



**Taiwan Lecture Series Working Papers  
Online  
(TLS WPO)**

No. 6 (October 2010)

**Space, Place And Kitsch In Taiwanese Television Drama  
And Their Contribution To Taiwan's Quest For Identity**

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Research paper on Taiwanese culture  
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Summer Term 2010

## **Space, Place And Kitsch In Taiwanese Television Drama And Their Contribution To Taiwan's Quest For Identity**

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August 15, 2010

## Table of contents

1. Introduction	3
2. <i>Devil Beside You</i> and <i>Why Why Love</i> - Pastiche In Its Purest Form	5
3. Taiwanese Drama In Eastern and Western Academic Discourse	8
3.1 An East Asian Identity	8
3.2 Kitsch - Denying Identity?	13
4. A New Space for a Taiwanese Identity	20
4.1 TV - An Unburdened Space	22
4.2 Place Identity: Taiwan and the City of Taipei	23
5. Conclusion	27
List of Figures	28
Bibliography	29

## 1. Introduction

Comprehending a culture which is not your own is a challenging task. If, however, you deal with a country which for centuries has struggled to grasp its own identity, this task becomes even more intriguing. Understanding Taiwan is such a challenge. Up to the present day the question of what it means to be Taiwanese has resulted in an endless amount of heated arguments even between citizens of Taiwan, whose opinions are, if not opposing in ideas, at least conflicting ones. How is one to understand the Taiwan of the present? During Taiwan's historical development, the quest for a Taiwanese identity is omnipresent and in both the area of politics and of arts and literature this quest is an endlessly recurring motif. The two main opposing political parties in Taiwan both emphasize the importance of being Taiwanese in their campaigns and in order to justify their political actions. It is safe to say that Taiwanese literature features the quest for identity to a level of obsession. As one might suspect, this incredibly large quantity of material, ideas and ideologies concerned with the quest for a Taiwanese identity add more confusion to the still seemingly unanswered question than they answer.

This paper also addresses the question of a Taiwanese identity. It does so, however, not by analyzing politics or literature. This paper takes a different approach, leading into a field which up to this point still struggles to be considered 'serious' enough to be dealt with in academia, the field of popular culture. By drawing on two Taiwanese television dramas, *Devil Beside You* 惡魔在身邊<sup>1</sup>, broadcast in 2005, and *Why Why Love* 換換愛<sup>2</sup>, broadcast in 2007, this paper will show that Taiwan today is the home of a new generation of Taiwanese, who seek an identity not in Taiwan's history or politics, but have chosen the road of popular entertainment. Academic research in this field has only recently attracted more attention by scholars and has mainly dealt with the "Asian-ness" of these television productions. Since Taiwanese drama has enjoyed high popularity in other Asian countries, the focus of research has been on cultural flows which such a strong distribution of popular culture products between Asian countries produces. This paper, however, will distance itself from an approach embedded in globalization and the idea of a general Asian-ness and will examine what makes these seemingly unoriginal popular culture products in Taiwan distinctly Taiwanese.

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<sup>1</sup> Lin 林, Helong 合隆, *Devil Beside You* 惡魔在身邊. With the assistance of Junxiang 軍翔 He 賀, and Chenglin 丞琳 Yang 楊. 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Lin 林, Helong 合隆, *Why Why Love* 換換愛. With the assistance of Chenglin 丞琳 Yang 楊, and He 賀 Junxiang 軍翔. 2007.

Taiwanese youth have discovered a new space unburdened by historical, political or ideological notions of identity. This ‘space’ is offered by the medium of television. Furthermore, a distinct Taiwanese urban space has been shaped in the settings of Taiwanese TV drama productions, which allows Taiwanese to feel a connection to a certain place, namely the city of Taipei.

These ideas will be introduced as following. The first part of this paper will focus on the similarities which can be observed in the two TV dramas analyzed in this paper. The extreme high level of copied elements within Taiwanese TV dramas stresses its role as a consumer object and invites a comparison to certain features of postmodern approaches to the topic. The second part will introduce scholars of Asian and Western background who have published writings on this subject. This enables the reader to view Taiwanese TV drama in a global context and gain an insight into the academic publications which set the frame for any further analysis. The material will be divided into writings with an Asian vantage point, mostly arguing the ‘Asian-ness’ of Taiwanese TV drama, and publications from a Western point of view which discuss notions of Kitsch and the popular in connection with the mass culture debate. The aim of this part is to represent those ideas included in these writings which are applicable to Taiwanese TV drama. The relevance of this part lies in the clarity of meaning of both the medium television and certain notions which are discussed in connection to it. Only if these terms are clarified can one analyze to what extent they are helpful in achieving a clearer understanding of Taiwanese TV drama. Finally, the third part will take another closer look at *Devil Beside You* and *Why Why Love* and analyze both the notion of a new space, namely television, which offers a space free of traditional, historical, political and even modernist burdens and the notion of ‘place identity’, which enables Taiwanese to identify themselves with a specific place, instead of abstract ideas such as a nation, a culture or an ideology.

## 2. *Devil Beside You and Why Why Love - Pastiche in its purest form*

Writing about Taiwanese identity in TV drama means working in an extremely unfriendly environment. This holds true for various reasons, one of which is the nature of popular culture products, in this case TV drama series, which in essence are consumer products. Chua Beng Huat from Singapore emphasizes this in his article “Conceptualizing an East Asian Popular Culture”<sup>3</sup> published in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* in 2004. When dealing with consumer products one must be aware of “the brevity of life of a consumer object”<sup>4</sup>. Consumer objects are meant to be consumed and then thrown into the trash. Only a constant demand of new objects keeps the economy running and the workers employed. If one, however, intends to analyze a consumer product critically in academic writing, one will always deal with objects of the past and therefore ‘historical’, as Huat defines it. This is true for Taiwanese drama as well. As soon as one drama is over, a new one will broadcast its first episode and the former will be past history. The two examples I have chosen were broadcast in 2005 and 2007, which at first glance seem to be very recent examples and quite up-to-date. During the three years since then, however, many more have been filmed and broadcast. If the drama you are analyzing is not at this very moment riding up and down Heping Donglu 和平東路 or some other main road in Taipei city on the side of a bus, you cannot claim to be writing about an up-to-date drama, not to mention the fact that, by the time an academic essay concerning such a topic has actually made its way through the publishing process, new TV dramas will be dominating the gossip pages of the daily newspapers.

Another factor detracting from work in this field is the negative attitude towards mass and popular culture one often encounters in academic circles. In *The Cultural Turn*<sup>5</sup>, Frederic Jameson speaks of the reaction which is evoked amongst scholars when realizing that a main feature of the ‘postmodernisms’, Jameson uses the plural intentionally in his analysis, is the “erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture.” He continues:

This is perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch [and] of TV series.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Chua Beng Huat. “Conceptualizing an East Asian popular culture.” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5.2 (2004): 200-221.

<sup>4</sup>Huat 2004: 204.

<sup>5</sup>Frederic Jameson. *The Cultural Turn*. London: Verso, 1998.

<sup>6</sup>Jameson 1998: 2.

One postmodern characteristic can work in our favor, however. Often criticized for monotonous repetition, which doubtlessly is a valid point of criticism, we can assume that the characteristic of imitation and pastiche in Taiwanese TV drama makes the analysis easier. Jameson put a strong focus on pastiche in his first chapter “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”. Pastiche is a form of imitation, often compared to the parody. Unlike the parody, however, pastiche does not aim at ridiculing the original, but, quite on the contrary, usually shows great respect for it. In essence “pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor.”<sup>7</sup> In postmodernism Jameson believes that pastiche ‘eclipses’ parody. TV drama, as a subcategory of mass culture, is the perfect place to observe pastiche in its natural habitat, in form of consumer products in a consumer society. In literature and art, pastiche usually can be defined as an author or artist not only referring or quoting others, but fully copying their works or styles, imitating them, integrating them into their own work. In pop culture pastiche is the safest path to choose, the only path to choose. In the two examples discussed in this paper this becomes very clear. If one particular drama has ended, we can be certain that the following one will be a copy, an imitation, a ‘blank parody’ of the one before.

In this case I have chosen two specific Taiwanese TV dramas, *Devil Beside You* and *Why Why Love*, which I believe are representative when it comes to the degree of pastiche, repetition and imitation often found in this genre. It is most evident in the chosen actors. Both male actors and the female actress playing the leading roles in *Devil Beside You*, namely Mike He 賀軍翔, Kingone Wang 王傳一 and Rainie Yang 楊丞琳, are featured again, also in the leading roles, in *Why Why Love*. All three actors were born in Taiwan and are typical idols, *ouxiang* 偶像, in the entertainment industry in Taiwan. Both Rainie Yang and Kingone Wang are engaged in singing careers apart from acting and Rainie Yang has produced the main theme songs for both of these TV dramas, featuring *aimei* 曖昧 in *Devil Beside You* and *queyang* 缺氧 in *Why Why Love*.

Not only are the same actors featured, but the characters they play are also strikingly similar. Mike He plays the role of the bad boy, who is infamous for his rude behavior and evokes resentment in the female protagonist. Even the nicknames chosen by the girl played by Rainie Yang to mock and scold the bad boy show obvious resemblance. In *Devil Beside You* she simply calls him ‘devil’, *e mo* 惡魔, and in *Why Why Love* she calls him ‘devil boy’, *e shao* 惡少. In both dramas, Kingone Wang plays Mike He’s opposite, the well-mannered and polite ‘good boy’, who instantly evokes affection in the young girl.

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<sup>7</sup> Jameson 1998: 5.

In addition to the similarities in the cast and characters, the storylines are also very similar. TV drama in general is not known for its unique storylines and plots. It mostly deals with romance amongst young people living in the city. The love relationships often described by A loves B, B loves C and C loves A can also be found in Taiwanese drama, in which these variables can be rearranged indefinitely. In *Devil Beside You* and *Why Why Love*, we learn of the romance surrounding these three young people living in Taipei, and the obstacles they encounter. In both dramas the good and the bad boy are in love with the leading girl, which turns schoolmates in *Devil Beside You* and half-brothers in *Why Why Love* into rivals competing for the girl's affection. At first the female protagonist clearly prefers the good boy planning to reveal her love for him, but with time her feelings of resentment for the bad boy turn into love and finally she chooses him over his rival, the good boy. Even though the competition for the girl's affection last much longer in *Why Why Love*, the resemblance of the plots is obvious. After having made her decision to be with the bad boy, the girl and her partner have to face various obstacles, which in the case of *Devil Beside You* is the marriage of their parents, turning them, even though not blood-related, into sister and brother, and in the case of *Why Why Love*, the bad boy discovering that he suffers from a life-threatening disease.

A further listing of similarities could be presented at this point, but the extent of copied elements in the field of actors, characters and storyline should be sufficient to emphasize that the repetition, or as Adorno put it "das Immergleiche"<sup>8</sup>, is one of the main characteristics of Taiwanese TV drama. In fact, this is the precise characteristic for which it is most criticized by scholars today and of the those of the past who might have never witnessed these TV programs during their lifetime, but who with absolute certainty would have been appalled by them.

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<sup>8</sup> Adorno 2006: 142. The always-the-same (literal translation) or sameness.



### 3. Taiwanese Drama in Eastern and Western Academic Discourse

#### 3.1 An East Asian Identity

This paper approaches the realm of popular culture in Taiwan by analyzing TV drama. It argues that the reason TV drama enjoys such an immense popularity in Taiwan is because the Taiwanese identify themselves with it and in reverse TV drama exerts influence on the identity of the Taiwanese. In spite of a strong increase in academic writings published on Taiwanese popular culture in the last few years, only very few publications have addressed TV drama in their analyses. Taiwanese TV drama has received the most attention in recent master theses and dissertations. Zhao Peihua<sup>9</sup>, Geng Huiru<sup>10</sup>, Chen Yijun<sup>11</sup> and Chen Chunfu<sup>12</sup> are such examples. Generally they focused on the role of Taiwanese youth and on the influence TV drama has on them in return. They attempt to analyze audience reception and the idea of a certain lifestyle conveyed in these dramas, which in the end is a style of consumption. The common ground on which all these students base their research is that there is, in fact, such a thing as a ‘Taiwanese popular culture’ in contrast to just simply popular culture in general, and Westerners would definitely associate this with American popular culture. What defines a ‘Taiwanese popular culture’? It definitely is not simply pop culture consumed by Taiwanese. A Taiwanese person watching a Hollywood movie on HBO here on Taiwanese cable TV certainly does not turn that movie into Taiwanese pop culture. Is pop culture produced on the island by definition Taiwanese pop culture then? Very quickly one finds oneself in a tangle of elements including the location of production, consumption and distribution, which are elements that play quite a different role in the field of television than in any other field of popular culture.

In 1994 Joseph Bosco published an article on “The Emergence of a Taiwanese Popular Culture”<sup>13</sup>, in which he analyses this topic also with a focus of Taiwanese identity. Who is Taiwanese? Ultimately there are really two definitions. On the one hand, one is a native

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<sup>9</sup> Zhao Peihua 趙培華. “Taiwan qingshaonian dui riben ouxiangju de guankan: jiedu yuxiaofei 台灣青少年對日本偶像劇的觀看, 解讀與消費 (Adolescents in Taiwan and Japan Drama: Observation, Interpretation and Consumption).” Master's thesis. National Zhongshan University 國立中山大學, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Geng, Huiru 耿慧茹. “Jiedu de huwen ditu: taiwan ouxiangju zhi shoushi jingyan tantao 解讀的互文地圖: 台灣偶像劇之收視經驗探討 (The Map of Intertextuality in Audience Reception: The Case of Taiwanese Trendy Drama).” Master's thesis. Shixin University 世新大學, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Chen, Yijun 陳怡君. “Cong shenghuo fengge guandian tantao nianqingren dui Taiwan ouxiangju de guanshang 從生活風格觀點探討年輕人對台灣偶像劇的觀賞 (A Study of the Young Adults' Viewing of Taiwanese Trendy Drama from the Perspective of Lifestyle).” Master's thesis. Shixin University 世新大學, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Chen, Chun-Fu. “Media Consumption in the Cross-Cultural Context: Transnational Television Fiction and Taiwanese Young Audience.” Dissertation. Northwestern University, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Bosco. “The Emergence of a Taiwanese Popular Culture.” *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the Present*. Ed. Murray A. Rubinstein. London: East Gate, 1994. 392-404.

Taiwanese in contrast to a mainland Chinese, also called *waishengren* 外生人, who came to Taiwan after the Second World War. In this case being Taiwanese is equivalent with being a Hakka speaker with ancestors who came to Taiwan before 1985, when China ceded the islands of Taiwan 台灣 and Penghu 澎湖 to Japan, signing the treaty of Shimonoseki (馬關條約). On the other hand, one is a Taiwanese who simply lives on the island of Taiwan, in contrast to residents of the PRC. In this case both the native Taiwanese and the residents of Taiwan who arrived in Taiwan in the years after 1945 are included. Bosco states that “identity must take some cultural form; persons adopt behavior, symbols, and rituals that allow identity to be recognized.”<sup>14</sup> He claims that in the areas of language, religion and the arts and entertainment an emerging Taiwanese popular culture is noticeable. Unlike this paper, the forms of entertainment in his analysis are more traditional ones, namely Taiwanese opera *gezaixi* 歌仔戲 and puppet shows *budaixi* 布袋戲, which have been paid a much larger amount of attention in writings on Taiwanese popular culture and are very different from television productions. Nevertheless, research in these three fields have established an acceptance of an existing ‘Taiwanese popular culture’ within the last twenty or fifteen years.

The medium of television is a very tricky one. Most scholars include a short introduction on Taiwanese television history, focusing on what Michael Keane calls the “anomalies” of Taiwan’s television industry, the abundance of privately funded TV channels, which serve a population of only about twenty-three million.<sup>15</sup> A very good overview on Taiwan television history can be found in Koichi Iwabuchi’s publication *Recentering Globalization*<sup>16</sup> from 2002, which contains a chapter dealing exclusively with Japanese TV dramas in Taiwan, which is very well written and researched and therefore frequently quoted in almost any publication on this subject. The four original free-to-air commercial TV stations in Taiwan, including Taiwan Television Enterprise (TTV), China Television Company (CTV), China Television Service (CTS) and Formosa Television (FTV) are still the major Taiwanese TV channels today. *Devil Beside You* was broadcast on CTV and *Why Why Love* on CTS. Before 1993 these were the only available official channels, but there were numerous illegal cable channels which consisted of foreign entertainment. Following the end of martial law in 1987, the democratic movements following it and the strong pressure on the Taiwanese government by the US to legalize cable channels in order to protect the American entertainment industry from piracy, a new Cable TV Law was introduced in 1993. It seems

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<sup>14</sup> Bosco 1994: 394.

<sup>15</sup> Keane 2007: 33.

<sup>16</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Trans-nationalism*. London: Duke University Press, 2002.

like quite an amusing fact that before the new cable TV law was introduced there were 600 cable operators, which after legalization were reduced to 126.<sup>17</sup>

To return to our initial assumption that there is, in fact, a ‘Taiwanese popular culture’ which has been noticed in different fields, arts and entertainment being only one of them, I would like to draw attention to the fact that in television the term ‘Asian popular culture’ has become very frequently used amongst scholars. Both Chua Beng Huat and Iwabuchi, as well as Thomas B. Gold in his analysis on Hong Kong and Taiwan popular culture in Greater China, try to focus on what makes popular culture not typically Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese or Singaporean, but Asian, examining cultural flows which arise when the production, distribution and consumption of a certain pop culture product extends across different Asian countries. These flows are not only cultural, but also financial. Huat also addresses Asian ‘idol drama’, to which both examples dealt with in this paper belong, claiming that “as popular culture is unavoidably a sphere of capitalist activities, the economies of this larger phenomenon are most concretely observable.”<sup>18</sup> Without a doubt, money always seems to be a very tangible factor in an examination and one can certainly say that money is being earned with Taiwanese TV drama. In a nutshell, business is really *all* it is about. In hardly any other field of popular culture is this more clearly observable than in television. Huat argues that “these flows of finance, production personnel and consumers across linguistic and national boundaries in East Asian locations give substance to the concept of East Asian Popular Culture.”<sup>19</sup> When a Taiwanese drama is broadcast in other Asian countries, both finance and culture moves from one area into another. Huat believes that even though production processes can be organized trans-nationally, consumption on the other hand is grounded in a specific location.<sup>20</sup> By analyzing consumption, in the case of television this would mean an observation of audience reception, cultural flows become palpable.

If an audience watches a TV program that is not locally produced, which implies that the location of production is a different one from the audience’s culture, cultural flows are activated. This clearly applies to all imported TV programs. Hua defines these flows as follows: “The audience has now brought his or her own cultural context to bear on the content and to read accordingly. It is in this sense that the cultural product may be said to have

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<sup>17</sup> Iwabuchi 2002: 140.

<sup>18</sup> Huat 2004: 203.

<sup>19</sup> Huat 2004: 203.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Huat 2004: 211.

crossed a cultural boundary, beyond the simple fact of having it means it has been exported/imported into a different location as an economic activity.”<sup>21</sup>

Huat’s final thesis is that these cultural products have created an imaginative space for an ‘East Asian Identity’. When taking a closer look at the supporting arguments he gives for this phenomenon it becomes clear that in both *Devil Beside You* and *Why Why Love* an East Asian identity can be clearly detected. In principle East Asian identity is a “conscious project based on the commercial desire on capturing a larger market.”<sup>22</sup> It is certainly in the interest of Taiwanese TV drama that audiences outside of the Taiwanese market enjoy watching the program, an existing ‘East Asian Identity’ in this case simply means more money. If a non-Taiwanese audience is supposed to enjoy the program, a certain level of ‘identification’ is an important precondition.

A factor which assists such an identification is the comparable level of ‘middle class’ lifestyle in East Asia, which means that even though the average Taiwanese has a lower income than someone living in Japan, the living expenses in Tokyo are higher than in Taipei, which results in a comparable level of lifestyle. Huat’s three final arguments are the ‘sameness of the urban’, claiming that the urban sceneries lack specificity, that a scene from a TV drama shot in Tokyo could just as well have been shot in Taipei, since the banking and shopping districts are similar all over the world. Secondly, there are the presence of family, which is far less prominent in western TV drama, and the Confucian filial piety omnipresent within relationships between family members. In *Devil Beside You* we find the young couple faced with an inner conflict between their filial piety towards their parents, who would be attacked by society for tolerating incest within their home, and their love for each other. In *Why Why Love* filial piety is addressed in the struggle between the two half-brothers and their father, in which the good boy is presented as the ideal filial son, who does his utmost to please his father’s expectations. And finally the ‘sameness of beauty’, which according to Huat is a genre of itself, the “genre of beautiful youth”, or more precisely, “beautiful masculinity.”<sup>23</sup> Unlike Western TV drama, Asian drama features leading actresses showing very little explicit sexuality and instead displays actors with strong erotic flavor. Taking a more gender-orientated approach to audience reception into consideration, one could compare this phenomenon of the beautiful male to Laura Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze which she addresses in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, published in 1999 in *Film Theory and Criticism*. A different audience gaze when watching Asian TV drama, in which

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<sup>21</sup> Huat 2004: 212.

<sup>22</sup> Huat 2004: 216.

<sup>23</sup> Huat 2004: 216.

the male body is eroticized, can be identified and this contradicts Mulvey's point of view in which she argues that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification."<sup>24</sup> This male beauty seems to have emerged in many Asian countries, which Huat calls 'similarity of packaging' in his introduction to a general idea of Asian-ness.

Even though Iwabuchi scales his area of research down to Japanese TV dramas in Taiwan, which is a far more detailed approach in comparison to Huat's notion of an 'East Asian Identity', he ultimately arrives at the same conclusion. The reason why Japanese TV drama enjoys such high popularity in Taiwan is because of its 'sameness', which in the end is very similar to Huat's 'Asian-ness'. Of course the notion of sameness referred to by Iwabuchi only refers to the unique relationship between Taiwan and Japan, which he describes as being dominated by something often termed as 'cultural proximity', which is "due in part to an emerging sense among the Taiwanese of coevalness with the Japanese, that is, a feeling that Taiwanese share a modern temporality with Japan."<sup>25</sup> Iwabuchi also stresses the importance of audience reception in such studies, arguing that a certain sense of agency of the audience must be taken into consideration and that "cultural proximity does not exist a priori but occurs a posteriori. It is articulated when audiences subjectively identify it in a specific program and context."<sup>26</sup>

Even though Gold does not deal with the medium of television in his analysis of *Gangtai* 港台- culture, which is the combination of the Chinese terms for Hongkong 香港 and Taiwan 台灣, but with audio cassettes, it is the level of 'sameness' that seems to make Taiwanese pop culture products so popular in the PRC, with the accessibility in terms of a common language at the very top. Even though he does list different arguments which are meant to explain the appeal of *Gangtai*-culture in the PRC, it seems that this list of arguments could just as well be referring to Western pop culture products. These arguments include the novelty of pop culture in the PRC, the fact that the content of pop culture products is "intensely personal"<sup>27</sup>, that the products seem foreign and modern to the citizens of the PRC and that they have an escapist aspect to them, that they provide an escape which "lifts consumers out of the generally harsh reality of life on the mainland."<sup>28</sup> But in the end, these arguments do not explain the high popularity of pop culture deriving from Taiwan and Hong

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<sup>24</sup> Mulvey 1999: 838.

<sup>25</sup> Iwabuchi 2002: 122.

<sup>26</sup> Iwabuchi 2002: 134.

<sup>27</sup> Gold 1993: 914.

<sup>28</sup> Gold 1993: 915.

Kong over that coming from Hollywood. The only persuasive argument on this list is that of a common language, which again stresses the point of sameness, and not the foreign aspect.

Academic research in East Asia dealing with Taiwanese TV drama seems to agree on and argue one single point. The popularity of Taiwanese television drama derives from its ‘sameness’, not its uniqueness. This notion of ‘sameness’ is advocated by scholars in areas of aesthetics (sameness of [male] beauty ideals), language (sameness in the language of Taiwan and China), time (coevalness of Japan and Taiwan), as well as society (sameness of Confucian family ideals) and locality (sameness of urban settings). The emergence of an East Asian identity is fully based on the existing ‘sameness’ in various fields of different Asian countries. In the case of Taiwanese TV drama a sole emphasis on its ‘Asian’ features can be presented quite effortlessly. Such an analysis, however, would ultimately claim that Taiwanese TV drama is simply Asian, not Taiwanese. Even though Asian-ness and Taiwanese-ness are by no means conflicting propositions of analysis, I believe that Taiwanese TV drama not only conveys something Asian, but also particularly Taiwanese.

### 3.2 Kitsch – Denying Identity?

The above chapter has introduced recent academic publications on Taiwanese TV drama from an Asian point of view, publications which tend to stress the role these programs play in the East Asian market by analyzing audience reception in different East Asian countries. Such approaches aim at explaining the high popularity of such programs with their ‘Asian-ness’, which allows audiences from different Asian countries to identify with them. In such a line of argument it seems that Asian television has become distinguishable from Western television, East Asian popular culture from Western popular culture. From a Western point of view, however, this seems very questionable. In the past Western intellectuals have argued that TV and film create something one can describe as Kitsch or pop, which denies authenticity, individuality and tradition and benumbs or even blocks a development of identity.

In the following a short introduction will be given to the emergence of television in the West and the impact it had on society, especially on its intellectual circles. Thereafter I will discuss ideas which originated in the West and have often been addressed in research on and critiques of television such as the ‘Culture Industry’, ‘Kitsch’, and the counterparts ‘elopement’ and ‘everyday life’. A linkage to a Taiwanese context will be proposed by drawing on these notions, which are not in essence Western but stem from Western language and philosophy and which have received increasing attention by scholars during the last sixty

years. By linking these notions, which are derived from Western sources and applied to the case of Taiwanese TV drama, their contribution to the quest for Taiwanese identity is revealed.

Even though the national boundaries lying between different nations within East Asia seem to have become more and more blurred with the observed cultural flows set in motion by this machine which seems to know no borders, called television, it is not advisable to separate Asian television from Western. You cannot deal with Asian, or more specifically Taiwanese television, without including the changes that came upon the West with the emergence of television and the immense impact it had on the mass culture debates around the world. Even though the development of television in Taiwan is very unique, I would like to take a look at what role television has played throughout the world from the post-war period up to the present date from a technological and postmodern perspective, but also keeping in mind the place it occupies today in Taiwan.

Television put the radio into the background because it supplemented the radio's attractiveness on the audio level with the visual, offering both the eye and the ear constant excitement. Black and white television sets were first marketed in the 50s and became more common in households in the 60s, but it wasn't until the early 70s that the color TV we take for granted today was introduced into Western households. In *The Origins of Postmodernity*<sup>29</sup> Perry Anderson writes that "once, in jubilation or alarm, modernism was seized by images of machinery; now, postmodernism [is] sway to a machinery of images"<sup>30</sup> and these machineries offer a "torrent of images, with whose volume no art [can] compete."<sup>31</sup> Ever since its beginnings television has not been able to cast off its stigma of being a machine creating something 'artificial' and 'low' in order to entertain the masses. Criticism of television and media in general today still refers to the ideas of the mass culture debate from the 1950s, during which intellectuals such as Adorno criticized not only film and television, but also radio, comic books and advertising, all of which can be summarized with the term "Culture Industry."<sup>32</sup> Had either of them had the opportunity to watch an episode of either *Devil Beside You* or *Why Why Love*, one can imagine their reactions being a combination of horror and despair.

Adorno's points of criticism against film can easily be read into Taiwanese TV drama. The sameness we have encountered in an East Asian approach to our topic can be enlarged to an even further extent. Not all Asian pop culture is the same, but, according to Adorno, all

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<sup>29</sup> Perry Anderson. *The Origins of Postmodernity*. London: Verso, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Anderson 1998: 88.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson 1998: 89.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer. *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*. 1947. 16th ed. Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 2006.

popular culture is more or less the same and the media turn it into a system. "Culture is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system."<sup>33</sup> His harshest criticism is directed against film, which, he believes, leaves people's imagination to rot because no dimension is left in which it can develop.

Furthermore, he criticizes the 'escapist aspect', mentioned earlier in reference to Gold, of pop culture and film in particular. The belief that entertainment offers something 'better' than everyday life, that it offers an 'escape' from it into a world beyond our own, into utopia, is in Adorno's opinion a myth. Even though Taiwanese TV drama appears to present simple people in their daily routine, to what extent does it present the everyday life of Taiwanese and to what extent a utopian world they wish to escape into? What does a young Taiwanese girl see when watching these dramas? Does she experience the ordinary or something out of the ordinary? In Adorno's opinion the audience seems to be trapped between the two. On the one hand, the audience is presented paradise, which, however, is simply everyday life in disguise. "The culture industry presents that same everyday world as paradise. Escape, like elopement, is destined from the first to lead back to its starting point."<sup>34</sup> But at the very moment the audience accepts the fact that what they see on TV is what they see day in and day out in their own lives, they are lured into thinking the leading character they see on screen just might as well be them. But they sooner or later have to face the bitter truth. They are not on screen and never will be.

Thus [the starlet] apprises the female spectator not only of the possibility that she, too, might appear on the screen but still more insistently of the distance between them. Only one can draw the winning lot, only one is prominent, and even though all have mathematically the same chance, it is so minimal for each individual that it is best to write it off at once and rejoice in the good fortune of someone else, who might just as well be oneself but never is. Where the culture industry still invites naïve identification, it immediately denies it.<sup>35</sup>

It must be a tempting thought for any young Taiwanese girl to be courted by two rich, handsome boys like Rainie Yang is in *Why Why Love*, but ultimately, she will find herself

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<sup>33</sup> Adorno 2002: 94. Original German edition: "Kultur heute schlägt alles mit Ähnlichkeit. Film, Radio, Magazine machen ein System daraus." (Adorno 2006: 128)

<sup>34</sup> Adorno 2002: 113. Original German edition: "Kulturindustrie bietet als Paradies denselben Alltag wieder an. Escape wie elopement sind von vornherein dazu bestimmt, zum Ausgangspunkt zurückzuführen." (Adorno 2006:150).

<sup>35</sup> Adorno 2002: 116. Original German edition: „So hält [das Scarlet] nicht nur für die Zuschauerin die Möglichkeit fest, dass sie selber auf der Leinwand gezeigt werden könnte, sondern eindringlicher noch die Distanz. Nur eine kann das große Los ziehen, nur einer ist prominent, und haben selbst mathematisch alle die gleiche Aussicht, so ist sie doch für jeden Einzelnen so minimal, dass er sie am besten gleich abschreibt und sich am Glück des anderen freut, der er ebenso gut selber sein könnte und dennoch niemals selber ist. Wo die Kulturindustrie noch zu naiver Identifikation einlädt, wird diese sogleich wieder dementiert.“ (Adorno 2006: 154).



trapped in a world too realistic to be a dream and too fantastic to be real. A true identification is therefore not possible, so Adorno. Iwabuchi would disagree not with the statement that we are presented everyday life on TV, but probably with the pessimistic presentation of the idea. He believes that the everyday life shown in TV drama is not a trap or a way to fool the audience, but that the Taiwanese audience watches the images of Japanese TV programs on Taiwanese television not as “a dream of tomorrow but as a (possible) picture of today.” He further notes that “this sense of the series being a ‘story about us’ was strongly shared by the Taiwanese fans.”<sup>36</sup> With this approach Iwabuchi uses the argument of everyday life presented on TV in order to defend an emergence of identity in contrast to Adorno, who uses it to undermine the authenticity of such an identity based on mass culture products.

It is interesting to see to what extent the ‘mass culture debate’ has evolved in the last sixty years and to what extent it has not. In these times which are termed postmodernity in the West, how have perceptions of pop culture changed in academic circles? Or would the average intellectual from a Western background still draw on terms such as ‘artificial’, ‘low’ or ‘Kitsch’ to comment on Taiwanese TV drama. This is very hard to say, especially since the latter term is, even though widely used in the German language, understood in many different ways, and more often than not, not at all. A German audience would with all probability use Kitsch to describe *Devil Beside You* and *Why Why Love*, if for no other reason than the high level of ‘sweetness’ or ‘cuteness’ referred to by Taiwanese with *ke'ai* 可愛, a term with far less negative connotation than the equivalent English or German terms. But such evaluations hardly grasp the entirety of meaning which the word Kitsch implies.

The etymology of the term Kitsch is highly ambiguous and remains unclear even today. Generally it is traced back to the German verb ‘kitschen’ (to collect rubbish from the street), Yiddish ‘verkitschen’ (to make cheap) or a mispronunciation of the English term ‘sketch’. It is mainly believed that the term entered the German language in the mid-nineteenth century and it is the German language which draws upon this term most frequently today. Since Kitsch ranks amongst one of the most difficult terms to translate, many languages have avoided the difficult task of translation by simply adopting the term into their own language (e.g. English, French). The difficulty of translation lies certainly in the complexity of meaning this term implies. Since it is a highly subjective term, a clear cut definition is not manageable. This becomes especially clear when taking a closer look at terms which have been considered to be its antonyms such as ‘culture’, or ‘art’, whose definitions are no less challenging. Roughly speaking, Kitsch is a term with an originally negative

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<sup>36</sup> Iwabuchi 2002: 146.

connotation which has described the opposite to high and serious art or culture and has been equated with popular or mass culture. In postmodern discourse and especially with the introduction of the term Camp, which is similar in meaning, into intellectual circles by Susan Sontag, Kitsch has experienced a change in the way it is perceived. Instead of seeing Kitsch or the popular as being opposed to high or elite culture products, they are seen as being related to them. In the attempt of a translation of the term into Chinese, *ke'ai* might not even be that far-off, since it encompasses many aspects of Kitsch, including aesthetical exaggeration of cuteness and its success on the market due to the embrace of such cuteness by the majority of consumers (see Hello Kitty). To include other features such as reproducibility and lack of quality, other frequently used terms are *tongsu* 庸俗 and *meisu* 媚俗, combinations of the word *su*, meaning common, with either *tong*, meaning vulgar and mediocre, or *mei*, meaning to coax or to charm. Since *meisu* is the most inclusive term it seems to be the most appropriate, even though the word Kitsch has also been adopted without attempts of translations by Taiwanese authors such as Long Yingtai.<sup>37</sup>

In Perry Meisel's latest publication *The Myth of Popular Culture* from 2010, Kitsch is discussed on a very complex level. Meisel writes: "One recalls Greenberg's surprisingly generous belief in 1939 that kitsch – a fair synonym for what Adorno means by the 'popular' – derives from high-culture products."<sup>38</sup> Kitsch, as we can see, is not limited to aesthetics, even though it is a term used by art critics such as Clement Greenberg. Greenberg uses it to analyze the "aesthetic experience as met by the specific – not the generalized – individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place." In his opinion Kitsch is a supplement to the avant-garde, namely the 'rear-garde'. Taking a closer look at some of the examples he gives for Kitsch, one can only agree with Meisel's statement that they are the equivalent of the popular, of what is produced by the 'Culture Industry' described by Adorno. "*Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc."<sup>39</sup>

Kitsch is an aesthetic term used in discourses of art history, but also in philosophical ones of sociology and can be encountered in literature as well. Not only have works of

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<sup>37</sup> Contemporary Taiwanese novelist Long Yingtai also addresses the notion of Kitsch, which has no equivalent term in the Chinese language, in letters to her son Andreas published in *Dear Andreas* 親愛的安德烈, in which they discuss their different interpretations of the term. See: Long Yingtai 龍應台. *Qinai de Andelie* 親愛的安德烈 (*Dear Andreas*). Taipei: Tianxia 天下, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Meisel 2010: 58. With reference to: Clement Greenberg. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." *Partisan Review* 6.5 (1939): 34-49.

<sup>39</sup> Greenberg: <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>.

literature been referred to as Kitsch, but authors have discussed the phenomenon in their works. Milan Kundera gives a definition of Kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*<sup>40</sup>, describing it as a far more segregative term, which excludes rather than includes.<sup>41</sup> A term which is ascribed so many different meanings, depending on what academic field one is affiliated to, is a term to be used with caution. If *Devil Beside You* or *Why Why Love* were to be described with this term, it could be referring to very different aspects of the drama. Firstly, it could refer to the ‘cuteness’, mentioned above, which seems to be compatible with Kundera’s idea of denying anything ‘unacceptable’. The world of ‘cuteness’ with its utopian aspect which is presented in Taiwanese TV drama is, as Kundera would put it, “a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist.”<sup>42</sup> The denial of the unpleasant or unacceptable seems to be best described with the Chinese term *ke’ai*. Secondly, it can refer to Greenberg’s and Adorno’s idea of what is on the other side of ‘high culture forms’ and ‘high art’. Popular culture has developed a certain confidence in the last few years, which has allowed artists to use the ‘popular’ in their art work. Even though the borders of ‘high’ and ‘low’ have become more blurred in postmodern art, they still exist separately, but also interdependently. This interdependence which has existed all along, but which has become more and more visible with the emerging confidence or even pride of popular culture in the West can be described as:

‘High’ needs to distinguish itself from ‘low’ in order to be what it is, and given our enthusiasm for ‘pop’ culture distinct from a ‘high’ or learned one, ‘low’ or ‘pop’ also needs ‘high’ to have its own presumably separate identity. The pop is a function of high culture, not its antithesis in any but a dialectical sense.<sup>43</sup>

‘Pop’ or ‘Kitsch’ has grown in character and has developed self-confidence. This we can also discover in Jensen Joli’s publication *Is Art Good For Us?* from 2002, in which she finally questions the instrumental view of culture which “assumes that cultural forms do something to us. This view presumes that good culture does us good, and bad culture does us harm.” The naturalness of art and the artifice of media seem to have an effect on the audience, turning them into better or worse people. This way of thinking, in her opinion, has not yet been overcome and prejudices against media as a toxic in contrast to arts as a tonic have controlled

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<sup>40</sup> Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. London: Farber and Faber, 1984.

<sup>41</sup> “‘Kitsch’ is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages. Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.” Kundera 194: 246.

<sup>42</sup> Kundera 194: 246.

<sup>43</sup> Meisel 2010: 59.

the thinking of intellectuals ever since ‘authenticity’ has been undermined by technological reproduction, which Walter Benjamin explains in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”.<sup>44</sup> Taiwanese TV drama is to the core ‘artificial’ and ‘commercial’. This does not, however, imply it is ‘low’ or even ‘toxic.’ It has turned into something Taiwanese take pride in, a certain pride in Kitsch.

Perry Meisel also addresses Susan Sontag’s article on Camp,<sup>45</sup> which offers a new perspective. “Like Wolf, and quite unlike Greenberg, Sontag wishes to discover an alternative to ‘the battle of the brows’. She wishes to oppose something else to high culture than kitsch. It is ‘camp’.”<sup>46</sup> Some features listed by Sontag on Camp can give us a better understanding of Kitsch. Sontag writes: “I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and that is why I can.”<sup>47</sup> Such an approach is also necessary when dealing with the level of Kitsch in Taiwanese TV drama. One must have felt the attractiveness of its Kitsch in order to appreciate it as a popular culture product and at the same time one has to have felt repulsed by its ‘exaggeration’, which is one of the main characteristics of both Kitsch or Camp most visible in TV drama. It is exaggeration to a repulsive level. “Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: love of artifice and exaggeration.”<sup>48</sup> Even though the terms Kitsch and Camp have subtle differences, it is striking that the German and English languages have come up with two terms so fraught with meaning where the Chinese language has none. Camp has come to have less of a negative connotation than Kitsch and might therefore best be described with the Chinese term *meisu*. One feature which is described as Camp fits very well in our analysis of Taiwanese TV drama. This is the disinterest in tragedy and the failure in seriousness in anything Camp. In conclusion, one of the main features of the notion of Kitsch in Taiwanese TV drama is that it, like Camp, has no room for tragedy or seriousness. In the following part I would like to address the question to what extent the commercialized Kitsch of Taiwanese TV drama can offer a new space for a Taiwanese identity free from any tragedy and seriousness.

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. 1936. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008. Technological reproducibility is also listed as a major feature of Kitsch.

<sup>45</sup> Susan Sontag. “Notes on ‘Camp’.” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. 1961. London: Penguin Classics, 2009. 275- 293.

<sup>46</sup> Meisel 2010: 60. With reference to: Susan Sontag. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. 1961. London: Penguin Classics, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Sontag 2009: 276.

<sup>48</sup> Sontag 2009: 275.

#### 4. A New Space for a Taiwanese Identity

The quest for identity has been an issue throughout Taiwanese history and the people living on the island have repeatedly been caught in a crossfire of influences. More than once a national identity has been forced upon the inhabitants of the island, which is best observable during the fifty years of Japanese occupation from 1895 to 1945, but also apparent during the almost forty years of martial law, which lasted from its enforcement in May 1949 to 1987, when it was finally lifted. According to Chen Fangming, professor of Chinese Literature at Jinan University in Taiwan, “Japanese Pan-Asianism was replaced by Chinese Nationalism”<sup>49</sup> and the people of Taiwan were therefore not simply faced with a postwar situation but a recolonized era. One might call the period leading up to 1987 the neo-colonial period.

During times of war the Taiwanese seem to have had rather pitiful roles to play, especially since other nations tended to recruit soldiers from the island in order to fight for their nation, nations they were expected to give their lives for. During the Japanese occupation they were expected to fight against the Chinese and during the Chinese Civil War they were expected to fight under the leadership of Chiang Kaishek against the Communists on the mainland. Whether or not these individuals could identify themselves with the nations they were fighting for stands to be questioned. Even more doubtful is whether or not they could identify themselves with either of the two ideologies which sparked the civil war in China, especially since many Taiwanese recruited by the Nationalists were, if captured, expected to continue fighting on the side of the Communists.

The fates these Taiwanese individuals faced during the war are addressed in Long Yingtai’s latest publication *Great River Great Sea*<sup>50</sup> in 2009. Originally intended to be a family chronicle, Long ultimately not only shares her personal history with the reader by describing her family’s story, but also tries to include a broad range of different voices. These include prisoners and guards of refugee camps in Indonesia and Malaysia, families of Japanese, German and Chinese soldiers and individual family histories ranging from public personages such as the current Taiwanese President Ma Yingjiu 馬英九 to a 106-year-old lady in a nursing home. From most of the interviews with contemporary witnesses of the war years in Taiwan and China, some of which are included as dialogues in her book, the reader is confronted with the immense tragedy inflicted on the individuals by war and hunger. Even though it is not an academic publication per se, the use of footnotes and references to various sources convey a level of seriousness to the realization of the novel. This indicates to the

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<sup>49</sup> Chen 2007: 33.

<sup>50</sup> Long Yingtai 龍應台. *Dajiang dahai 大江大海 (Great River Great Sea)*. Taipei: Tianxia 天下, 2009.

reader that the novel is supposed to be taken seriously, both in form and content. The Taiwanese identity referred to in this publication is based on the similarly terrifying experiences of individuals during war times. Searching for a Taiwanese identity in shared wounds can be seen as the complete opposite to the Kitsch of Taiwanese TV drama. It is, however, this Kitsch to which a very large audience of Taiwanese turn for identification. This could imply that many Taiwanese are weary of the constant weight of their shared tragic history on their shoulders and yearn for the lightness and non-seriousness Kitsch has to offer.

Recent politics in Taiwan have also put some heavy obstacles into the road of a quest for a Taiwanese identity. After the election of Chen Shuibian of the Democratic Progressive Party in 2000 ending an over fifty-year-long rule by the Guomintang in Taiwan, a new pride has spread over the country, a pride in being distinctly Taiwanese in contrast to Chinese or Japanese. The DPP, supporting Taiwan's independence from China, propagated a 'national pride', a kind there never had been before. With the imprisonment of Chen Shuibian for corruption on a grand scale in 2009, this 'pride' has suffered a strong blow and with the election of Ma Yingjiu in 2008 the Guomintang has regained power and a whole new political chapter in Taiwanese politics has begun.

In addition to the disappointment on a political level and the frustration when looking back on Taiwan's history, features of modernity, mass culture and media have also been perceived as being more of a burden than an improvement on the creation of identity. Joli Jensen gives a colorful description of the pitiable and helpless modern man who is always under attack by the evil media. This image often reappears in mass culture debates, even today.

In mass society, the argument goes, the individual is less and less defined by custom and tradition, and, it is implied, less protected by them. Unstuck from the "cake of custom", he must find his own way in the modern world, without the foundation and guidance that tradition offers. In this way, mass man is presumed to be vulnerable. He is exposed, disconnected, unprotected by the bonds of community, and is thus easy prey.<sup>51</sup>

I would like to argue that with such a tragic historical past and such a frustrating political present, a new space free from the burden of history has been sought by the new Taiwanese generation. This space is not only untouched by historical and political issues, but is also free from tradition. Unlike in the intimidating description above, this space is not experienced as turning people into prey for the media. Quite on the contrary, having grown up with the media,

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<sup>51</sup> Jensen 2002: 123.

it has lost its threatening effect for the new generation of Taiwanese. TV drama offers a space in which the pitiful past can be left behind, the role of the sad vulnerable modern man can be shed and the masses celebrate Kitsch. Identification with the tragedy of Taiwan's historical past was a source for a 'Taiwanese identity' for the last generations. The new generation cannot identify itself with such tragedy. Instead they turn to Camp, for "Camp and tragedy are antitheses", and even though Camp can be serious, "there is never, never tragedy"<sup>52</sup> in Camp.

#### 4.1 TV – An Unburdened Space

What can this new era of Kitsch be called in Taiwan? Eventually one seems to return to the issue of periodisation. Can we speak of postmodernity in Taiwan or can it not be applied to a Taiwanese discourse, since the term and everything this term implies has its origins in Western culture? I believe that the term postmodernity is acceptable in our context,<sup>53</sup> which is in an analysis of contemporary Taiwanese TV drama. Anderson writes that "postmodern culture is not just a set of aesthetic forms, it is a technological package. Television [...] has no modernist past. It became the most powerful medium of all in the postmodern period itself."<sup>54</sup> Having no modernist past frees the space created by television from the burden of modern vulnerability and leads us straight into a 'postmodern' time.

Apart from dealing with television, there are only very few areas in which scholars would accept the term of postmodernity referring to Taiwan. In the literary history *Writing Taiwan*<sup>55</sup> edited by David Der-Wei Wang and published in 2007, Chen Fangming ponders on the question "Postmodern or Postcolonial? An Inquiry Into Postwar Taiwanese Literary History." He introduces scholars who have claimed that postmodernity has arrived in Taiwan, referring for example to economic developments such as the service sector overtaking the

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<sup>52</sup> Sonntag 2009: 287.

<sup>53</sup> Since postmodernity remains a highly controversial notion, an elaborate definition of this term would exceed the capacity of this essay. Although the main themes remain Space, Place and Kitsch, the essay does come into contact with postmodern features on various levels which need to be addressed at this point. Firstly, the technological distribution of images by television is referred to as a postmodern medium, since it has no modern past. Secondly, the emergence of a new generation of a Taiwanese audience, which has long overcome the vulnerability related to the idea of the modern man has postmodern implications. The modern no longer symbolizes a break, since this new generation has emerged from it, therefore knows nothing but it and does not perceive it as threatening. Thirdly, the revaluation of Kitsch and the popular is ever present in postmodern discourses. This revaluation results in the erosion of the distinctions between high culture and popular culture. Finally the notion of postmodern consumption is referred to on various occasions in this essay, which claims that anything is a consumer product, from the TV drama on television to the entertainment park.

<sup>54</sup> Anderson 1998: 122.

<sup>55</sup> Chen, Fangming. "Postmodern or Postcolonial? An Inquiry into Postwar Taiwanese Literary History." *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History*. Eds. David Der-Wei Wang and Carlos Rojas. London: Duke University Press, 2007. 26-51.

manufacturing sector. In the field of literature, however, Chen believes that “the postcolonial character [of Taiwanese Literature] vastly exceeds its imported postmodern character,”<sup>56</sup> but adds that the question of “whether Taiwanese society [has], in fact, witnessed the arrival of the postmodern period certainly remains very important.”<sup>57</sup>

Even though TV seems at first glance to be free from historical baggage, a certain postcolonial flavor to Taiwanese TV drama cannot be denied. One could argue that Japan’s former political influence on the island now concentrates on a cultural influence. Taiwanese TV drama developed out of the imitation of Japanese TV drama, beginning with the adaption of *Meteor Garden*<sup>58</sup> 流星花園 in 2001. The connections to Japanese pop culture are still present in *Devil Beside You*, which is based on the Japanese manga *Akuma de Sourou* 惡魔在身邊.<sup>59</sup>

But in the production of *Why Why Love* two years later this direct connection to Japanese culture is not existent any longer. Through constant imitation and repetition of TV drama, the Japanese-ness of Taiwanese TV drama seems to have been washed out bit by bit with every new production. In the case of *Why Why Love* we have arrived at a fully Taiwanese group of creators, namely a Taiwanese cast, producer, director and screenwriters. Even though traces of postcolonialism can still be found in some aspects of Taiwanese TV drama productions, its importance seems to diminish with every new Taiwanese TV drama broadcast. For this reason, I believe that unlike in the field of literature, the term postmodern is more adequate to describe Taiwanese television than Chen Fengming’s postcolonial. In the following, an aspect of Taiwanese-ness in Taiwanese TV drama is introduced, namely the urban space visualized in the productions. This urban space is not only of any city, but naturally of the city of Taipei.

#### 4.2 Place Identity: Taiwan and the City of Taipei

In the above, two ideas are addressed and examined in the context of Taiwanese TV drama. One is the aesthetic term Kitsch, whose most prominent feature observable in Taiwanese TV drama is its inability to accept anything tragic, and the other is the idea of a space which offers freedom from historical burden. This space is provided by the medium television, which transmits the images of Kitsch to the Taiwanese audience. If, however, a contribution

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<sup>56</sup> Chen 2007: 45.

<sup>57</sup> Chen 2007: 41.

<sup>58</sup> Cai 蔡, Yuexun 岳勛, *Meteor Garden* 流行花園. With the assistance of Chengxu 承旭 Yan 言, and Xiyuan 熙媛 Xu 徐. 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Takanashi, Mitsuba, *Akuma de Sourou* 惡魔在身邊. 11 vols. Shueisha, 1999- 2002.



to Taiwan's quest for identity should be given, one must turn to a form of identity which can be visualized. Identity can be rooted in notions of a culture, a nation or a place. Since notions such as culture and nation cannot be made visible, they lack immediacy, which the notion of place easily provides. The focus of this essay is therefore on a Taiwanese identity which is connected to the island Taiwan not as a nation, but a location – on Taipei not as a city like any other urban space, but as a real, authentic city which people can see, relate to and experience.

When comparing the Taiwanese TV drama *Why Why Love* to its forerunner *Devil Beside You*, we learn that, despite the similarities discussed in chapter two, certain changes have occurred. One component encompasses a far larger role in *Why Why Love* than it has in *Devil Beside You*. It is the city of Taipei. The characters featured in *Devil Beside You* are slightly younger which limits the settings of the story to the homes and the schools of the characters. The 101-Building is at times shown on the screen in the background, but most settings keep to more 'humble' places such as the home. In *Why Why Love* the main characters are university students, which could imply that the settings are limited to the university campus and dorms, but this is not the case. The university life of the main character seems to play only a very minor role in the plot and the settings of the drama focus one building complex, the Miramar entertainment park 美麗華樂園<sup>60</sup> in the Zhongshan district in Taipei. The storyline connects the characters to this place by introducing the father of the half-brothers as the head of Miramar and the filial son in the CEO position. The leading girl is rarely shown at university but instead presented in various part-time jobs in order to earn money to pay her family's debts. One of these jobs is working at a petrol station and the other is working as a shop assistant at Miramar. When the 'devil boy' finally realizes that he has feelings for the girl, he follows her to Miramar where he easily gets a job in security, since his father is glad about his son's interest in the family business. This job allows him to find various excuses to meet the girl. In the end we are presented a love story in an entertainment park, which is in the case of Miramar literally a synonym for a department store. This correlates with postmodern theories.

Amongst intellectuals such a setting must stir a variety of strong reactions. In an Asian point of view this is a perfect setting for an Asian TV drama, for it features the urban sameness with which the Japanese, Singaporean and audiences of other Asian countries can easily identify themselves with. From a Western point of view, this doubtlessly is the apogee of the Culture Industry per se. The entire storyline is set in a department store, the temple of consumption, turning everything presented in the drama into a piece of advertising. There is

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<sup>60</sup>Miramar official website: <http://www.miramar.com.tw/main.php>



Figure 1

certainly no more efficient way to gain publicity for a department store than to turn it into a set for a TV drama, broadcasting hours of images of their Miramar building complex to a young audience, the most potential audience of consumers. Taiwanese TV drama is the poster child of pop culture products in Taiwan. In addition to the advertising for the department store it is also a twofold promotion for the idol stars featured in the drama and their most recent albums advertised in the theme songs of the dramas, benefiting both from the visual and the audio of television. In this flood of imagery resembling more the nature of German ‘Dauerwerbesendungen’ (long-time advertising programs), what is left in these TV dramas that can be described as Taiwanese in contrast to Asian or simply ‘consumer orientated’? This leads us back to the city of Taipei and the role of the department store Miramar. Miramar is the Spanish term for ‘ocean view’, which refers to the Ferris wheel belonging the entertainment park aka department store.

This Ferris wheel (Figure 1) shapes the profile of the city of Taipei and it is visible from the 101 skyscraper. The two of them dominate the outer appearance of the city, especially if observed from afar. These are the attributes of the city of Taipei which the new generation can identify themselves with. It not so much the Chiang-Kaishek Memorial Hall or the National Palace Museum to which the young Taiwanese experience a feeling of belonging. It is the recurring background motif in *Why Why Love* (Figure 2) including the Ferris wheel and the 101 skyscraper which evokes a feeling of identity in the young Taiwanese audience. Not only is the Ferris wheel shown regularly between sequences, emphasizing changes in location during the plot and reminding the audience where the storyline continues, but it is also prominent in dramatic scenes which can be seen in Figure 3. Even though the main focus of both TV dramas is the city of Taipei, *Why Why Love* also includes the city of Tainan (Episode 10), which is idealized as a quiet retreat from the noisy city. A further TV drama by Lin Helong, the successor of *Why Why Love* called *Wish To See You Again* 這裡發現愛, includes a prolonged sequence of the drama shot in Taroko Gorge, Hualian 花蓮, and features the 101 skyscraper in Taipei prominently on its poster (Figure 4). Lin Helong, director of various Taiwanese TV dramas, lays a significant importance on the location of Taiwan. When examining the development of the TV dramas he has produced, one can clearly observe an increasing occurrence of Taiwan as a location starting with *Devil Beside You* to *Why Why*

*Love* and finally to *Wish To See You Again*, which is nothing short of a virtual journey across the island, which allows visual tourism through television. However, the city of Taipei remains the most important location.



Figure 2



Figure 3

The means of identification clearly rely on the very tangible idea of place, instead of the more abstract notions of national or cultural identity. Cliff Hague writes that a “‘place’ implies some mix of memory, sensual experience (in particular visual, but possibly also aural and/or



Figure 4

tactile) and interpretation. We might say that a place is a geographical space that is defined by meanings, sentiments and stories rather than by a set of coordinates.”<sup>61</sup> The new generation of Taiwan have claimed a new unburdened space, namely TV drama, have found a palpable place to which they can feel a sense of belonging and have developed a preference in aesthetic forms, similar to the Western notion of Kitsch. It is on the ground of these three factors that they base their sense of identity, choosing an alternative path to what the pity-evoking imageries of Taiwan’s history and politics have to offer, in which they find only tragedy and towards which they feel no desire.

<sup>61</sup> Hague 2005: 4.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper aims at offering an alternative approach to the subject of Taiwanese TV drama, which has raised increasing attention in intellectual circles both in Taiwan and on an international scale. Only by carefully examining the similarities in analysis of different scholars around the world and by gaining from their experience they achieved during their work in this field but also by challenging it, is such an alternative path to be found. Certain highly abstract and controversial terms which have been mentioned and discussed in this paper such as notions of Kitsch, postmodernism and place identity are too complex to be given the necessary introduction for analysis in such a modest essay. It merely intends to present Taiwanese TV drama in a new light, arguing that despite its features which imply it is a consumer product in an Asian 'packaging' merely aiming at achieving a larger market and in spite of featuring characteristics reminiscent of Kitsch, which in Western theories of the past would imply that it cannot be a source of identity, the new generation of Taiwan seems to identify themselves with Taiwanese TV drama. Attempts at finding elements of identity in Taiwanese popular culture have been made, leading either to popular culture products which draw on a longer tradition or history than Taiwanese TV drama, for example the Taiwanese puppet show, or leading to the notion of a East Asian identity in general.

By no means does this paper wish to refute the idea of an emergence of an East Asian identity as such, but it hopes to complement this idea. A certain place identity has developed amongst the new Taiwanese generation, allowing them as Taiwanese to have a special and certainly higher possibility of identification. This possibility is given when you are a citizen of the island Taiwan because a certain identification with the island and its capital seems quite effortless.

Being granted a real and tangible place, most prominently the city of Taipei, to identify themselves with, a place which stands in no contradiction to the definition of being Taiwanese in the meaning of being a person living on the island, the new youth are inclined to choose historically unburdened places of the city such as the department store Miramar and the 101 skyscraper to identify themselves with. In all three elements of place, space and Kitsch the new generation chooses not necessarily the lesser serious, but definitely the lesser tragic path on its quest for a new identity. It is precisely because Taiwanese TV drama is so unpretentious that the youth turn to it. It does not want to sell an ideology or a specific identity, it simply wants to sell. This space free from agenda and free from ideology is the Kitsch which the Taiwanese youth feel drawn to and take pride in.

## List of Figures

### Figure 1:

Ferris wheel at *Meilihua*

Lin, Helong 林合隆, *Why Why Love* 換換愛. With the assistance of He Junxiang 賀軍翔, and Yang Chenglin 楊丞琳. 2007. Ep. 8; min 34:15.

### Figure 2:

Kingone Wang 王傳一 and Rainie Yang 楊丞琳 (shown in intro of every Episode)

Lin, Helong 林合隆, *Why Why Love* 換換愛. With the assistance of He Junxiang 賀軍翔, and Yang Chenglin 楊丞琳. 2007. Ep. 9; min 01:14.

### Figure 3:

Kingone Wang 王傳一 and Judy Fukumoto 福本幸子 in a car, Ferris Wheel in the background

Lin, Helong 林合隆, *Why Why Love* 換換愛. With the assistance of He Junxiang 賀軍翔, and Yang Chenglin 楊丞琳. 2007. Ep. 14; min 41:18.

### Figure 4:

Poster: *Wish to see you again*

<http://movie.douban.com/subject/2371983/>

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