into the cultural narratives presented. Additionally, conducting comparative studies across multiple cases can

highlight shared challenges and successful practices, offering a clearer understanding of how storytelling can continue to strengthen and preserve local culture in these unique settings.

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