

Introduction

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of male sociality, the most pervasive but paradoxically unexplored aspect of public life in urban Taiwan today. Specifically, I examine the politics and poetics of disreputable social activities in which cohorts of male friends engage regularly and extensively, including hunting, drinking, and gambling. My analytical point of departure derives from anthropologist Michael Herzfeld's concept of "cultural intimacy," which recognizes how everyday practices whose social efficacy hinges on contravening official norms and deforming mainstream values actually constitute the state as well as a range of national and other identities (Herzfeld 1985; Herzfeld 1997; Herzfeld 2004; Herzfeld 2005). The dissertation addresses three overarching questions: What are the micropolitics of cultural intimacy through which men negotiate status and identity and provide mutual assurance of common sociality? How are mainstream values and norms perpetuated and reworked through these activities, and how do subversive forms become incorporated into everyday social repertoires? And in what ways do these local practices resist, reformulate, and reinforce global forces, state power, and nationalist ideologies?

The data for my analysis was collected from three years of intensive participant-observation fieldwork among several cohorts of men, from semi-structured interviews, and from popular and official discourses gathered from newspapers and periodicals, fiction and non-fiction literature, as well as Web sites. My primary informants numbered around forty-five, and were between the ages of thirty and fifty, married, and had children. Island-wide, this age group constituted around 40% of the total population of 22 million in 2001. Ethnically, my primary informants consisted of

an arbitrary mix of Taiwanese, Mainlanders, and a few Hakka.¹ Occupationally, they held a diversity of urban working and middle-class jobs, from cab driver to cram-school teacher, computer salesman to stockbroker, construction boss to carpenter, bridal-shop photographer to art-house movie cameraman, customs bureau rank-and-file to factory manager, interior designer to engineer, local politician to police officer, among others. These men lived in Taipei City and County, from where many of them originally hailed but to where even more had moved from different places throughout the island. This demographic profile suggests that the customary conditions for shared identities grounded in ascriptive or quasi-ascriptive ties have been largely eroded (typically recognized as classmates [*tongxue*], same native place [*tongxiang*], and/or colleagues [*tongshi*]; see Yang 1994:194)—a fact that I maintain goes far to explain the compulsory nature of male social activities in urban Taiwan today.

Ethnographically, my study is centered around three social activities: deep-sea spearfishing, carousing at hostess clubs, and high-stakes gambling at mahjong, each of which my informants understood to be subversive of societal norms.

Methodologically, I structure my examination of each activity around an innovative adaptation of classic ritual analysis, namely totemism, sacrifice, and *ludus*. In so doing, I explore the production of male sociality in relation to the culture of fate and luck, military training and masculinity, sexuality and public culture, nature and the environment, as well as state ideology and global capitalism. Based on my findings, I argue that disreputable male social activities are key sites for the production of values and communities that reconfigure the contours of public culture, capitalism, and democratization in Taiwan, and that both contest and legitimate state power. In developing this argument, the nation-state emerges as a sub-topic, so that my

¹ Hakka refer to a sub-ethnic group of Han Chinese. Most Hakka in Taiwan are “Taiwanese” and currently constitute about 14% of the total population (roughly the same percentage as Mainlanders). I elaborate on the ethnic dimensions of Taiwanese society below.

ethnography of the concrete lived experiences of male sociality is simultaneously a study of the connections between politics, power, and play.

The Dangerous Relationship and the Rise of Taipei

In her contribution to a recent *American Historical Review Forum* on “Gender and Manhood in Chinese History,” historian Susan Mann writes that “China’s late imperial society was even more sex-segregated than contemporary societies in the West” and that “any historian of China whose subject lies outside the domestic sphere...will find himself or herself studying almost exclusively men and their relationships with each other.” Yet, Mann proceeds to ponder, “no one has thought to ask what sorts of homosocial bonds these various sex-segregated social networks gave rise to or how they might be understood” (Mann 2000:1602). Mann also affirms what scholars of contemporary China have discovered, namely that “public culture in contemporary China remains dominated by structures formed of male bonds,” despite a quarter century (1949-1976) of Socialist experiments intended to erase the gender inequalities of the traditional Confucian family and society (2000:1612). As this dissertation demonstrates, the centrality of male associational life also remains true of public culture in contemporary Taiwan, whose own tumultuous postwar past was marked by more than a quarter century (1945-1987) of thoroughgoing political mobilization in which “traditional Chinese culture” was formalized and sacralized.

Mann suggests that one key reason why historical studies of men have been so few has to do with the history of gender studies in the China field. In the 1970s, “anthropologists in Taiwan, together with scholars interested in women and socialist revolution in China proper, shook loose decades of scholarship encrypted in the ‘patrilocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal’ language of China’s family system” (2000:1601). Perhaps the most influential scholar to emerge from this initiative has been Margery Wolf, whose pioneering work placed women at the center of the

patriarchal family structure (Wolf 1972). As Mann explains, the ensuing stream of valuable work on women entailed simultaneously a turn away from studying men, which was an “inevitable result of a backlash against the China field’s obsession with problems of patriarchy and male dominance” (Mann 2000:1601). The upshot, then, was that “gender studies” became equated with “women’s studies,” resulting in scholarship that left men as the unmarked gender and tended, paradoxically, to hypostasize the male dominated family and state structures that it set out to deconstruct.

But the impact of women’s studies only partly explains why male associational life has remained a blind spot in anthropological studies of Taiwan. Another contributing factor has to do with both the nature and milieu of the male bond. Four of the “five cardinal relationships” (*wu lun*) of Confucianism were overtly concerned with “the maintenance of China as a *guojia*—literally a state-family—a state modeled on the principles of family organization” (Kutcher 2000:1615). The relationships that bind father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, as well as older and younger brother appeal to hierarchy and necessity as the source of parallel devotions to family and state. In contemporary society, as I detail in Chapter 3, “work” emerges as an intermediary realm of hierarchy and necessity integral to the maintenance of the *guojia*, now defined as the nation. But the fifth relationship, “friendship” (*you*), has always remained morally and spatially outside this state-(work-)family system of hierarchy and necessity, which is why China historian Norman Kutcher calls it the “dangerous” relationship. Indeed, friendship is voluntary and, theoretically, could be non-hierarchical. For these reasons, combined with the fact that, especially in the cities and towns, men of all classes have always lived most of their lives beyond the orbit of the state-family system (see DeGlopper 1995; Fried 1951; Kutcher 2000), male friendship was and is potentially the most powerful relationship. The power and danger of male friendship, as Kutcher notes, goes far to explain why it is strategically

downplayed as the fifth and last relationship, as well as why Confucianism is obsessed with the maintenance of hierarchy and necessity—with “order”—through the first four cardinal relationships. And this overwhelming preoccupation of the classics with the state-family system has also contributed to the anthropological neglect of the friendship relationship.

Formally set apart from the family-state system, male friendship belongs to the public realm, particularly as manifest in urban centers (towns and cities), where all-male institutions have long been a feature of the urban landscape (see Chapter 3). The Confucian-driven scholarly interest in family life must be viewed in the context of the history of the Western anthropology of China in order to obtain a more complete understanding of why the public life of urban men has been largely neglected, especially in the anthropology of Taiwan. The pioneers of the Western anthropology of China were fated to conduct fieldwork at a time when China was in tremendous tumult. After World War II, which ended China’s protracted bloody war with Japan, the nation became engulfed in a civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists. The Communists, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, defeated the Nationalists in 1949, and all but closed the country to foreign researchers for the next quarter-century. Consequently, the early China anthropologists went to Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Southeast Asia to find diasporic or immigrant Chinese communities, which became surrogate field sites for the study of Chinese culture. Much of the resulting ethnographic work was concerned to comprehend the archetypal institutions of Chinese civilization, particularly those associated with the family. With notable exceptions (e.g., Skinner 1957), the local histories and politics of these places were not focal points. In Taiwan, especially, this resulted in studies conducted mainly in villages, at something of a remove from the dramatic political and social changes taking place on the island, especially in the expanding urban centers, where the divide between private and public life was most salient.

It is perhaps due to this conventional interest in village life that explains why the anthropology of China and Taiwan lacks a compelling conceptual paradigm for comprehending the status of the fifth relationship of friendship. If anthropology's orientation toward village studies has led to the grounding of patriarchal power in the hierarchy and necessity of the first four relationships, how do we make analytical sense of the ever present but scantily understood fifth relationship, which is voluntary, premised on the ideal of equality, potentially the most powerful relationship, and also the most dangerous? Kutcher, in response to the consistent historical concern of Neo-Confucians with the deleterious effects of friendship, speaks to this question by posing a more provocative one: if friendship is the most "dangerous" relationship, "why did the [Neo-Confucians] not recommend that men do away with it entirely?" (Kutcher 2000:1628).² Kutcher concludes his article with the following response to this question:

...this could not be done because many in the society hungered for friendship, for the joys it provided, and for the relief it offered from the demands of living in a *guojia*, a state-family system. If it could not provide the "haven of egalitarianism" it does in modern Greece, it could at least be a "sentimental alternative to maternal love and the amity of kinship." And the friendship relationship, properly managed, could serve the needs of the state-family. (Kutcher 2000:1629)

At a descriptive level, Kutcher's conclusion is far from unreasonable, though it begs more questions than it answers and offers little by way of analytical insight. I wish to go further by arguing that the fifth relationship, friendship, is the precondition for the production and maintenance of the patriarchal power of the state-family system. The underlying logic of this argument may be explained by Gödel's theorem, which

² Kutcher points out that this question, with which he draws his article to a close, was posed to him by a reader of an earlier draft of his article (Kutcher 2000:1628).

states that the axiomatic basis of a given system cannot be guaranteed within the confines of that system, but only by another one of greater power (Gell 1992:283). The axiomatic basis of Chinese patriarchy therefore must be referred to a system set apart from the four relationships of the state-(work-)family system, and to one that is at least potentially more powerful. I maintain that this set-apart system is friendship, or male sociality. The power and danger of friendship inheres fundamentally in its contrasting set of values, namely spontaneity, plurality, and non-necessity. What has made these values historically so “dangerous” to Neo-Confucians is not only that they clash with the orderly basis of the state-(work-)family system, but also, as I argue in Chapter 3, that they are inherently closer to the full realization of the human condition defined socially (see Arendt 1958).

It is this set of “dangerous” values, which sharply conflicts with the hierarchy and necessity of the first four relationships intergral to the state-(work-)family system, that secures friendship’s set-apartness and that explains the significance of all-male social activities that are disreputable or even subversive (see below). The values of friendship align closely with the set of values characteristic of the political public as conceived by Hannah Arendt (among others), for whom the public realm, as exemplified by the ancient Greek city-state, is also the foundation of political power (Arendt 1958; see also Calhoun 2004). One dimension of this power, especially in the case of Taiwanese society, derives from exclusionary access to a separate system; by being both inside and outside two systems, men accrue the power of a transcendent perspective. I draw on Arendt (among others) to advance these arguments in greater analytical detail in Chapter 3, and I provide the ethnographic evidence to the support the arguments throughout the dissertation. Here, however, it is necessary to outline the historical emergence of Taipei as a major urban center, for this is the ethnographic environment within which I develop my analysis of male sociality and the public realm.

The original inhabitants of Taipei Basin are thought to have been a tribe of Ping-pu aboriginals, who, beginning in the early eighteenth-century, were pushed into the mountains by Chinese settlers, which included Hoklo and Hakka from Fujian Province.³ These Chinese, referred to today as “native Taiwanese” (*bendiren*), soon established the Western Danshui riverside area, which they called Mengjia (a Chinese transliteration of the aboriginal place name; this is present-day Wanhua), as a commercial and political settlement. By the mid-nineteenth-century, owing to river silting as well as feuding among Fujianese native place subcultures (Quanzhou versus Changzhou), a new settlement called Dadaocheng was established just north of Mengjia, whose commercial importance began to decline. Taipei received a developmental boost in 1875, when the central government of China established it as a separate prefecture. The appointed magistrate built city walls and set up offices in the Mengjia-Dadaocheng area. In 1895, Taipei was further promoted to provincial status, but in that same year Japan was awarded control of the island as part of the costly Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ended the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 (see Selya 1995).

Establishing Taipei as Taiwan’s capital, the Japanese began large-scale building and infrastructural development projects, including government buildings, a sewerage system, Danshui-river dikes, and road design and paving (1995:23). Toward this end, in 1900, the Japanese tore down the Chinese city walls in order to make way for improved traffic flow (the four gates were left standing). The colonizers also transformed Mengjia, now renamed Wanhua, into a designated entertainment district, and Wanhua retains today its iconic status as a place for disreputable male pleasures, most notably special teahouses (*chashi* or *a-gong dian*; see Chapter 4). Dadaocheng was developed into a thriving tea center and agricultural-products trading district, and also became the site of Taipei’s most famous “wine house” (*jiudian*), Jiangshanlou,

³ While Hoklo came exclusively from Fujian, Hakka came from both Fujian and Guangdong (see Brown 2004:252).

where upper-class “geisha” (*vidan*) entertained Taipei’s commercial and intellectual male elite (see Chen Huiwen 1999). As we will see in Chapter 4, Dadaocheng’s spatial topography today remains richly layered with traces of these modern colonial inroads and constitutes a liminal space-time integral to men’s carousing ritual.

With the defeat of Japan at the end of World War II, “Taiwan province” was returned to the “Republic of China” (ROC).⁴ At the time of the retrocession in 1945, Taipei had a population of around 600,000, was ranked 21st in the Chinese urban hierarchy, and appeared fated to remain a “sleepy, backwater provincial capital” (Selya 1995:1). If retrocession had little impact on the development of Taipei, the retreat of the Nationalist government (*Kuomintang* or *Guomindang*, hereafter KMT) to Taiwan in 1949, following the Communist victory in the civil war on the Mainland, spurred major changes to the city. Upon arriving in Taiwan, KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek established Taipei as the “provisional capital” of the ROC, a title it retains today even though the government no longer promises to “recover the Mainland” and even though, in 1967, the city was granted the status of “special municipality” under the central government. Along with KMT government officials, there also arrived two or so million tired and dejected soldiers and party members along with their families.⁵ These Chinese who arrived on Taiwan after 1945, along with their descendents, are officially and popularly referred to as “Mainlanders” (*waishengren*), and currently constitute around 14 percent of the island’s total population. Mainlanders are distinguished quasi-ethnically from “native Taiwanese,” or Chinese settlers who arrived on the island prior to 1945 and who make up the majority 84 percent of today’s population (the remaining 2 percent are aborigines).⁶ The KMT’s immediate

⁴ Retrocession was promised to China under the terms of the Cairo Conference in 1943, and later confirmed in the Potsdam Proclamation of 1945.

⁵ There are no exact figures.

⁶ “Native Taiwanese” effectively refers to Chinese settlers arriving prior to 1895, as the Japanese formally disallowed immigration from China. Sizable early waves of immigration from South China (mainly Fujian Province) occurred in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

need to headquarter, house, feed, and entertain the infusion of exiled Mainlanders led to “native Taiwanese displacement, residential segregation, and squatter settlement development” (1995:5). No small number of walled compounds used to house Mainlander military families (*juancun*) can still be found in Taipei today.

The process of KMT occupation and Mainlander assimilation was anything but smooth. Anticipating defeat, Chang Kai-shek began sending administrators and secret police to Taiwan in 1945, in part to purge the island of suspected Communist sympathizers, and this initiated tensions and skirmishes between Taiwanese and Mainlanders. It was the 1947 February 28 Incident (“*er-er-ba*”), however, that triggered an island-wide uprising by Taiwanese against Mainlanders and that has had a formative impact on Taiwan’s postwar history and identity, with one scholar describing the Incident as the “founding massacre” of Taiwanese ethnic national consciousness (Corcuff 2002:xiv). In brief, on February 27, police arrested and pistol-whipped a middle-aged widow allegedly violating the state alcohol and tobacco monopoly by selling cigarettes on a street in the Dadaocheng district of Taipei. Crowds formed in protest, and the police shot and killed innocent bystanders. Within 24 hours, protests erupted throughout the island and Taiwanese hunted down and beat Mainlanders everywhere. The KMT responded by brutally killing tens of thousands of Taiwanese, with the reported number dead ranging between 30,000 and 100,000.

Within days, martial law was declared and formally promulgated as “The Period of Mobilization for the Suppression of Communist Rebellion.” For the following four decades, the military permeated all aspects of life. The first two decades of martial law are referred to as a reign of “White Terror,” for during this period thousands of Taiwanese disappeared, many taken away while asleep to be slaughtered or incarcerated—the exact number killed is unknown. This was also a time when the Mainlander authorities prohibited any expression of native Taiwanese “ethnicity,” and began a thoroughgoing process of enforcing “traditional Chinese

culture” as official policy (Chapter 4). My primary informants were born and raised during this era and occasionally recounted to me their stories of being beaten and fined in school if overheard speaking their local Taiwanese language (*Minnan*). The conflict and chaos contributed to economic austerity, with the early postwar years marked by inflation, grain shortages, industrial collapse, and rampant corruption. Some of my informants even recall foraging for wild greens to eat (Chapter 4). The legacy of KMT cruelty is so pronounced that the collective Taiwanese memory of Japanese colonial rule has been recast as the “good old days,” and many elderly Japanese-speaking Taiwanese today identify more strongly with a sense of Japaneseness than Chineseness.

These tragic ethnic conflicts tripped up development but did not thwart it, and the KMT went about altering the political, cultural, and economic landscape, especially in Taipei. The Mainlander government brought with it from China the treasures of the National Palace Museum, the National Library, as well as entire universities, swiftly transforming Taipei into a cultural and educational center. Banking and financial institutions were also in tow, as were a retinue of U.S. government aid and advisory groups strategically interested, since the 1950 outbreak of the Korean War, in assisting the KMT postwar recovery effort. These institutional developments, as Roger Mark Selya explains, “lent to Taipei an aura, a mystique, of a vibrant place of not only important Chinese government work, but of multinational and international commitment to the rebuilding of China [on Taiwan]” (1995:5).

The KMT’s economic development plans initially emphasized agriculture. In the 1950s, there were successful land reform, rent reduction, and import-substitution policies. The first two four-year plans targeted fertilizers and textiles, and with the help of American aid the manufacturing industry was jump-started. In the 1960s, the adoption of an export orientation along with government incentives for investment in labor-intensive industries kindled sharp growth. In 1967, the KMT enlarged Taipei by

annexing six surrounding townships, expanding the city's agricultural and industrial base. Educational reforms generated a core of quality workers (Chapter 1), while the shrinking agricultural sector island-wide released into the manufacturing and emerging service industries low-cost labor, much of which was migrating into cities, especially Taipei, whose 1972 population had tripled since 1945 to 1.8 million. Beginning in the mid-1970s, economic restructuring stressed industrial upgrading and high technology, straining the urban infrastructure. In the 1970s and through the early 1990s, the government responded by launching a series of major infrastructure projects, which went far to transform Taiwan into a globally competitive industrialized and urbanized society, with Taipei as the vanguard.⁷

Taiwan embraced its touted "economic miracle," and by the 1990s had become a bona fide modern consumer economy. The majority of households had refrigerators, color televisions, telephones, washing machines, and motor cycles, while ownership of VCRs, air conditioners, and cars were on the rise. (Brown 2004:62). People were gambling aggressively on lotteries and the stock market (Weller 2001; see Chapter 5), and consuming conspicuously on weddings, funerals, and religious festivals. Taking stock of the vulnerability of its reliance on foreign technology and oil supplies--a lesson imparted during the early 1970s oil crisis--the government had begun, in the 1980s, promoting "strategic industries," those with "low energy consumption, high technological intensity, and high value added" (Rubinstein 1999:374). Most important among these was and remains the computer/information industry, and by early 1990 Taiwan was one of the world's largest personal computer exporters. As I explain in Chapter 1, the island's increasing orientation towards high technology displaced large segments of the population, especially the underclass and the sizable "traditional middle class," and the fault line of these growing class cleavages ran along and

⁷ The "Ten Major Construction Projects" was launched in 1973 (see Chapter 3), and two other major development projects were launched in the 1980s; see (Rubinstein 1999:373; Selya 1995:10-11).

strained “ethnic” divisions. The displacement of traditional industries also contributed to profound sociocultural change as more and more people migrated into urban areas looking for a livelihood in the “new middle class” (see Gates 1981). By 2000, with the urban population reaching 80 percent of the total, the nuclear family common to the industrialized West had become the new norm, replacing the stem and extended families of the older agrarian Taiwanese/Chinese society. Two-earner households, latch-key kids, along with an increasingly free-wheeling and commercialized public culture unhinged traditional family and gender values from their customary moorings in the state-family system.

But there was no turning back for the island, especially given that economic progress and social change were accompanied by political liberalization, the momentum for which came from an infectious wave that unfurled around the world in the mid-1980s: “the overthrow of Marcos in the Philippines, the retreat of South Korea’s Chun Doo Hwan, and Gorbachev’s program of *glasnost* in the USSR” (Brown 2004:63). Beginning in the early 1970s, Taiwanese elite were gradually brought into the KMT party, including Lee Teng-hui, who would become Taiwan’s first Taiwanese president in 1988, and first democratically elected president in 1996. Chiang Ching-kuo, who assumed the leadership of the Nationalist party when his father (Chiang Kai-shek) died in 1975, presided over historic political changes in the 1980s that would mark the end of KMT authoritarian rule. Perhaps emboldened by world events, in 1986 Taiwanese activists organized and formally established Taiwan’s first opposition party--the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). President Chiang responded with tolerance, and three years later the Legislative Yuan legalized political opposition parties. If world events set the stage for liberalization, Taiwan’s desire to distance itself from Communist China and overcome diplomatic isolation propelled its leaders headlong towards procedural democracy. Towards this end, in 1987, just before his death, Chiang lifted the forty-year reign of martial law—the longest in world history

(Solomon 2001). This ushered in the open expression of ethnic Taiwanese nationalism, a significant dimension of which has entailed the public examination and commemoration of a topic that had, up until this point, been taboo—the “*er-er-ba*” incident. A powerfully poignant portrayal of this historical tragedy is Hou Hsiao-hsien’s internationally acclaimed 1989 film, *The City of Sadness* (*Beiqing chengshi*), which won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival (Liao Ping-hui 1993). A high point of this nativist efflorescence was reached in 2000, when Taiwan’s “native son,” Chen Shui-bian, emerged victorious in the presidential elections and his party, the DDP, ended a half-century of continuous KMT rule over Taiwan.

I first arrived in Taipei in 1996, to study a year of advanced Mandarin at National Taiwan University. Having already lived for three years in major Mainland cities between 1988 and 1994, I was instantly struck by the social and commercial vibrancy of Taipei. Compared to Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Chengdu, sprawling cities which were self-consciously striving to wrest themselves from sleepy socialist insouciance through free-market reform, Taipei was freewheeling.⁸ From thronging street markets to speeding motorcycles, roadside foodstalls to a bewildering multiplicity of pubs, artsy teahouses to seedy pool halls, smoky shrines and temples to steamy hot-spring bathhouses, knapsack-toting flocks of colorfully uniformed school kids to consumption-happy hordes of urban inhabitants hitched to ceaselessly singing cell-phones, the citizens of Taipei seemed to be reveling in a remarkably social joy of living. Equally remarkable, “order” somehow obtained below the phenomenal appearance of “chaos” in this metropolis where 2.7 million people were jam-packed into 270 square kilometers, and where a great many of the 3.7 million living in surrounding Taipei County flowed in and out of the city proper each day. Indeed, by 2001, Taiwan ranked second in the world behind only Bangladesh in terms of

⁸ I have visited China several times since 1994 and urban life has certainly become much more vibrant and commercialized.

population density—with more than 613 people per square kilometer in an island of 36,000 square kilometers—and 42% of the entire population was living in the urban Taipei-Keelung area alone, my main field site (see Map One). It helps to appreciate how passion for consumption impels much of the island’s bustling public life if we consider that the average propensity to consume in Taiwan is 85%, compared to a rate of 77% in China and 72% in the US.⁹ As I would eventually learn, friendship status in Taiwan tends to be less a function of how much money someone accumulates, and more closely tied to how much one spends, especially on social activities among friends.¹⁰

My research interest evolved gradually out of a desire to understanding the principles of organization and division within this vibrant and diverse public culture, particularly in comparison with those of the Mainland city of Chengdu, the administrative capital of Sichuan Province. Towards this end, I designed a comparative project on gambling in Taipei and Chengdu, with a focus on the ubiquitous game of mahjong. It is difficult to understate the prevalence of all sorts of gambling in Taiwan, as I demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, and mahjong bears the distinguished title of the “mother of all gambling [games]” (*mudu*) as well as the “national gambling [game]” (*guodu*). In China, mahjong has staged a swift comeback after being eradicated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and by the 1990s the popular gambling game—officially redubbed a “national treasure” (*guocui*)--had already been declared a “fever,” one with which the people of Chengdu (and surrounding areas) had become seriously smitten (Festa 1995). It was my hope that, through a comparative study of the modern history, politics, and social relations of

⁹ Average propensity to consume is measured as consumption expenditures divided by household disposable income. Also, unless “ethnicity” is clear from the context or is specified as “ethnic Taiwanese,” “Taiwanese” refers to the entire population of the island, including Mainlanders and aborigines.

¹⁰ Obviously, how much money a person earns is an important factor in this general formula, for it is a condition of possibility for his potential to spend. Individuals known to have money but who tend to be parsimonious invite the greatest contempt.

gambling in Taipei and Chengdu, I could obtain valuable insights into the public cultures of these two sprawling Asian cities.

In August 1998, I returned to Taiwan to begin exploratory research on the Taipei segment of this topic. A fellow Cornell graduate student from Taiwan had arranged for me to stay in an empty room at the rear of his father's downtown Taipei office. Literally right next door to the office was a scuba shop, totemically marked by a long surfboard cemented upright into the busy city sidewalk just outside the front door. On my first full day in Taipei I noticed a group of five men gathered around a table in the center of the dive shop chatting away and brewing tea, in the traditional style with a small teapot and tiny cups. I thought to myself that perhaps this might be a productive entrée into mahjong circles: how large a step could it be from tea table to mahjong table? Although unbeknownst to me at the time, my project—as well as my life for the next three years--would change course after I entered the dive shop and befriended these men on that fateful first day of fieldwork.

These men welcomed me as a regular at their scuba shop tea table, where waves of guests arrived for conversation and relaxation throughout the course of each day. They introduced me to other men, who introduced me to still other men. In only the first few weeks of preliminary fieldwork, my network of new friends snowballed wildly, and I was introduced to more men—and only men--than I could keep track of. Different men took me along with them to offices, pool halls, restaurants, and even to the seaside for scuba diving. It was only gradually that I began to remember the names of and basic information about these men. Each night, after returning to my apartment, I recorded events and observations of that day and updated my growing list of new acquaintances. At the outset, these men embraced my interest in mahjong mainly as a carrot on a stick: “Hey, Paul, you want to learn about mahjong and earn your ‘mahjong Ph.D.’ [*majiang boshi*]? Come with me and I’ll introduce you to a mahjong master.” Even though many of the men I had met were billed as mahjong

devotees, not one of them was willing to take me table side, despite my entreaties. They insisted that my mahjong skills must be wholly inadequate for their high-stakes matches and recommended that I accumulate experience in less consequential game situations. But how could I become a more proficient player, I protested, if I was not allowed at least to observe? I would eventually learn that mahjong observation, not to mention participation, required a depth of familiarity and trust greater than I had achieved with these men at that time (see Chapter 6).

What these men did reveal to me, however, was a key insight into an overarching question motivating my research interests: an important organizational basis of public culture in Taipei was male sociality. Most remarkable to me was just how intensive was the time that these groups of friends shared in pursuing collective social activities. Without any concerted effort on my part, these men took it upon themselves to expand the scope of my research, exploding my focus on mahjong into their vast reticulating world of friendship relations. Consequently, within a few months, my new project on male sociality and the public realm in Taiwan was born. Given the unusual fieldwork access these Taiwanese men were making available to me, I placed on hold for my next project my plan to return to China.

Cultural Intimacy and the Nation-State

As I spent more time among cohorts of men, I found myself being included in increasingly meaningful social activities. One measure of an activity's meaningfulness was the degree of exclusivity: the more important the activity, the more sharply circumscribed was the in-group. Another indicator of consequentiality was conversation, with the more hallowed habits providing the most gainful grist for storytelling. It very soon became apparent to me that the activities *most* meaningful to these men were also disreputable, in that they either contravened mainstream norms and/or were quasi-legal or downright illegal. In other words, the activities most

efficacious in providing mutual assurance of common sociality necessarily entailed a degree of defiance. This dissertation focuses ethnographically on the three social activities that for different but sometimes overlapping cohorts of men were most disreputable and therefore most meaningful: spear fishing, carousing at hostess clubs, and high-stakes gambling at mahjong.

Several groups of men with whom I grew quite close were devotees of a spear fishing sub-culture (Chapters 1 and 2). These men drew a sharp dividing line between recreational scuba diving and spear fishing, and they were quite selective about whom they admitted into their hunting circles. The spear fishermen I came to know insisted on hunting in only one place, White Lighthouse at Keelung Harbor. Taiwan's harbors are government owned, and Keelung harbor is not only a major port for transnational cargo vessels but also an important naval base.¹¹ Consequently, the area is formally restricted (*guan zhi qu*), with sentries on guard round-the-clock, and diving there is technically illegal. Moreover, spear fishing is time intensive, so these men were invariably conniving ways to play hooky from work and from family in order to pursue their hunting passion. Among these men, the *ideal*—in practice difficult to achieve--was to embrace a primary identity as “spear fishermen” (*da yu de*), and this was sharply subversive of normative expectations of male productivity, for spear fishing diverted men's productive energies, contributing neither to the national economy nor to the familial breadbasket (beyond an occasional fish to eat).¹² From the perspective of environmental consciousness, an increasingly normative awareness in Taiwan, spear fishing was environmentally incorrect, and no sharper reminder of this for spear fishermen was when Buddhists gathered at White Lighthouse to perform

¹¹ In Chapter 1, I discuss day-time spear fishermen only. As I describe in Chapter 2, there were also groups of night-diving spear fishing devotees, for whom both the hunting locales and the ritual dynamics were different.

¹² One could argue that in purchasing scuba gear the spear fishermen contributed to the national economy as consumers; however, these men went to lengths to limit their hunting-related expenses, minimally maintaining and rarely upgrading their gear. The only regular expense was an air-fill, and most of these men paid annual club dues to a dive shop that gave them free air-fills.

their “setting free” ritual. Finally, the symbolic gender dynamic of spear fishing, as we will see, was a “ruefully embarrassing” (Herzfeld 2005) culturally intimate contravention of Taiwan’s official claims to being a democratic society.

Carousing at hostess clubs, or literally “drinking flower wine” (*he huajiu*), is a notoriously shadowy yet pervasive activity engaged in, to one degree or another, by all classes of men (Chapter 4). Hostess clubs are nearly always illegal, at best operating outside the scope of some bogus business license (e.g., KTV club, piano pub, breakfast sandwich shop). The legal offense is compounded if hostesses happen to be minors, which is not uncommon. Flower-wine drinking is also a favorite topic of media censure and sensationalism, where it is portrayed as a traditional male “vice.” Hostess clubs have also been investigated in an officially commissioned study of Taipei’s “sex industry” and scrutinized by local feminist scholars. If there is credence to the media reportage and scholarly conclusions, tax-payer dollars and corporate expense accounts sustain the hostess club industry, as government officials and business executives are accused of being its primary clientele (see Chapter 4).¹³ From what I learned during fieldwork, however, this is by and large a stereotype, even if *partly* true, one which paradoxically dignifies the profile of carousing’s disrepute and serves as an alibi obscuring the cultural intimacy that drives ordinary friends to carouse together. To officials, there is no greater humiliation to Taipei’s status as a “global city” than its myriad hostess clubs, which police claim are infinitely elusive and therefore impossible to eradicate. Notwithstanding, the pointed question of “tacit permission” is often broached, and became a publicly painful discomfiture in 2002 when three Japanese reporters locally published “Paradise Taiwan” (*Jile Taiwan*), a

¹³ While I do not doubt that there are officials who frequent hostess clubs, my fieldwork experiences convince me that the charge that these bureaucrats drive the industry is itself loaded with politics and serves as an alibi that obscures the embarrassing allure of these underground establishments to ordinary men (Chapter 3).

200-page photo and map-filled guidebook detailing names, prices, and street addresses for sex services in Taipei and Kaohsiung (Huang 2002).

Mahjong is played among all classes of people and in a wide variety of social settings in Taiwan. In nearly all instances, the noisy tile game entails some level of wagering and is synonymous with gambling. Gambling in Taiwan is technically illegal, and this has closeted mahjong, driving the game underground. Consequently, mahjong is nearly always played behind closed doors, a requirement that shrouds the game in an aura of secrecy and illegitimacy that thickens as the ante goes up. Like spear fishing, mahjong is also time intensive, and the high-stakes all-male mahjong matches I examine run for no less than five hours per sitting. Like drinking flower wine, gambling at mahjong is also a media phenomenon and, when played for high stakes, is portrayed as a “vice.” Indeed, rarely absent from the pages of Taiwan’s major dailies are stories of some celebrity or political personage squandering large sums at the mahjong table or of a high-profile police raid busting an underground mahjong casino. The high-stakes matches among friends to which I was made privy were nearly always all-male, and the martial imaginary they invoked marginalized women and once again flouted the egalitarian democratic ethic publicly proclaimed by officials as a basic characteristic of Taiwanese society.

It is within the disreputable nexus of these cross-cutting official and normalizing forces that men pursue these three activities, and it is precisely this nexus of forces that constitutes the political conditions of cultural intimacy. Michael Herzfeld defines “cultural intimacy” as the “recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation” (Herzfeld 2005:3). Central to this argument, according to Herzfeld, are the

propositions that the “formal operations of nation states depend on coexistence—usually inconvenient, always uneasy—with various realizations of cultural intimacy” and that most citizens of most countries participate through their discontent and their irreverence in the “validation of the nation-state as the central legitimating authority in their lives” (2005:2, 4). At the core of this concept, therefore, is the paradox of modern power: activities that derive their social efficacy from contravening official norms actually constitute the nation-state, whose power may therefore be understood as being constructed out of the conflicts, contraventions, and negotiations of cultural intimacy.¹⁴

Herein also lay the significance of the two key terms of my title: vice and *virtù*. Political theorist Bonnie Honig defines the politics of *virtù* as disruptive practices that resist administrative closures or regulative efforts to stabilize moral subjects, build consensus, or consolidate identities (Honig 1993:2). *Virtù* politics embraces “agonistic conflict” as the basis of excellence and fullness of self-realization, and as the means for emboldening citizens for “the ruptures, the genuinely discomforting pleasures and uncertainties, of democratic political action” (1993:4; see also Chapter 6). Honig defines *virtù* in opposition to a politics of “virtue,” wherein it is assumed that the world and the self are enabled and completed only by order, that is, by the elimination from politics of dissonance, resistance, conflict, or struggle (1993:2-3). Cultural intimacy engages in *virtù* politics at the level of “discreetly maintained secrets,” and tends not to be an aggressive source of obvious public disruption (Herzfeld 2005:60). The “manly vices” I analyze do not aspire to topple political regimes or turn the world upside down, but do strive, in accordance with *virtù* politics,

¹⁴ Although I draw on Herzfeld, it should be noted that the logic of his concept of cultural intimacy—especially its paradoxical dimension—does resonate with Michel Foucault’s formulation of “governmentality” and Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “state of exception” (see Agamben 1998; Foucault 1991; Gordon 1991). Herzfeld’s “cultural intimacy,” however, focuses far more on the ethnographic level of micropractices than do Foucault’s or Agamben’s formulations, and therefore is particularly well served by anthropological analysis.

to create public spaces of possibility for alternative ethics of self-overcoming. The politics of *virtù*, as I argue in Chapters 3 and 6, offers key insights for formulating cultural intimacy as the basis of a plural democratic public *agôn*.

In postwar Taiwan, state strategies to anchor ideological “fixities”--“virtue” essentialisms that I call “state specters”--within people’s social and cultural lives have been powerfully persistent, in large part in order to counteract locally the fact that the state’s formal status as “nation” is globally ambiguous. In Chapter 5, I flesh out in ethnographic detail the gradual shift in the cultural imaginary of state ideology from abstract sacred aura to popular culture, wherein the post-authoritarian state has strived to embed official ideologies within everyday life in order to realize greater totalization (see Chun 1996). During the authoritarian era, the KMT sought to displace Taiwan’s Japanese colonial past and native Taiwanese culture with “traditional Chinese culture.” In the post-martial law era of liberalization and democratization, however, the DPP celebrates the island’s indigenous customs, and even embraces the colonial era as a marker of distinction between Taiwanese and Chinese identity.¹⁵ The changing political dynamics of cultural imagination in Taiwan have remained heavily inflected throughout the postwar era by the ever-looming cross-Strait conflict, which places at stake in the *agency* of cultural intimacy Taiwan’s very sovereignty and self-determination as an independent nation. If, as Herzfeld puts it, essentialism and agency are “two sides of the same coin,” the “fixities” strategically deployed by the Taiwanese state are but specters produced by the very things they deny: “action, agency, and use” (Herzfeld 2005:211). Through my exploration of cultural intimacy, I aim to obtain some critical purchase on the ways in which essentialism and agency are integral to identity formation at both the state and local levels. Towards this end, as I

¹⁵ The latter is especially true of former KMT President Lee Teng-hui, who is a Japanese-speaking Taiwanese and remains a forceful proponent of Taiwanese independence.

explain in the following section, I develop an analytical notion of secular ritual as a component of public culture.

Secular Rituals and Public Culture

Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff define secular rituals as nonreligious “collective ceremonies”—graduation, birthday, holiday, etc.--concerned with “unquestionability,” “predictability,” and bringing into “orderly control” some particular part of life (Moore and Myerhoff 1977:3). The chief assumption implicit in Moore and Myerhoff’s interpretation is that every ceremony is a dramatic statement made against a “background” of “indeterminacy” or “chaos,” hence the need for unquestionability and orderly control.¹⁶ My approach to secular ritual departs from that of Moore and Myerhoff in a few key respects. First, I focus on ritual activities that are not “collective ceremonies,” per se; on the contrary, these activities are undertaken among tight-knit groups of men within “shadow zones” that tend to be shrouded by an aura of secrecy, even if they are not exactly clandestine (see below). Consequently, the “stylized and conventionalized forms” of these secular rituals, as well as the life of the imagination that they nurture, are not intended to belong to the collective social memory; they are intimate knowledge imparted only to members of the in-group. A simple ritual illustrates this point: One cohort of men regularly gathered for traditional-style tea at the office of a buddy. Upon preparing the props for the mini-ceremony, he would routinely warn me about cleaning the tea bowl in which the tiny tea pot was partially submerged in overflowing tea: “Paul, make certain never to scrub this bowl or use soapy water on it. Just give it a quick rinse, that’s all.” The tea bowl had hardened on its surface a dark crust of tea sediment, which for these men had to be allowed to accumulate. I came to realize that this sediment signified the

¹⁶ For a critique of definitions of culture as order against a Hobbesian “state of nature,” see (Sahlins 1968).

accumulated history of their time and conversations together drinking tea, and the ritual significance of each tea ceremony adhered in both recuperating this history and adding to it. Only those men made privy to the intimate knowledge of the tea bowl could partake of this ritual dimension. Those without the knowledge who might have been present on any given day were merely enjoying conversation and drinking tea. This intimate knowledge becomes “cultural intimacy,” I should note, only when the activity rubs against the normative grain of society.

More significantly, the context pertinent to the disreputable secular rituals I analyze is not chaos but, conversely, a predominance of orderly control, and correspondingly a preponderance of predictability and unquestionability. Thinkers from Max Weber to the members of the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault are preoccupied with the compulsion of modern societies to rationalize, routinize, and normalize activities and behaviors. This is precisely the *theoretical* precondition for “everyday forms of resistance”: resistance may be found in all places only because of modern power’s omnipresent pretensions (see Scott 1990). To be sure, one byproduct of the valuable industry of resistance scholarship has been to reveal the ways and means by which the modern state penetrates and pervades aspects of everyday life. The least credible forays into the arts of resistance forget that power engenders resistance and search instead for subversive “spaces of freedom,” whereas Foucaultian studies of the paradoxes of power have been far more persuasive and influential. I situate my study among those influenced by Foucault; however, it nonetheless remains something of a departure to argue that secular rituals of cultural intimacy, which deform and rework official norms and ideologies, are in fact *essential* to state power and national politics.

If the background for cultural intimacy is orderly control, the aim of disreputable secular rituals is deconstruction in order to reconstruct spaces of spontaneity, an alternative ethic that sustains at least a simulacrum of open-ended

possibilities. In other words, secular rituals of cultural intimacy contrive to create circumscribed spaces of genuine agency or action against a sociopolitical background that otherwise limits or even forecloses this possibility. The quest for agency is neither productive of chaos nor radically subversive; as Herzfeld puts it, “the claim to agency is itself a key part of the modernist project, and woe betide those who do not realize that important principle” ((Herzfeld 2005:59). In playing mahjong, for example, men bracket the unquestionability of “fate” and engage in battle against “luck,” which can be altered through action, particularly skillful moves and performative style (Chapter 6). In hostess clubs, each man strives to break through a hostess’ professional persona and strike a personal cord, and to do so must depend on his ability to cultivate charisma through discursive and gestural improvisation (Chapter 4). For spear fishermen, the only limitation to skillful and creative action in battling the sea and bagging fish is the fear of injury or even death. These acts, I contend, accrue to individuals a unique identity that becomes an important basis for initiatory action in other social fields, thereby contributing to a public culture marked, as I explain below, by plurality and contestation. But spontaneous or initiatory action, precisely because of its fleeting character, nonetheless requires a degree of fixity, which is to say authority, in order to constitute identity and community, and here is where “state specters” reenter secular rituals of cultural intimacy.

In his study of the “dialectics of alienation,” P. Steven Sangren adapts Marx’s logic of commodity fetishism to the production of divine power among religious worshippers in Taiwan (Sangren 2000:69-95). In China, Sangren explains, deities are perceived as powerful only insofar as people worship them (2000:72). But individuals and collectivities misrecognize their own productive power by attributing it to deities, which in effect become “alienated representations of the self-productive power...of social collectivities and...individual subjects” (2000:69). The upshot, then, is that the relationship between producer and product is inverted: deities possess the power that

produces individual and collective identities. I follow the basic logic of Sangren's "dialectics of alienation" to explain the production of power in disreputable secular rituals, but with minor modification to account for the fact that, in the secular context, rituals entail neither worship nor deities.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx explains that, because people perceive as "natural" the division of labor in the capitalist mode of production, the value of individual deeds is consolidated in an "objective power above us," creating an "alienating contradiction between the individual and the community" that ultimately takes an "independent, illusory form as the *State*" (Marx 1978 [1932]: 160, original emphasis). Unlike the uninterrupted circular logic of divine power, where the return on investment is potentially profitable, state power demands heavy investment and expropriates a profit that it retains for itself—and it justifies the need to do so by reference to the "fallen condition" of the alienating structure of contemporary society. Moreover, to protect and preserve itself, as Marx explains, state power tends to be atomizing, driving its own ideologically ordering wedge between individual and community. Disreputable secular rituals are therefore pursued with a redemptive critical edge, for, as Herzfeld puts it, "the embarrassing but comforting intimacies of the present would not have been necessary had humankind adhered to the daunting path of true virtue" (Herzfeld 2005:175). Through disreputable secular rituals that deform and rework state ideologies—and here is where the accent is on agency-- individuals and groups generate alternative *virtù* essentialisms that, as I will demonstrate, are nonetheless specters of state ideology. In this way, cultural intimacy transforms the legitimating authority of the state into a "counter-vision of a 'common humanity'," one which, like state ideology itself, tends to locate "moral authority" and "eternal truth" within collective representations of an antecedent "Edenic order" (2005:147, 176).

Here the parallel preoccupation interconnecting the state and cultural intimacy is manifest: both are concerned with the production of authenticity, purity, or sacrality, and the capacity of ritual to produce such objective power, as Sangren has shown, is precisely what makes ritual so powerful and perduring. Different types of ritual customarily act upon different material or existential aspects of the human condition in generating objective power. Nature, for example, is central to totemism (e.g., Levi-Strauss 1963), the gender dichotomy is germane to sacrifice (see Jay 1992), and contingency or chance is most pronounced in *ludus* (see Caillois 2001), even though elements of nature, gender, and chance can likely be found in all rituals. I adapt classic ritual analysis to secular contexts of cultural intimacy in contemporary Taiwan. In my analysis of spear fishing, for example, the harbor setting of men's totemic "game against nature" consists of various "iconicities" (Herzfeld 2005:93-110) of national and transnational political economy, whose expropriated value men rework through ritual reification and recuperate for themselves. In flower-wine drinking, men pursue pre-outing protocols that animate embedded layers of nationalist ideologies within their disreputable flower-wine dreamtime, which they in turn authenticate through the ritual sacrifice of hostesses. Through battling luck in high-stakes mahjong matches, men mimetically trigger an officially orchestrated martial imaginary, which the dynamics of ritual play eternalize behind the sacred game-mask of fate.

In exploring these different "zones of intimacy" through adapted ritual frameworks, I "risk" highlighting, in conventional ethnographic fashion, "*distinctive* models of time and space, ways of holding the body, methods of sexual approach, ideas about authority, reckonings of kinship [and friendship], styles of talking, notions of clean and unclean" (Shryock 2004: 14, my emphasis). Indeed, much of this dissertation is concerned to describe and analyze precisely such local intimacies. I refer to this ethnographic unveiling as a "risk" because, from the mainstream perspective of public culture as a mass-mediated "global stage," these otherwise

obscured or ignored intimacies tend to be at best embarrassing and at worst antithetical to the “resistance-oriented agendas that animate the most compelling approaches to public culture” (2004:11, 13). But, as Andrew Shryock has recently reminded us, “these things are still with us, still real and significant,” as are secular dimensions of the ritual processes responsible for their dynamic reproduction (2004:14). The urgency, therefore, in the current global “age of public culture,” is to explore how these “zones of intimacy” are embedded within and draw their legitimacy from larger discursive universes.

Shryock describes “zones of intimacy” as off the stage of public display, at the “edge of comfortable sociability,” and so, it would seem, a natural home for disreputable activities. Upstaged by mass-mediated public culture, these penumbral zones are nonetheless where the “explicitly public is made...before it is shown” (2004:3). This terrain is not private, *per se*, and does not, *pace* Habermas, “‘flow’ out of a familial space” (2004:11). Rather, it is “‘intimacy [always already] oriented towards a public’” of real and imaginary onlookers (2004:11). The set-apartness of these shadow zones, however, allows intimacy to be perceived against an eavesdropping backdrop of mass-mediation that “accentuates the experience of difference,” and it is the indispensability of difference to the formation and multiplication of identities that explains why mass-mediated public culture, which necessarily tends to limit the dimensions of difference, requires these pre-public zones. At the same time, the discomfiture of diverse intimacies to global frameworks of cultural display impels public culture to obscure the existence of these shadow zones, not necessarily to suppress diversity (though sometimes to do so) but, again, in order to organize it within a “common frame” (2004:11). But the identities born of cultural intimacy necessarily vie to be displayed on the public stage, for only their performance before an audience affords permanence and legitimacy; in doing so,

however, they deform and rework the dimensions of the common frame of mass-mediated public culture.

This paradoxical but mutually conditioning relationship between zones of intimacy and public culture is a central concern of this dissertation. Hunting, carousing, and gambling are cultural intimacies situated in shadow zones, and I have already explained the sources of embarrassment that secure their upstaging by public culture. As I will demonstrate, however, these disreputable activities are also relentlessly, if agonistically, “oriented towards a public” from which they derive their significance. To illuminate the articulations and mediations of the public and penumbral realms, I pay close attention to time and space. Spatial juxtapositions are pronounced, for example, when different groups of men move between a seedy subterranean pool hall and glitzy KTV hostess clubs, between a historically rich city district and seamy special teahouses, between luxurious offices and a roadside betel nut stand, between global Taipei and steadfastly local Keelung. These diverse urban topographies are mediated by a dizzying array of past and present meanings, which register through temporal shifts. Urban Taiwan is unique in this temporal regard, as there are extant three distinct calendrical modes of time-reckoning as well as the memory of a fourth one. The Republican calendar, in which year one begins in 1912 following the founding of the Republic of China, is a postwar KMT legacy and unambiguously marks “official time.” Affairs of state, government documents, and most major newspapers record the year according to the Republican calendar. The traditional Chinese lunar calendar marks “popular time,” which regulates the ritual rhythms of local religion and traditional Chinese holidays (unlike in China, most of these holidays are observed in Taiwan) and defines the myriad activities (from buying a car and moving a household to getting married) for which each day is either auspicious or inauspicious. The third extant mode of time-reckoning is the Gregorian calendar, which marks “public time,” or the time of global modernity. Public time sets

the workaday pace of production and consumption, of commerce and trade, and of global cultural flows. Finally, there is the memory of the Japanese Imperial calendar, which marked time during Taiwan's colonial occupation (1895-1945). Although no longer extant, this colonial temporality is still recalled by vestiges of the colonial past that remain embedded in the physical and cultural landscape (Chapter 4).

Public culture in Taiwan is a complex nexus of these four modes of time-reckoning, whose cadences and connotations, synchronies and diachronies, and “non-synchronous synchronicities” (see Chapter 4) compete to constitute everyday urban spaces as a rich battle ground for the production of difference and identity. Taiwanese strategically shift between and negotiate these temporalities, so that the poetics and politics of everyday life entail the dramatic experience of what Shryock calls “self aware and Other-conscious” manipulations of “the cultural” (Shryock 2004:14). When Taiwanese men go carousing at a “special teahouse,” they may recall the notorious colonial-era sex culture that hostesses (modern geisha) conjure up; they may register identification with local Taiwanese culture upon seeing and smelling (burning incense) the anteroom mini-altar presided over dependably by the tutelary or money god; they may sense the social disrepute interpellated to carousing by its ceaseless mass-mediation as a shadow zone of sexual exploitation and official corruption; and they may experience the modern alienations of the money or commodity form when hostesses and madams foreground the cash nexus by contriving ways to run up the tab. Throughout this dissertation, I reconstruct the relevant cross-cutting temporalities of Taiwan's public culture that constitute the essential backdrop for the three zones of intimacy on which I focus ethnographically and wherein this public culture is (re)made. In Chapter 6, I go furthest in demonstrating how the identities born of the pre-public shadow zones reverberate outward to destabilize the boundaries of on-display public identities. My methodology for analyzing mass-mediated public culture draws upon the techniques of cultural studies; in particular, I mine for meaning

a promiscuous range of mass-media forms, including newspapers, periodicals, fiction, popular non-fiction, and Web sites. This *mediated* methodology is also my hermeneutic foil for transforming into conscious knowledge the embodied knowledge I internalized through the *immediate* mimetic methodology of participation, which I employed to assimilate the cultural intimacy of the shadow zones and which I discuss below.

Mimesis and Methodology

A key concept integral to my ritual analyses as well as to my fieldwork methodology is an agonistic mode of embodiment called mimesis or mimicry. Simply put, mimesis is the imitation of an Other (see Benjamin 1979; Caillois 1984; Caillois 2001; Taussig 1993b). Ethnographers have long noted that mimicry is an inherent aspect of most rites (Taussig 1993b:83-83). In the culturally intimate context of disreputable rites, mimesis is markedly agonistic, which is to say characterized by challenge, opposition, or contestation. Most basically, imitation produces a powerful form of embodied memory, an internalized knowledge akin to Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977). In certain instances, however, the mimetic faculty manifests a "drug-like addiction to merge, to become the other," leading bodily into alterity (Taussig 1993b:41-43). Here, any biologically based theory of mimesis as rooted instinctually in material adaptation yields to a cultural interpretation of mimetic acts as creatively integral to social life, particularly the life of the imagination (1993b:83). If mimesis necessarily entails a loss of self by imitation of an Other (or by adaptation to milieu), it simultaneously partakes of the production of alterity, or the reassertion of difference in order to experience human consciousness, personality, or life. The key assumption here is that the kind of difference meaningful to identity cannot obtain without some underlying sense of similitude. Mimicry is therefore essential because it

expands the degree to which we are allowed to know that “nature” is everywhere, in some way, the same (Caillois 1984).

Through different modes of imitation, as I will show, Taiwanese men at once animate and expand imagination and, in the process, invigorate powers essential for the production of self and collectivities. In Chapters 2 and 4, I examine the embodied ritual practices by which men agonistically imitate stereotypical aspects of their sexual other—women.¹⁷ The mediums and meanings of these mimetic cultural intimacies are manifold, but always engage wider social issues of politics and power. Drawing on interpretations of mimesis by Niccolo Machiavelli, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Michael Taussig, I also endeavor to explore the potential born of mimetic embodiment for experiencing “compassion” (J. J. Rousseau’s “*pitié*”), or *identification with alterity*. Levi-Strauss views Rousseau’s “compassion” as enabling recognition of the self in an Other, which is the precondition for distinguishing self from Other (Levi-Strauss 1963; Mendelson 1967). Taussig takes sentient compassion further by suggesting that, in more “theatrical” contexts, bodied mimesis “stages” “second nature,” a process that engenders, to recall Shryock, reflexive flashes of “Other-consciousness” and “self-awareness,” which, as we will see, blur or blunt the boundaries between self and Other.

Mimesis also describes the methodology by which I internalized knowledge of Taiwanese men’s disreputable secular rituals. By “living where they live, going where they go, and doing what they do,” I embodied a good many of my informant-friends’ aspirations and anxieties, realities and dreams, and in the process earned their trust and esteem.¹⁸ Sociologist Loïc Wacquant also partook of this mimetic mode of ethnography, referring to his sparring with boxer-subjects as “total surrender,” which implies “total involvement [in which] a person’s received notions are suspended [and]

¹⁷ Herzfeld emphasizes the social significance of stereotypes and therefore the need to analyze rather than ignore them (Herzfeld 2005:201-209).

¹⁸ This is China anthropologist James Watson’s fieldwork mantra, which he recited at a talk at Cornell University.

everything is pertinent, [which implies] identification [and] the risk of being hurt” (Wacquant 2004:11). To represent the experience of total surrender, I adopt a performative mode of expressive writing in which I “surrender” myself to the ethnography, if only at the most intimate ritual moments. This relinquishing of critical distance might disconcert the reader by making me appear over-invested in the performance of manly *virtù*, especially when these occasions entail tarrying with the gender division. However, it should be noted that, in Taiwan (and elsewhere), the repression of intimacy (here with the accent on affect) is a defining attribute of manliness, which means that a staid scholarly prose is complicit in this enterprise even when mightily criticizing it. By insisting upon the “return of the repressed,” my intimate textual interludes reveal what manhood compels men to conceal and therefore performatively contravene the basic tenets of manliness.

My methodology for analyzing secular rituals also departs from the predominant approach of critical gender studies, which emphasizes difference, deviation, and change. Although extremely important, such work tends to fashion difference and deviance as the only legitimate basis for identity politics, so that self-reflection and the potential for change are possible only among the marginal or oppressed (Festa 2004; Yudice 1995). This “politics of difference” has the paradoxical effect of holding up an already hypostasized normative culture and “keeping in place in our imaginary an ever greater monolith of power” (Yudice 1995:280). By exploring disreputable practices and identities as produced within the shadow zones of mainstream culture, and in tense relation to the mass-mediated discourses of public culture, I aim to expose the contemporary contours of the “*historical* mechanisms responsible for the *relative dehistoricization* and *eternalization* of the structure of the sexual division” (Bourdieu 2001:viii, original emphases). In doing so, however, I tuck between penumbral practices and public politics and tease out the progressive potential in the dialectic of mimesis and agonism,

intimacy and struggle. Towards this end, in my concluding chapter (Chapter 6), I develop the notion of “sympathetic agonism,” which defines equally well both the ethic of public culture in Taiwan and my methodology of fieldwork and analysis.

Chapter 1

Patrimonial Value and the Social Poetics of Spear Fishing--Part I

Introduction

The Division of Labor, Sexual Totemism, and the Erotic Triangle

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx describes the division of labor as the historical process by which we can no longer “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, and criticize after dinner,” but perforce must become either hunter, fisherman, shepherd, *or* critic (Marx 1978 [1932]:160, my emphasis). As I noted in the Introduction, Marx argues that we apprehend this process as “natural” rather than “voluntary,” so that our own deeds and labor products become consolidated in an “objective power above us, growing out of control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations” (1978:160). This objective power, Marx explains, creates an alienating contradiction between the individual and the community, with the latter ultimately taking an independent, illusory form as the *State* (1978:160). Marx’s critical political-economy therefore suggests that the value expropriated through the division of labor and naturalized in estranged objects is consolidated in the modern state.

In Taiwan, a paradigmatic home of “Patriarchal Man” (Blackwood 2005), modern alienation and expropriation dispossess men of value and power that they believe customarily belongs to them and that, paradoxically, society still teaches them *should* belong to them. In the context of recreational spear fishermen in Taiwan, I therefore refer to this expropriated value and power as “expropriated patrimony.” In a study of (occupational) sponge diving on the Greek island of Kalymnos, anthropologist H. Russell Bernard refers to the derring-do and danger defiance of Kalymnian sponge divers as a “game against nature” (Bernard 1967:104). In this and

the next chapter, I examine spear fishing as a particular instance of what Michael Herzfeld calls “social poetics,” as a dangerous social performance through which urban cohorts of middle- and working-class men partake of the production and comprehension of aspects of the national space through the creative deformation of the national boundary (see Herzfeld 2005:100). My point of departure will be to view this social poetics of spear fishing as a “game against nature” through which these men contrive to collapse the alienating contradiction between individual and community and to reappropriate their expropriated patrimony—in effect, to hunt in the morning, work in the afternoon, and commune over dinner.

This “game against nature” exhibits certain basic totemic properties, particularly as ethnographers have described among Australian aborigines, North American Indians, and certain tribes of Africa. I conceive of the operation of totemism as consisting of two parts, metaphoric and metonymic.¹⁹ The metaphoric moment closely resembles Marx’s fetishism of objective powers; however, what takes place thereafter departs from fetishism in a key respect: the feeling of awe in the face of fetishized objective powers leads individuals or groups to seek union or identify with these “objects” in order to endow *themselves* with their powers, and this metonymic dimension of totemism has much in common with magic.²⁰ In other words,

¹⁹ I draw my understanding of metaphorical and metonymic from Hayden White’s analysis of Giambattista Vico’s use of tropes to describe the changing nature of man’s relation to the external world in his stadial model of history (*corsi*) in *The New Science*. In short, in the initial metaphoric (or religious) stage of history—“the age of gods”—men (*sic*) are “totally alienated from themselves” for they are “presumed to have projected onto the natural world their conceptions of their own passionate and sensate natures, to have endowed all aspects of nature with an animus, or spirit, and to have conceived themselves to be governed by and to have worshipped these products of their own febrile imaginations” (White 1978:200, 210). In the second stage of history—“the age of heroes”—men have begun to “identify themselves with the spiritual forces with which they have endowed nature, and in such a way as to justify the privileged position that certain men or a certain class of men...enjoy at the expense of the weaker members of their communities, namely, children, women, and aliens” (1978:200). I am not advocating Vico’s (hardly original) teleology of history. I am combining his characterizations of man’s metaphoric and metonymic relations to nature into one conceptualization of totemism.

²⁰ In the nineteenth-century, anthropologist J.F. McLennan offered the following famous formulation: “totemism is fetishism plus exogamy and matrilineal descent” (Levi-Strauss 1963:13). This formulation has been well criticized, by Franz Boas among others, and long superseded (1963:13).

whereas the fetishistic dimension of totemism, like Sangren's "dialectics of alienation" (see Introduction), is the naturalization of creative human capacities in alienated form, the magical aspect of totemism entails endowing human capacities with naturalized "spiritual" powers, potentially for the purpose of realizing individual intentions (see Graeber 2001:239-240).²¹

Most typically, totemic objects are found in nature, among a wide diversity of animal species, including fish (Levi-Strauss 1963:26, 27).²² As anthropological studies of totemic practices explain, identification with totems and assimilation of totemic powers are achieved through the performance of totemic rites: individuals dress like totemic animals, imitate totemic animals, and, on appropriate ritual occasions, might even eat totemic animals (though often times this is taboo).²³ It is nearly universally noted that, socially, totemic objects are a focal point of group membership, the basis of a bond of "intimates," "associations," or "friends" that is potentially stronger than the encompassing tribal bond (Durkheim 1915:175). In parts of Australia and elsewhere, "sexual totemism," as Sir James Frazer coined it, is used to "mark off" male/masculine and female/feminine groups (Durkheim 1915:192; Levi-Strauss 1963:37-38). Variations of totemic meanings and practices are manifold, but I focus in this and the next chapter on the dialectic of totemism's dual dimensions of metaphor/essentialism and metonymy/agency, and on how feminine power and symbolism configure a contemporary sexual totemism concerned to cement bonds between men.

²¹ On the fetishistic dimension of totemism, Levi-Strauss provides a succinct definition: "Totemism is firstly the projection outside our own universe, as though by a kind of exorcism, of mental attitudes incompatible with the exigency of a discontinuity between man and nature which Christian thought has held to be essential" (Levi-Strauss 1963:3). Levi-Strauss goes on to emphasize that the totemic relationship is chiefly metaphorical, or based on resemblance.

²² Totemic objects also include plants and other objects.

²³ It is worth mentioning Levi-Strauss's famous explanation of why natural species are chosen as totemic objects—not because they are "good to eat" but rather because they are "good to think" (Levi-Strauss 1963:89).

In my totemic framework, the projection of creative human capacities onto an estranged totemic object takes place through the alienation and value expropriation born of the modern division of labor. At “White Lighthouse,” my informant-friends’ spear fishing Mecca, expropriated patrimony manifests to spear fishermen in estranged objectified form as national and transnational iconicities that, as I elaborate below, signal modern power—concrete breakwaters, naval frigates, giant cargo ships. Owing to the spatial metonymy of White Lighthouse, men perceive this patrimonial value/power as being absorbed by nature-*qua*-the sea. Through a variety of ritual practices, spear fishermen endeavor to reconstruct the meaning of the sea as fickle, unpredictable, dangerous, asocial—in short, as a materially and symbolically powerful *yin* force, which is also the feminine register of traditional Chinese correlative cosmology. The cultural intimacy in spear fishermen’s reification of nature derives in part from the fact that these ritual practices, as I explain in depth below, clash with contemporary environmentalist discourses that construct nature as “in itself” (*ziwo cunzai*). More saliently, however, spear fishermen produce cultural intimacy through the ritual practices by which they metonymically assimilate the naturalized *yin* force in order to capture the natural totemic object—fish. Here, the spear fishing rite becomes a particular anthropological variant of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “erotic triangle,” in which men’s efforts to mimic and capture the feminized totemic object are ultimately driven by their desire to repossess the patrimonial value/power of which they are dispossessed by the alienating structure of contemporary society (see Sedgwick 1985: 21-27).

In Chapter 1, I first examine White Lighthouse’s distinctive spatial metonymy, which dramatically marks and mediates aspects of the national boundary. In particular, I explore the ambient physical instantiations of modern power—contiguous consolidations of the alienated value of men’s expropriated patrimony—and show how spear fishermen’s desire to dive at White Lighthouse hinges on mistaking nature-

qua-the sea as embodying this alienated value. I then proceed to examine salient aspects of the environmental movement and emerging nature discourses in Taiwan in order to supply the critical hermeneutic foil that accentuates the cultural intimacy of spear fishermen's totemic relationship towards nature. In Chapter 2, I detail the ritual spear fishing protocols through which these men collectively reify nature and endow it with stereotypical gendered meanings, creating an estranged force that I call Taiwanese Fortuna: an objectified power that renders more proximal the patrimonial value expropriated through the alienating structure of contemporary society.²⁴ I argue that these spear fishermen in practice valorize an ideal of manly *virtù* that entails outwitting Fortuna by beating her at her own game. Towards this end, I demonstrate how men's donning of dive gear is a kind of cross-dressing and spear fishing a form of drag. Spear fishermen consummate their conquest of Fortuna, as well as their reappropriation of patrimonial value, by bagging the totemic object--fish. I conclude by showing how these spear fishermen, through circulating fish among others and banqueting over fish amongst themselves, materialize the "structural nostalgia" of a "gift society" in which individual interests and identities are reconstituted as part of community rather than in alienated opposition to it.

Moles, Military Brinkmanship, and the National Boundary

In the modern world, according to political scientist Sheldon Wolin, "boundaries are commonly identified with frontiers, frontiers with nation-states, and the state with the bearer of the political" (Wolin 1996:31-32).²⁵ This formulation defines the establishing of boundaries as integral to the modern politics of state-

²⁴ Herzfeld argues that anthropologists need to take seriously the analytical significance of local stereotypes, as people commonly use them as a form of action (Herzfeld 2005:201-209).

²⁵ Wolin defines the political as the "idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity" (Wolin 1996:31); hence, for Wolin, boundaries identify the state as the bearer of the collective power of a diversity of citizens.

making, nation-building, and social control. For Hannah Arendt, boundaries are a prerequisite for her understanding of politics as action and community: without building a “wall,” she explains, there could be no “political community” (Arendt 1958:63-64). Arendt sees boundaries as providing the sense of continuity that is the basis of new beginnings, arguing that boundaries “are for the political existence of man what memory is for his historical existence: they guarantee the pre-existence of a common world, the reality of some continuity which transcends the individual life span of each generation, absorbs all new origins and is nourished by them” (Arendt 1968:465). Through the social poetics of hunting at White Lighthouse, spear fishermen come to “know” the nation space in the agonistic act of transgressing its boundaries. If “to know is to deform” (Herzfeld 2005:100), then hunting also enables spear fishermen to redraw the national boundary, establishing their own culturally intimate frontier, and thereby remapping political existence onto their historical existence.

The politics of boundaries has been particularly pronounced in post-war Taiwan, where an early 1947 act of legislation passed by the KMT government was the Map Review Statute (*shuilu ditu shencha tiaoli*), which required that all maps undergo official review before being published (Wu 2004a).²⁶ State supervision over the representation of cartographic boundaries signaled the seriousness of the KMT’s attitude towards geopolitics (*diyuan zhengzhi*), which, during the martial law era (1949-1987), became a key element of social control through “the restriction of national space by controlling access to the mountainous outback, the open sea, and the air space above Taiwan” (Solomon 2001).²⁷ Taiwan being an island, the KMT moved swiftly to define the open sea as a frontier whose coastal boundary was intended as

²⁶ This statute was only recently abolished on April 23, 2004 (Wu 2004a).

²⁷ The “mountainous outback, the open sea, and the air space above Taiwan” echo the historical trajectory of the changing strategic uses of space in geo-military politics as taught, for example, in high-school military training textbooks: of initial importance to a nation/country was conquering the land, then the sea, now the air (see Sun Xiaoying 1999).

much to keep “citizens” in as to keep “foreigners” out. Although no longer incontrovertible, this littoral boundary is still strictly controlled (see Yu Sen-lun 2004). When I queried my spearfishing friends as to why there were no charter dive boats in the north, I was told that during the martial law period the KMT declared the sea off-limits to private boats and that, despite repeated appeals by dive shop owners since the lifting of martial law, officials remained unwilling to compromise the island’s ocean frontier by lifting the restriction.²⁸

As any visitor to Taiwan’s seashore soon discovers, vast expanses of the island’s coastline are cluttered with gigantic concrete breakwaters or moles (*fangbodi*), which my friends colloquially referred to as *bah chang* (M: *rou zong*), the Taiwanese term for a glutinous rice tamale stuffed with meat and wrapped in the broad leaves of reeds. The colloquialism derives from the fact that the three-dimensional triangular shape of the palm-sized tamales resembles in miniature that of the 5,000-pound breakwaters, which have only four points but, when stacked together, remind me of colossal piles of giant six-point jacks. At White Lighthouse, twenty-foot high jumbles of moles are incongruously heaped between a ten-foot-tall concrete platform and the surf, and this massive impenetrable barrier was being gradually extended along the coastline throughout the duration of my fieldwork. At low tide, a narrow rocky ledge is bared between the breakwaters and the choppy surf; at high tide, the slashing surf can engulf more than three-feet of the breakwaters. Most superficially, these enormous moles, which were a dangerous hindrance to our diving and sent a surly message to “keep out,” are a tool intended to halt the fickle forces of the sea whose formidable power they paradoxically invoke.²⁹ More significantly, however, they are

²⁸ In recent years, some dive shops in popular resort areas in the south of the island have been permitted to run charter dive boats. Although the government’s Port Administration Bureau makes private use of harbors bureaucratically difficult and financially expensive, the National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports has recently set up a task force to promote water sports in Taiwan, so there is increasing pressure on state-controlled harbors to accommodate private operations (see Yu Sen-lun 2004).

²⁹ These breakwaters, which are very difficult to climb or traverse, tempt fishermen looking for convenient ocean access and also leave them trapped in the face of “mad dog waves” (*feng-gou lang*),

a brash gauntlet of human bravado that drives an unwavering wedge between a (Hobbesian) antipolitical state of nature and political society, revealing the role of boundaries and frontiers in establishing the territorial nation and in shoring up the modern state's power and control.

But the breakwaters are also an unmistakable reminder of another wedge, namely the inescapable geopolitical one dividing the Taiwanese state and the Chinese territorial nation. Since at least the mid-eighteenth century, Chinese have conceived of the nation-state as comprised not only of the people and the sovereignty but also of the territory or land.³⁰ In the first decade of the twentieth-century, a school of Chinese “national essence” thinkers, whose ideas contributed to the founding of Republican China in 1912, began constructing modern national narratives in which geography as a profession was employed to define “the space of the nation” (Fan Fa-ti 2004:427). With the Nationalist Government's exile to Taiwan, the hyphen linking “state” and “nation” became profoundly problematic. Until most recently in Taiwan, geography textbooks defined and graphically depicted a “national boundary” (*guojie*) that sharply contradicts the concrete one extravagantly marked littorally by the moles. In a typical geography (*dili*) textbook assigned in 1976 at a five-year senior vocational school of industry/engineering attended by one of my informant-friends, the national boundary includes all of mainland China proper, with the 11,000 kilometer eastern ocean boundary encompassing Taiwan and passing no closer than 200 kilometers off Taiwan's mole-demarcated coastline (Dai Guangdong 1976:1-6). This 11,417,000 square-kilometer cartographically bounded area is referred to ubiquitously throughout

which occasionally erupt along Taiwan's coast and sweep fishermen into the sea. For example, in 1997-1998, mad dog waves claimed the lives of three fishermen in Keelung alone, and two of these fishermen were standing on breakwaters when they were swept away; see (Cai Zhenghan 1999). In 2000, I accompanied four friends on a dive off the northeast coast to search for the bodies of two fishermen who were swept out to sea together by a single mad dog wave—one of these men was the husband of a colleague of the wife of one of my friends (which is why we were called upon to conduct a search).

³⁰ For an interesting discussion of ancient Chinese political geography, see (Fan Fa-ti 2004).

the textbook by the ambiguous term “our country” (*wo guo*), which, again throughout the textbook, notably appears underlined—the diacritical convention used to indicate a proper noun—just like the names of other nation-states (Dai Guangdong 1976). The breakwaters therefore at once embody and emphasize the painstakingly stark ambiguities of territory and sovereignty surrounding the notions of nation, state, and country in post-war Taiwan. These ambiguities animate the island’s crisis of “national” identity, which is differently nuanced for Taiwanese, mainlanders, and aborigines.

The first time I arrived at White Lighthouse, I asked my spear fishing buddies why the inhospitable breakwaters were not superfluous given the impressively high concrete wall already winding along the coastline. Without hesitation, one friend replied that the breakwaters were meant not only to cut down treacherous waves during typhoons but also to impede a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) attack on Taiwan.³¹ My friend’s mention of a PLA attack prompted me to scrutinize carefully his expression, as well as everyone else’s reaction, for some sign of jest, but I noticed none. Thereafter, wherever I encountered these breakwaters, I made a habit of inquiring about their purpose with anyone nearby to me—and oftentimes this was a stranger. Only after hearing many times over the very same response—to impede a PLA attack—was I convinced of my friend’s candor and did I begin to take seriously what these breakwaters signify for many Taiwanese: a national frontier where the sea is sliced off and marked as an unruly political remainder that embodies the ever-looming China threat and that must be managed and controlled. And if national frontiers necessarily signify “ethnic” difference, the breakwaters constitute a formidable affront to the official PRC discourse that the people on both sides of the Strait are “Chinese” (*Zhongguo ren*), just as they demonstratively invert the PRC’s

³¹ The PLA refers to the three branches of China’s (PRC) military—the army, navy, and airforce.

cross-Strait-relations mantra recently pronounced by Chairman Hu Jintao--“blood is thicker than water” (*xue nong yu shui*)--by suggesting that “water is thicker than blood” (see Editor-Military News 2002).³²

All of Taiwan’s harbors are state owned, and our diving at White Lighthouse, a jetty at the outer-most entrance to Keelung Harbor, was technically illegal, undertaken in what posted signs declared a “controlled area.” Security guards protected surrounding points of ocean access, but the sea itself seemed to remain a “zone of indistinction” (Agamben 1998), where self-surveillance was induced by invisible sentries presumably perched behind tinted windows wrapped 360 degrees around the spherical crown of a towering panopticon—Keelung Harbor’s Vessel Traffic Control Tower. As long as we entered the sea from an unsecured spot, the police were little concerned to remove us from the water, even though we snorkeled out to the most restricted and dangerous point—the mouth of the harbor where 3,000 to 60,000-ton ships sliced through powerful rip tides—and hunted deep below the passing vessels, along the shadowy and steeply sloped banks of the underwater channel. The national boundary iconically marked by concrete moles and state sentries not only separates the nation space from the ocean frontier, but the sea as a displaced space—as a dangerous and undomesticated antipolitical state of nature—points up the political achievement of the national boundary and the nation space.

The patently political pretensions of the “national” boundary, along with the implied repudiation of consanguinity with outsiders, reflects Taiwan’s desire to clarify its national status (*guojia dingwei*) as an “equal entity” (*duideng shiti*) in a modern global order of nation-states, and especially vis-à-vis the PRC. In 1999, then President Lee Teng-hui spurred discussion of Taiwan’s national status by announcing: “Let the ‘two separate nation-states discourse’ [*liang guo lun*] heat up so the world will know

³² At the time of this pronouncement in 2002, Hu was still vice chairman of the PRC.

the hardship suffered by the Republic of China on Taiwan” (Lin Fangmei 1999). In 2002, President Chen Shuibian, in order to rebuke China’s overtures of a “one China principle” (*yige Zhongguo yuanze*) and “one country, two systems” (*yi guo liang zhi*) plan, rekindled the discussion of “two separate nation-states” by coining a new slogan: “one nation-state on each side of the Strait” (*yi bian yi guo*) (see Wang Mingyi 2002). National Zhengshi University journalism professor and influential feminist, Lin Fangmei, pointed out in a *China Times* editorial that Lee Teng-hui’s “two separate nation-state discourse”—with its related political, foreign-relations, and military implications—revealed a masculinist bias by implying that “nation-states” trumped gender as an essential basis for claiming the status of “equal entities.” Lin’s argument is that uncoupled with calls for gender equality, the “two separate nation-states discourse” is no more than a patrimonial power struggle between men; only by joining the claim of “equal status” for nation-states with the comparable claim for male and female gender would the “very meaning of ‘nation-state/country’ [*guojia*] become specific and complete” (2002). Lin’s critique, along with the heated public debate it inspired (for example, see Zhu Weicheng 1999), hinges on the idea that politics, power, and violence are born perversely from the “return” of a repressed fundamental injustice, the oppression of women. We will see, in Part II below, that this repressed gender injustice returns as well in the culturally intimate rituals of spear fishing at White Lighthouse. If gender as a political remainder tends to play a repressed role in affirming the masculinist “achievement” of national boundaries, what goes far to flaunt gender as an involuntary co-conspirator is the pernicious pomp and pageantry of the military.

As many scholars have pointed out, the nation-state (as well as its corresponding imperatives of democracy and freedom) is always and inescapably a military achievement (e.g., Wolin 1996). Upon alighting the highway and entering downtown Keelung, one is instantly struck by the grand roadside view of warships

docked inside Keelung Harbor, which is one of the island's most important naval bases with more than 26 berths reserved for warships (Editor-Strait Military Affairs 2002).³³ I have seen frigates, destroyers, aircraft carriers, and submarines, and the area is always teeming with uniformed sailors. Indeed, China amplified the naval importance of Keelung in March 1996, when, as part of its largest-scale military maneuvers ever in the Taiwan Strait, the PLA landed two (of four) M-9 medium-range ballistic missiles just outside Keelung harbor, 30 kilometers from shore, in order to intimidate voters prior to the first direct presidential elections on Taiwan (and in Chinese history) (Shambaugh 1998:240-244).³⁴ The drive through Keelung en route to White Lighthouse thus cannot help but invoke Taiwan's military brinkmanship with China. Regional (if not global) peace, stability, and prosperity—not to mention Taiwan's autonomy—are commonly believed to hinge on the balance of military power on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait (Snyder and Wu 2004). Analysis of the relative military might of Taiwan versus that of China is a mainstay of Taiwan's media and the topic of a regularly aired network television program that dramatizes the current capabilities of Taiwan's armed forces, no doubt to reassure the public that the island's defenses are formidable and up-to-date.

Up to at least the early 1990s, the PLA was widely known as “the world's largest military museum” owing to the obsolescence of its equipment (McVadon 1998:44). But China's goal to become a global economic superpower has entailed developing a military appropriate to this status, and the National People's Congress has responded with a long line of hefty annual increases to China's military budget,

³³ Keelung Harbor was first opened as a naval defense headquarters in 1872. The harbor area was heavily bombed during WWII and almost all port facilities were completely destroyed.

³⁴ The other two missiles landed 20 miles outside of Kaohsiung Harbor in the south of Taiwan. These March 1996 maneuvers deployed 150,000 troops and involved air, sea, and amphibious operations. They also followed by only six months or so China's two-staged missile firings 95 miles north of Taiwan in July and August 1995, exercises precipitated by Taiwan's then President Lee Teng-hui's private visit to the United States in June 1995; see (Shambaugh 1998:240-244).

with a 12% boost approved at its latest 2004 meeting (Luard 2004).³⁵ Until most recently, the strategic arms buildup on both sides of the Strait centered on achieving naval supremacy in order to win control of the sea. Toward this end, to mention but one example, the PLA has acquired, under the anxiously watchful eyes of Taiwanese, Russian Sovremenny-class destroyers and quiet Kilo submarines (Klintworth 1998; McVadon 1998). My friends were aware of such advances made by the Chinese navy, just as they knew that Taiwan's antisubmarine defenses were dangerously weak.³⁶ Indeed, they often bantered about the possibility of encountering PLA submarines while spear fishing: "If you see a giant dark shadow down there, it's certainly not a shark, as sharks don't dare approach our coast because they're deathly afraid of Taiwanese fishermen; a giant dark shadow could only be a Chinese submarine."

In June 2001, the three branches of the PLA (army, navy, air force) staged another large-scale amphibious mock Taiwan landing, backed by guided missiles, on Dongshan Island in Fujian Province, only 277 kilometers west of the Penghu Islands (the Pescadores). The PLA selected Dongshan as the site for these four-month-long military exercises because the island's topography of hills and peaks, as well as its being bordered on all four sides by the sea, makes it something of a spitting miniature image of Taiwan (Yu Yulin 2004). These exercises involved some 100,000 troops and featured a mock sea battle aimed at sinking an aircraft carrier strategically positioned in the Taiwan Strait (AFP Beijing 2004). Beyond training PLA troops for an actual attack on Taiwan, the mock invasion was expressly aimed at sending a "substantial warning" to "Taiwanese separatists." Toward this end, giant signboards were planted throughout the battlegrounds bearing slogans intended to rally the troops behind the

³⁵ As China's military grows, more and more Taiwanese believe that allowing the balance of power to shift in China's favor is the best way to ensure that the US will intervene on Taiwan's behalf should China attack the island (Luard 2004).

³⁶ Most recently, Taiwan has made redressing its weak submarine defenses a top priority and high-profile political issue, which played a significant role in the 2004 presidential elections; see (Snyder and Wu 2004; Wu 2004b; Wu 2004c).

raison d'être of the maneuvers: "Never abandon force of arms" (*juebu chengnuo fangqi wuli*) and "Overtake Taiwan separatists with an iron fist" (*tiezhang da Taidu*) (Yu Yulin 2004).

Under certain diving conditions, the sensuous (in the double sense of corporeal and symbolic) reverberations of these inescapable cross-Strait geopolitical currents can be palpably, if also perilously, intense. On one dark and stormy mid-morning, six guys, including me, arrived at White Lighthouse amidst a steady rain and stiff wind for some spear fishing. We climbed up onto the concrete platform from where we observed a turbulent swathe of large and disorderly swells rising and falling across the 200 meter expanse of sea we needed to traverse in order to reach the lighthouse point, where we descend and which we slowly prowl around at depth until entering the harbor channel on the far side. In order even to enter the water, however, we would need first to scale down the slippery moles and then to execute a carefully timed charge in swirling knee-deep water so as to clear the rocky ledge without being captured by one of the curling four-foot waves, which were being powerfully churned up by the strong wind and rising tide, and carried back into the breakwaters, where the surf would mercilessly thrash you against the giant concrete structures. As we stood silently assessing the threatening conditions, I became momentarily seized by fear and involuntarily uttered, "No way. Call it off." Dragon Brother immediately turned towards me and, after struggling for a few seconds to gather his pasty mouthful of red betel nut grinds into one protruding cheek pocket so that he could speak, responded, "No problem. We've charged through much bigger waves than these. Let's do it."³⁷ My heart skipped several beats as the gang dispersed to grab their gear. I first leaped behind the protruding point of a breakwater for my requisite pre-dive crap, attempting

³⁷ All names are pseudonyms. Most men call each other by nicknames, such as "Little [something]," A [something]," or some more colorful sobriquet. I have tried to retain the general flavor of nicknames in assigning pseudonyms.

at once to rush so as not to fall behind the gang and to relax in order to calm my breathing, which was already erratic and uneasy.

Little Clean and Dragon Brother made impressively smooth and well-timed solo entries between crashing waves. Hammerhead and Little Pearl were less agile and slower afoot, and so had no choice but to take a wave on the rocky ledge, which they did strategically by hunkering down in a small crater where together they could hold their position. The wave crashed upon them and swooshed them around like ice cubes in a cocktail, but as soon as the foam dispersed, they popped out of the crater, raced for the edge, and made successful entries. King mistimed a wave and, rather than forcing a bad entry, took a hit right at the edge of the ledge—no doubt a spontaneous decision, and a wise one, as it is less dangerous to be struck with two feet on the rocks than to become helplessly trapped inside a curling wave just off the ledge. The crashing wave floored King and flushed him back into the breakwaters, but he remained steady and in control, upright on his hands and knees even while being spun around. As soon as the surf began to pull back, he rose like sprinter out of the starting blocks and chased the retreating surf into the sea without further incident. Five bobbing heads were now turned towards shore, watching and waiting for me to make my move.

While clinging to a low breakwater, I forced myself to “surrender” to the situation, which implied suspending all received notions of “sensible behavior” and facing squarely the risk of being injured (see Wacquant 2004:11). Trailing behind the loud and chaotic clatter of a wave thrashing inside the breakwaters—a sonorously hypnotic backdrop for my last-second introspection—I heard faintly rising up the dissonant exhortations of my floating friends commanding me to “charge” (*chong*). I secured my speargun over my shoulder, squeezed the last puff of air from my BC, and, unlike my friends for whom conserving air trumped safety, popped my regulator into my mouth. Almost in the same motion, I released myself from the larger-than-life

breakwater and landed on the ledge, from which there was no turning back. Focusing exclusively on reaching the edge, I clumsily battled my way across the ledge through the agitating knee-deep surf. Upon reaching the edge, I hastily popped on one fin and desperately plunged straight down below the surface, kicking out mermaid style against the pull of a wave breaking a few feet above me. Once I was a safe distance from the crag, I surfaced in ear-shot of a bobbing King, who was shouting at me to breathe my snorkel and conserve air. I quickly inflated my vest, switched to my snorkel, rolled over onto my back, slid on my second fin, and began kicking my way through the undulating swells.

With my back towards the lighthouse, I peered at the coastal boundary of breakwaters, which gradually shrank and appeared increasingly insignificant as the expanding patch of sea between them and me began to dwarf them. As was my habit when kicking out to the lighthouse, I also gazed up at the towering panopticon, this time through a steady rain, and wondered what some sentry whom might have been watching us would have been thinking. The swells were large enough so that my fully inflated vest could not keep my head from taking a partial dunk upon rolling off each one, and I intermittently had to clear a mouthful of salt water from my snorkel.³⁸ Only a few minutes had passed before I lost track of my five buddies amidst the heaving swells. I knew that these guys viewed treacherous surface conditions merely as an “external” obstacle to the “shadowy inner” sanctum of underwater depth, where scuba gear rendered the sea more open to human assimilation. Had they already ducked out of the rough surface conditions and headed for undersea sanctity?

As I approached the half-way point to the lighthouse, I heard a distant rumbling that rapidly escalated to a thunderous roar. I turned toward the channel to

³⁸ Adding to my inability to keep my head above water was the fact that I was deliberately carrying more weight on my weigh belt than is needed under normal diving conditions. Spear fishing required holding a firm position on the bottom amidst a powerful current, so one needed to carry considerably more weight than usual.

witness cruising majestically into the harbor an all-gray ROC naval frigate, which appeared almost opaque riding along the intersection of the gloomy gray horizon and the blue-gray sea.³⁹ The speed of the frigate was faster than that of the much larger freightliners, so I waited and braced for the fallout from the warship's sizeable wake, which, in conjunction with the surging swells, was making to take me on a roller-coaster ride. As I rolled off the frigate's wake, I observed another of these warships motor into the channel and disappear behind the lighthouse. Very soon, the undulating swells were smashing into erratically curling white-caps, and I was barely able to keep my head above water. Catching dry breaths from my snorkel became increasingly difficult, so I decided to set my compass and, if need be, make for the lighthouse at depth. As I set my compass, a third frigate rumbled into view, and I was beginning to feel suffocated as much by the authoritatively imposing reverberations of the powerfully thundering warships as by the salt water flooding my snorkel.

After counting off the sixth frigate of the passing fleet, I retreated from the wild surface chaos and dove down 60 feet into pitch darkness where, as with all underwater sounds, the loud thumping of the frigates was absorbed by the water and became magically muffled and omni-directional, creating the feeling of being wrapped in a gently vibrating blanket. This water was typically turbid, but without sunshine and with the frigates stirring things up, I could see nothing at all but the faint luminosity of my gauges, which I needed to monitor closely for both direction and depth as this was a bottomless dive.⁴⁰ I held my compass console close to my face and kicked along slowly behind the glimmer, lengthening the swing of my left leg to offset the push of the tide. At depth the swim was smooth against the strong and steady current. Now breathing effortlessly, I was somehow able to allow the pounding pulse

³⁹ A frigate is a warship smaller than a destroyer. Shambaugh refers to this class of warships as patrol combatants (Shambaugh 1998:251). In 1996, according to Shambaugh, the ROC navy had a fleet of 98 patrol combatants.

⁴⁰ I had been down as deep as 150 feet at this outer edge of the bay and never bottomed out. According to my friends, this part of the bay was more than 200 feet deep.

from the steady stream of passing warships—as well as the suffocating geopolitical currents reverberating commandingly through their thumping turbines--to envelope and soothe me. I believe this mimetic underwater assimilation explains how my friends found escape and tranquility at depth, and I wondered if it was only when submerged and thereby merged with the anti-political sea that they could begin to fathom a bond with some sensuous semblance of the nation space.

Transnational Ships, Harbor Globalization, and the Transparency of Low-Visibility

Keelung Harbor was first opened as a commercial port in 1863, about the time when Taiwan was opened to Western trade (Rubinstein 1999:394). Currently the island's second largest international container port after Kaohsiung (which is the fourth largest in the world), Keelung Harbor has over 56 cargo ship berths and, in 2001, handled more than 1.82 million TEU's (twenty-foot equivalent units), establishing it as the 29th largest container port in the world (Taiwan Yearbook 2003). Up to 60,000-DWT freightliners haul into Keelung Harbor coal, crude oil, minerals, grains, and sundry goods, and export to places throughout the world the gamut of the island's finished goods, including machinery, chemical products, electronics, light manufactures, textiles, processed foods, as well as miscellaneous commodities. Taiwan has long traded heavily with the United States and Japan, and especially since the mid-1980s with Hong Kong and the ASEAN states (Maguire 1998:58). Given the island's diplomatic isolation, global trade has played a central role not only in the island's rapid economic development but also in its foreign relations, making Taiwan's 2001 entry into the WTO as important economically as politically.⁴¹

⁴¹ Taiwan was formally admitted into the WTO in November 2001.

Massive cargo ships pass continuously in and out of Keelung Harbor—often queuing up on the horizon as far as the eye can see--and were a defining characteristic of spear fishermen’s diving experience at White Lighthouse. As moving mountains of transnational cargo—of the imports and exports that have navigated the course of Taiwan’s modern socioeconomic development—these imposing vessels, by sheer dint of their imponderable vastness, demanded reflection upon one’s “labor value” vis-à-vis some abstract global standard. This disconcerting object of contemplation seemed to be taken up only obliquely by my friends, but I often found it buried in passing remarks. For example, a typical comment made by Little Clean one afternoon while leisurely off-gassing between dives on the concrete platform at White Lighthouse was: “Look at those giant ships, bursting with cargo. They go in and out of the harbor all day, everyday. And yet Taiwan is just a tiny speck of an island. What does that tell you about Taiwanese productivity? It’s extraordinary [*lihai*]!” What Little Clean here calls “extraordinary,” however, is for him and for many of his generation the source of no small amount of modern anxiety.

Born between the late-1950s and mid-1960s, my spear fishing friends attended school during a time when the KMT was overhauling the basic educational system. In 1968, the national education policy of free (or nearly free) public schooling was extended from six to nine years, so all of my friends attended junior high school (Sun Chen 1994:96).⁴² By the mid-1970s, however, the focus of education policy was on increasing the number of vocational high schools (at both the junior and senior levels) to produce a workforce capable of meeting practical demands, and the number of students attending vocational schools quickly exceeded those in academic high schools (Rubinstein 1999:378; Sun Chen 1994:100). While some of my friends received no education beyond junior high, most attended some kind of vocational

⁴² These additional three years of junior high school were not compulsory, but they were nearly universally available.

school, with only a few taking the more exclusive academic route and going on to earn a college degree. In other words, most of my friends acquired a practical skill that provided limited flexibility, but with a little luck enough mobility to rise above the lower or working classes and to fill some specific role among the ranks of the new middle class burgeoning in Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s. According to anthropologist Hill Gates, this middle class was bifurcated along “new” and “traditional” lines, with the former constituted of “salarymen” working for large bureaucratic organizations (government institutions, schools, industrial corporations) and the latter of entrepreneurs running their own small-scale enterprises (Gates 1981; see also Rubinstein 1999). Indeed, my friends ultimately found niches in both middle-class sectors, with some holding salaried positions with the Customs Bureau, a computer manufacturing firm, various retail enterprises, as well as a “supplementary education school” (*buxi ban*), and others striking out on their own in manufacturing, construction, and the service industry.

Groundwork for Taiwan’s 1970s and 1980s industrial boom was laid by various economic policies in the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps most notably by an import-substitution policy, which discouraged the outflow of capital and encouraged local reinvestment (Maguire 1998:49-63). In the 1970s, the success of import-substitution resulted in a glut of domestic industries, which led to the adoption of an external orientation (1998). Indeed, by the 1980s, manufactured exports had skyrocketed, growing 267 percent in value (Rubinstein 1999:372). During this period, the Taiwanese economy capitalized on its growing industrial workforce—the upshot of ambitious vocational education initiatives as well as an ample supply of low-cost unskilled labor--attracting large-scale foreign and domestic firms as well as smaller-scale industrial firms producing specialized goods.

Two of my friends, Little Big and Black Belt, offer exemplary cases of the fate of many during Taiwan’s industrial boom, having established successful small

manufacturing operations in the 1980s. Both spoke often of their affluence during those prosperous years, and especially of their status as “big brother”—“I was ‘big brother’ in those days”—the big spender treating buddies to banquets and rounds of carousing at expensive hostess clubs. But the initial success of their enterprises was fueled by low-cost labor, something that, by the 1990s, had become a scarce resource in an increasingly skilled workforce. Import-substitution was also gone, and global competition descended upon the domestic market. Little Big and Black Belt lacked the resources to respond as many Taiwanese entrepreneurs did, by relocating manufacturing operations to China, the new low-cost labor frontier and a pristine marketplace of more than a billion consumers. Consequently, their businesses failed. Another enterprising friend, Big Brother Lou, had the foresight and finances to move production across the Taiwan Strait, where he built two large-scale factories in two major Chinese cities. He is now one of Taiwan’s wealthy elite industrialists (though he has not forgotten his roots and continues to play nine-ball almost daily with ordinary friends at a ratty downtown pool hall). But the fates of Little Big and Black Belt are more typical of 1970s and 1980s start-ups. Now under-skilled in a globalizing economic environment marked by rationalization and dominated by the electronics and information/computer industries, Black Belt scrambled for a decade to acquire new skills before finally managing to reenter the middle class, this time as a salaryman in the “new” sector, while Little Big slid downwards into the working class, driving a cab or else picking up temporary construction work.

But even my friends in the “new” middle class tend to be running on a treadmill rather than pushing professional envelopes; consequently, but for some notable exceptions, these men experience acutely the alienations accompanying Taiwan’s drive for progress and globalization and therefore tend not to identify themselves strongly with their careers—especially to the extent that they are able to persevere as spear fishermen. Silk, for example, was a fanatical spear fisherman,

earning bragging rights for hunting seven-days straight at White Lighthouse, even braving a sizeable storm in order to do so, and for bagging at least one amberjack on each day (I dove on these seven consecutive days as well, but without equal hunting success). Some months later, however, Silk was swept into the breakwaters by a “mad dog wave” (*feng-gou lang*) upon attempting his entry. His speargun and one fin were lost and he became trapped inside a jumble of moles, pinned on his back helplessly with both hands wedged so that he could not insert his regulator in his mouth, and was pounded and flushed by each crashing wave for close to an hour before his buddies arrived to free him. For the remaining one year of my time in the field, Silk never again donned his dive gear. As the others put it, he had “*po dan le*” (“ruptured his spleen”), which implied that he had lost his courage and was finished as a spear fisherman. In a conversation with Silk several months after the incident, I asked him if he thought he might one day spear fish again. His reply points up what the fright from the breakwaters had forced him to surrender: “Of course I’ll dive again. But you should know that, unlike those other guys, I never considered myself first and foremost a spear fisherman. I’m an interior designer and I want to concentrate on building my business. I’m currently exploring the possibility of opening a satellite office in Shanghai. Next time you go to White Lighthouse, give me a call anyway.”⁴³

Riding the momentum of Taiwan’s touted “economic miracle,” Taiwanese officials and big business leaders have become eager for the island to supplant a post-1997 PRC-held Hong Kong as the new communications and financial/corporate hub of East Asia (see Rubinstein 1999:377). This lofty aspiration has deepened the interdependence of the bureaucratic state and global capitalism, a merger which, echoing Max Weber, has led to the increasing valorization of political-economic predictability, calculability, and routinization—tools that Weber identified as

⁴³ I called Silk on more than one subsequent spear fishing occasion, but he never failed to have conflicting plans.

“harnessed to specific projects of manhood”: the “quest for freedom defined as liberation from constraint and for power defined as domination” (Brown 1988:152-176). If the goal of autonomy retains unusual political urgency for Taiwan, as pursued within the neoliberal economic calculus of instrumental rationality, however, it necessarily alienates individuals from the means of power and production, which reside in the state and in capitalism. To be sure, “instrumental rationality” is “gender-neutral” (1988), and its ascendance has allowed women to leave the home and enter the professional workforce to compete with men, a momentous historical transformation typically accorded primary blame for Taiwan’s 1990s “crisis of masculinity” (see Wang Haowei 1998). Consequently, especially for Taiwanese of my friends’ generation and middle-class station, the “economic miracle” has only intensified their struggle for existence, and especially for a positive and productive sense of self-identity and self-worth.

It was the implacable admixture of nervousness *and* resolve pointedly particular to my friends’ experience of diving and hunting at White Lighthouse that triggered my grasp of the giant transnational cargo ships as instantiating some deep sense of these post-war political-economic struggles and contradictions, and especially of the “patrimonial value”—the font of freedom and autonomy--expropriated from them through the increasingly alienating convergence of the state and capitalism in Taiwan’s modern socioeconomic development. The intensely “immediate” deep-sea encounter with the sea at White Lighthouse, it seems to me, at once masked and mediated a corporeal recuperation of unplumbed personal and political meanings, such that my friends pursued game fish amidst the swirling currents and dark “inner shadows” generated by passing giant cargo vessels as a precarious reappropriation of fundamental value and control. Over the three-year period during which I spear fished at White Lighthouse, Keelung Harbor underwent manifold modifications intended to expand, fortify, and “rationalize” harbor operations. In addition to the sprawling

breakwater project, there was also an extensive dredging program as well as a complete replacement of patrol personnel, who we relied upon for (illegal) access to the channel on foot when the surf was too high for a shore entry. These man-made alterations intended to achieve harbor modernization presented us with multiplying diving hazards, each of which seemed only to intensify my friends' desire to continue to spear fish at White Lighthouse, despite ample alternative dive sites in the area.

To meet the requirements of global shipping and strengthen the harbor's competitiveness, a two-phased dredging program was completed in 2001, increasing the depth of the inner channel and enlarging the diameter/width of its turning basin (Taiwan Yearbook 2003). A deeper, wider channel meant that the harbor could receive ever-larger ships carrying ever-greater quantities of cargo, raising the harbor's global cache. When dredging was underway, a small fleet of flat-bed utility boats hauled bilges-full of sand from the inner channel—creeping like ants alongside the incoming cargo ships--and dumped them at points just beyond the mouth of the harbor. Especially when the tide was incoming, spear fishermen therefore faced near-zero visibility due to the undersea sand storm. On one perfectly sunny day when dredging was proceeding apace and a storm far off at sea was delivering gratuitously giant waves that washed onto the White Lighthouse platform, our only fallback was to enter the sea inside the harbor channel, from a restricted spot my friends called “Little White Lighthouse,” and swim out toward (big) White Lighthouse. This was before the changing of the harbor patrol had been completed, so our gang of six was able to bribe our way past the fortunately familiar guard by offering him a wooden shrimp fishing lure.⁴⁴ Little Pearl and I plunged first. I set my compass, descended forty feet, loaded my speargun, and began swimming towards the harbor exit. Visibility was less

⁴⁴ Fishermen lost these lures—which can be worth more than a few hundred NTDs--in the rocky underwater topography at White Lighthouse. We collected them while spearfishing and traded them with harbor guards for access to restricted spots.

than a foot, and the muzzle of my speargun vanished in a thick blanket of blackness. After only a few minutes, and long before reaching White Lighthouse, I decided to turn back and abort the dive. With its swift currents and steady boat traffic, the channel was a dangerous place in which to lose your bearings. Indeed, the underwater sand storm was so blinding that Little Pearl lingered only a short time longer than me.

The gang was disappointed with my and Little Pearl's failure, and somewhat skeptical of our bleak assessment of the conditions—perhaps in part because the weather was otherwise so perfect. Professor and Little Sunshine redeemed us, however, when they were similarly stymied by the undersea blackout. For Little Clean, however, each failure incrementally enraged him. He cursed the dredging project and the flat-bed sand boats: "F... your mother. The breakwaters didn't stop us. I'm not going to let this dredging keep us from hunting here. Deeper! You gotta drop off the platform and dive deeper down, way underneath the cargo ships. The sand does not penetrate that far down." Little Clean had been waiting for his turn to dive because he needed to borrow a speargun, having lost his to the sea the weekend before when, as with Silk, a "mad dog wave" lifted him from twenty-feet off-shore and hurled him back into the breakwaters. I lent him my speargun and off he went, with silent determination. We followed his bubbles until they disappeared amidst the surging swells. Golden Boy, whose ceaseless oral commentary tipped the balance of our "practice" from "acting" to "viewing" by making a spectacle of our own experience, speculated on how deep Little Clean would need to descend in order to get below the sand storm: "You gotta go thirty or forty meters, maybe more. Only Little Clean is skillful enough to navigate his way to that depth in zero visibility without getting lost. He's amazing." As Little Clean had already been down for thirty minutes, I had to affirm Golden Boy's praise of Little Clean's skill and determination.

After forty-five minutes, Little Clean resurfaced. We yanked him from the water, watching eagerly for any fish—the sign of triumph—that might be dangling

from the stringer attached to his waist, but there were none. We fired questions at him about depth, visibility, currents, and fish, but he remained silent as he doffed his gear, piece by piece. It took a few minutes before he collected himself, and then he spoke: “Visibility was less than zero. I hugged the wall until I reached the platform. After rounding corner three, I swam off the platform and down into the channel. I still couldn’t see a thing. But I worked my way deeper and deeper through the rocks. At a hundred feet, I hit a plateau. I kicked ahead for a few minutes, but it was still flat. I had never encountered such a flat spot down there, less than half way to the bottom of the channel. No matter how far I seemed to move, the rocks all looked the same and the landscape was still flat. I figured I must be swimming in circles. It was pitch black. The cargo ships were getting louder, like they were right above my head. I checked my compass, but the needle was jumping wildly with the vibrations from the ships. I tried hard to hold a straight course. But still it was flat. I checked my air and needed to be heading back, but had no idea which way to go. For the first time ever at White Lighthouse, I found myself lost and I panicked. I swam for another few minutes entirely clueless as to my whereabouts. I thought I was done for. Luckily, however, the channel pitch reappeared. I followed it. When I finally arrived at the platform, I discovered I was between corners 1 and 2. I had been swimming straight out to sea, not straight down into the channel. If I had swum out any further, I would have never found my way back.”

There was unusual gravity to the dispiritedness that overcame the gang upon hearing Little Clean’s story of underwater defeat. We had had plenty of washed-out diving days at White Lighthouse, to be sure. But typically we were thwarted by Mother Nature, whose challenges we expected, embraced, and found exhilarating. It is true that the forces that had frustrated our diving on that day were hardly unanticipated; dredging—as well as cargo ships and breakwaters—had become a mainstay of diving at White Lighthouse and integral to the allure of hunting there—

how else to explain why my friends insisted on spear fishing there rather than elsewhere? Beyond the encounter, however, what my friends counted on at White Lighthouse was that sea would always succeed in encompassing these man-made efforts to change and control nature, so that, in effect, the marine environment absorbed and embodied the alienated patrimonial value of the “paternal economy” driving the progress of Taiwan’s modern development. In other words, whatever the extent of “outer worldly” transformations wrought by modernity, nature would prevail over them and remain “inwardly” unified, and the sea’s challenges, no matter how formidable, would never render “recognizable” the secular forces that conspired to dominate nature. By thus absorbing the powerfully progressive “essence” of modernity—the alienated patrimonial product of these men’s own expropriated labor value—the sea became endowed with history and memory, with “fullness of meaning” whose wholeness fostered the forgetting of fragmentation, alienation, and discontinuity. On that fateful day, however, intensive dredging and dumping prevailed over nature by transforming the sea into an impenetrably thick turbid soup, making diving, not to mention hunting, impossible. The insurmountable circumstances that blinded us undersea therefore rendered disconcertingly transparent the global forces of modern progress and development. Consequently, what dampened my friends’ spirits was neither Little Clean’s empty fish stringer nor his unsettling story of disorientation at depth; rather, it was the naked manifestation of modern power’s conquest over nature and the acute sense of dispossession experienced by being made cognizant of their own expropriated patrimony in inassimilable and indomitable form.

Nature, Nativism, and the Environmental Movement

Environmental Ethics versus Native Identity

Since the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwan's environmental movement has surged. In 1988 there were less than 25 environmental protests, while by 1991 there were more than 275 (Weller 1999:122). And in the three years between 1988 and 1990 alone, more than NT\$12 billion (US\$500 million) was paid to settle environmental lawsuits (1999:111). The environmental movement has been multiply nuanced in form and substance, merging with the rise of "green" politics, ecotourism, local activism, as well as a burgeoning industry of "nature writing" (*ziran xiezu*) (e.g., Lu Hsin-yi 2002; Weller 1999:111-125). However, beyond the urgent need to redress rampant ecological degradation from rapid industrial development, the movement's underlying force has been the burgeoning of Taiwanese ethnic nationalism, which reflects the desire to rediscover the authenticity of Taiwan, the "real" geophysical place, in order to erase four decades of KMT-inculcated fictions of China, the imagined sacred space.⁴⁵ But this convergence of environmental and native consciousness has presented a certain paradox. If the "natural" enemy of environmental movements tends to be economic expansion,⁴⁶ Taiwanese nativism is not inherently at odds with material progress and development; on the contrary, public opinion in Taiwan generally favors industrial growth (Weller 1999:113). For this reason (among others), Taiwan's environmental movement is anything but a unified force, while its fractured character has made it that much more adaptable to a plurality of interests and meanings.

⁴⁵ Lin Fangmei points out that "all" progressive/democratic developments in Taiwan are pursued under the encompassing rubric of "Taiwanese independence" (*Taidu*) (see also Chun 1996; Lin Fangmei 1999).

⁴⁶ This generalization needs to be qualified for a certain camp of "conservationists" who believe that (industrial) growth/progress and environmental conservation can coexist (see below); however, environmental "activists" generally tend to be preservationists who are stridently antithetical towards economic expansion.

This discontinuity between environmentalism and localism becomes acute with respect to Taiwan's aborigines. With the rise of ethnic nationalism, aborigines have been officially and popularly embraced as embodying the originary essence of the new geopolitical core of the modern nation (see Stainton 1999). Much to the ire of modern environmentalists, however, aborigines continue to hunt fish and game, a customary practice that remains integral to aboriginal social, economic, and cultural life. For the combined reasons of national culture and local custom, my spear fishing friends maintained a certain idealistic identification with aboriginal spear fishing culture. They often spoke of one exceptionally skilled aboriginal spear fisherman on Orchid Island (*Lanyu*) as the founding "primal" ancestor of "modern" spear fishing in Taiwan. Even having only one functional leg, my spear fishing friends would tell me, this aborigine could out-swim and out-hunt any man. During my fieldwork, this origin myth seemed to receive a surge of sanctity from the revitalization of aborigines within national and popular culture; indeed, some of my friends made the pilgrimage to Orchid Island both to spear fish and to meet their apical ancestor, now an old man.

Especially since 1994, when then President Lee Teng-hui called for society to bring out "the special characteristics of aboriginal people as part of the mainstream" (Stainton 1999:42), it has been entirely usual to find ethnographic reportage on aboriginal customs featured in Taiwan's major dailies. A 2003 *China Times* "Local News" piece on the Amis Tribe's (*A'meizu*) spear fishing "male rite[-of-passage]" (*nanren de jidian*) is typical of this genre. To express gratitude toward the ancestors and the sea for their munificence, Amis of Fengbin County in Hualian conduct an annual "sea ceremony" in which male adolescents descend upon the sea and, possessing "ancestors' divine assistance" as well as "spear guns," hunt from dusk till dawn.⁴⁷ With the catch, tribe elders, dressed in colorful ceremonial regalia,

⁴⁷ The date of the rite in 2003 was May 5.

orchestrate an elaborate ritual offering to ancestral and ocean spirits, praying that their people will once again be blessed with the good fortune of reaping a rich harvest of seafood in the year to come. After the ceremony, the young hunters themselves prepare a sumptuous feast with their catch for the male elders. From beginning to end, women and children are strictly forbidden from participating in any aspect of the rite, “making this annual event the single most important day of the year for Amis males” (see also Huang Mingtang 2000; Xu Zhiqian 2003).

Such adulatory accounts of aboriginal customs, especially given their role in localizing a timeless core of the modern Taiwanese nation, pose a predicament for the preservationist politics of the globally mass-mediated environmental movement. National Zhengzhi University Geopolitics Professor, Xu Shirong, addresses precisely this problem in another *China Times* article entitled: “Are Environmental Ethics and Local Identity Contradictory?” (Xu Shirong 2002). On August 23, 2002, more than a thousand aborigines staged a high-profile street demonstration at the Legislative Yuan to protest a state initiative to transform an aboriginal hunting ground into a protected national park (*Magao guojia gongyuan*). At the same time, certain environmental groups organized press conferences to explain to the public why the national park plan should be carried out. Inspired by these events, Xu proceeds to examine the positions of the two reigning environmentalist schools of thought—preservationism (*baocun zhuyi*) and conservationism (*baohu zhuyi*)--and to offer an alternative “localist” perspective that they both overlook.

Preservationism is roughly akin to positions associated with “deep ecology” (*shenceng shengtai*) (see Vogel 1996:6, 8). Nature has its own spiritual and aesthetic “right to life”—it is “sacred” and “beautiful”--and human beings have no right whatsoever to tamper with it. The preservationist impulse, which is sharply anti-urban and anti-development, is the driving force behind the establishment of national parks, such as Yellowstone, as well as environmental protection organizations, such as the

Sierra Club. Conservationism, on the other hand, gauges nature's "progressive" value according to its "usefulness" to mankind, particularly as a font of economically vital natural resources. It views degradation and depletion as problems for "specialists" to resolve using advanced technology and scientific management. Xu cites noted conservationist Gifford Pinchot, who espouses this perspective: "We need to protect forests not because they are beautiful or the natural habitat of living creatures, but rather because they facilitate the development and prosperity of the [human] world [*jia*]" (Xu Shirong 2002). If preservationism objectifies nature as "in-itself" (*ziwo cunzai*), conservationism targets it as an object of scientific management and control; the former, in Xu's view, reflects the bias of the upper-middle class, who need not themselves rely on nature for life necessities, while the latter exalts the views of bourgeois technocrats (Ibid.). Both schools, Xu argues, should be faulted for neglecting people's "subjective desires" (*zhuguan yuanwang*) or "local place-based identity" (*difang rentong*). Xu acknowledges that "place" (*difang*) entails considerations of "space" that are naturally and socially "objective" as well as more "macro" with regard to economics and politics. However, when it comes to policy decisions regarding locales, he insists that nothing should trump in importance matters pertinent to the local people's subjective identity; consequently, aborigines should have the right to decide how they wish to use their land.

These larger conceptual themes become diffuse, but do not disappear, once mapped onto the local grid of Taiwan's environmental movement, which has generally been stratified along two axis, national-local and gender (Weller 1999:111-125). At the national level, the movement has been piloted mainly by male academics, most of whom have American Ph.D.s. The major organizations at this level are the New Environment Foundation, Taiwan Greenpeace, the Taiwan Environmental Protection Union (TEPU), and the Homemakers' Union Environmental Protection Foundation (HUEP), all of which were founded soon after martial law was lifted (1999:112). But

for HUEP, which is an important national women's environmental group, these organizations are male-led and share comparable goals, which TEPU expresses as follows: "uniting people who care about protecting the environment in all regions and fields of work, jointly promoting the environmental protection movement and preserving Taiwan's ecology" (1999:112). Whereas the male-dominated national groups strive to counter human expansion and generate new moral philosophies of living in harmony with nature, the women's organizations, explains anthropologist Robert Weller, are motivated by modern disaffection with family life and root their environmentalism in issues of family, motherhood, and nurturance (1999:112-114). As Weller describes, the HUEP introductory brochure shows a woman pushing the bandaged earth in a wheelchair, with the slogan, "Women take care of the wounded earth" (1999:114). Indeed, HUEP women embrace a broad view of "spiritual environment," the protection of which often means in practice to "defend the health of their children," and towards this end the organization runs summer camps for children and organizes meetings on child-rearing practices (1999:114). HUEP has a broader base than the male-dominated national organizations, and therefore has much in common with the environmentalist impulse behind popular Buddhist religious organizations, like Taipei's Jinghua Social and Cultural Foundation, which focuses on both family and religious issues, but unlike HUEP roots its cause in a Buddhist ecological equilibrium rather than Chinese family values (1999:114-115).

Grass-roots environmental movements, often in the form of spontaneous local protests, adopt Taiwanese cultural forms, with kinship and local religion shaping organization and initiatives (1999:115). For example, protests against environmentally polluting projects have successfully used divination and funerary rituals to affirm supernatural support for campaigns and thereby mobilize popular participation. Whereas women-led grass-roots environmental initiatives share the familial, nurturing orientation of their national counterparts, local protests run by men

diverge more from male-led national organizations by propounding a discourse melding preservation and patriliney, “talk[ing] in generalities about preserving the world for their descendents” (1999:120). The outlook of a new wave of east-coast marine preservationists is exemplary in this regard. Lee Kuan-hsin, an Yilan native, dropped out of college to set up Taiwan’s only crab aquarium upon learning from a Singaporean marine biologist that the coastal area of his hometown is one of the world’s richest sources of marine life, but that many species were facing extinction due to economic development (TaipeiTimesAP 2003). Lee is not unlike many other Taiwanese who have altered their career paths and taken, often through ecotourism, to raising environmental awareness and “to sav[ing] the *nation* from decades of neglect and damage caused by its frenetic pursuit of economic growth” (Ibid., emphasis added). As former coral trader turned coral museum curator Lai Rong-hsin puts it, “After making so much money from exports, we should save what’s left of our natural resources for our children” (2003).

Environmental awareness in Taiwan has generally entailed a movement away from the traditional Chinese contemplative principles of “non-action” (*wu wei*) and “unity of heaven/nature and humans” (*tian ren he yi*), which conceives of humankind as an integral part of nature (see Hou Wenhui 1997). Concomitant to the influence of Western/global environmental trends and the rise of middle-class ecological awareness, Taiwanese environmentalists have eschewed profound natural philosophies, eulogies of nature, and hermetic self-discovery, preferring instead pragmatic eco-knowledge pertinent to the real-life, means-end concerns of a changing society. This “modern” stance toward the environment tends, however, to misrecognize not only the naturalness of humans, which the ancients embraced, but also, echoing Xu’s charge of neglecting “subjective identity” (*zhuguan rentong*), the humanness of nature, or the degree to which nature is a constructed category, mediated by people’s thoughts and activities (see Vogel 1996:69-90). Instead, the desire for deliverance from

contemporary social anxieties and alienations manifests as the urgent need for knowledge and appreciation of the environment as essential to the continuation of human existence, even if expressed perspectively or ideologically in the name of the nation, nativism, the patriline, or the family. Within this idiosyncratic Taiwanese admixture of preservationist and conservationist impulses, the social conditions mediating the construction and apprehension of nature are reified, in such a way so that nature is apprehended, in nearly all discourses, as “in-itself,” as a non-identical object of (scientific) investigation or educational observation (i.e., eco-tourism) that must be protected and preserved.

New Nature Writing

The tensions born of these transformations of attitude towards the environment, and the desire to bridge if not blend traditional/religious and modern approaches to nature, are well illustrated by Taiwan’s increasingly popular “new nature writing” (*xin ziran xiezuo*), and especially by the reflections of one of the genre’s earliest and most prolific proponents, Liu Kexiang. In 1981, Liu began writing creative prose about birds, seeking knowledge and inspiration in the classics of Chinese literature, including the *Book of Odes* as well as Tang and Song Poetry (Liu Kexiang 2002). At that time, other ecology writers also began mining for inspiration traditional Chinese literature, including Laozi and Zhuangzi, and collectively they generated an escapist genre of nature writing evocative of, and for some inspired by, the famous nineteenth-century American pastoralist Henry David Thoreau (2002). But Liu was soon moved by the widely influential 1983 newspaper supplement, “We Only Have One Earth” (*Women zhi you yige diqiu*), in which women ecology writers Han Han and Ma Yigong made a powerful plea for environmental protection by recording “the spectacle of destruction inflicted on plants and animals by the denudation of wilderness and unrestricted hunting everywhere in Taiwan” (Kuo Ch’ing-tu 2000; see also Liu

Kexiang 2002). By the early 1990s, Liu had distanced himself from the pastoralists—“we nature writers know that we can’t imitate traditional Chinese intellectuals...ensconced as they were in their private social circles, immersed in their own private worlds...peaceful quietism is a castle in the air, a disavowal of and escape from reality” (Liu Kexiang 2002). In response to turbulent social changes, Liu no longer limited himself to writing on birds and other animals; instead, like many other new nature writers, he began focusing more on ecological education, localized field studies, ecotourism, and stories exploring the relationship between ecology and human beings (2002). As he explains, “this change reflected a change in consciousness and content, an unambiguous move closer to ‘the real world’” (2002).

A recent fictional short story, *Fang sheng* (Set free), by another prominent ecology writer (*shengtai xiezu*), Hwang Chun-ming, exemplifies this current genre of nature writing that explores the relationship between ecology, human beings, and the “real world” (Huang Chun-ming 2001). The story is set in a poor fishing and agricultural village in Yilan County. The main protagonists are an elderly husband and wife, Awei and Jinzu respectively, whose close-to-the-earth lifestyle and meager subsistence have been rendered painfully precarious by nearby chemical and cement factories, which blanket the fields with toxic grey soot, have “turned the red face of the local temple’s God of War as black as that of the Three Kingdom warrior Zhang Fei,” and polluted the streams and harbor, killing off the fish fry that constituted their main source of income. Most tragic for the couple, having already lost three children, is that their remaining ex-Marine son, Wentong, was imprisoned for three years for assaulting a corrupt official found to be in cahoots with factory owners and forging water samples taken from the polluted river. Awei finds escape through trancelike meditations spontaneously triggered and mediated by nature and the environment, particularly by the sight of an egret. Jinzu is exasperated by Awei’s stubborn reveries, and scolds him harshly while repeatedly uttering “Amida Buddha.”

Awei is engrossed by egrets owing to a painful memory from Wentong's childhood: after an egret he had captured for Wentong to raise had escaped and flown away, Wentong pestered him to recapture it and drove him to grab and yank Wentong's arm with such stiffness that he dislocated Wentong's shoulder. Returning home one day in the pouring rain after visiting Wentong in prison, Awei stumbled upon and captured a weak egret that he assumed had been poisoned by pesticides. Awei nursed the egret back to health in a chicken cage and, much to Jinzu's unrestrained frustration, the bird became his obsession—and increasingly so, it seems, as Wentong's prison-release date drew near. When Wentong failed to return home on his release date, Jinzu and Awei were filled with extreme anxiety and prayed desperately to the eclectic panoply of deity images on their home alter--Guanyin, Mazu, the Earth God, and the Kitchen God. After a policeman showed up and informed them that Wentong had been released from prison the day before they had expected, Jinzu and Awei became distraught at their son's disappearance, and Awei entered a silent state of vacancy. As if possessed, Awei proceeded to lift the lid on the egret's cage, but the egret did not move until Awei squatted down, at which time the bird walked into his arms. Awei stood up slowly, walked out the door, and—evoking the Buddhist practice of “setting free” living creatures that is the title of the story--gently released the bird into the air and watched it soar away. As the story's narrator puts it, “Now his memory leaped back into his mind, clearing his head completely” (2001:49).

What Awei recalled with pleasing clarity was the incident with the egret from Wentong's childhood, and precisely at this moment of remembrance, Wentong slipped through the gate, calling out to his father. Awei's first words to his son are, “I caught an egret.” Wentong replies that he had been watching all along from under a nearby banyan tree and had seen his father set the bird free. The story closes with Jinzu tearfully watching the conversation between father and son and silently muttering a

prayerful “*Namu Amida Buddha*.” A central theme of the story is that modern anxieties (e.g., capitalist development, environmental degradation, official corruption) are fundamentally alienating, repressing recollection of personal and social history. The moral of the story merges modernist criticism and Buddhist practice: “liberation” hinges on the restoration of memory, and the key to connecting present and past resides in a Buddhist approach towards our ineluctable relationship to the environment; in other words, respecting nature and allowing living creatures (*zhongsheng*) to live free is a precondition for our own freedom. It is as if the caged egret at once symbolized the “iron cage” in which Awei, Jinzu, and Wentong had become entrapped *and* contained the key to their freedom. In “setting free” the egret, Awei went far towards emancipating himself and his family, a liberation signified by Wentong’s returning home from hiding and by Jinzu’s cathartic tears.

My spearfishing friends are keenly aware of the medley of growing forces from the environmental movement, including, as we will see, the imbrication of environmentalist impulses and local Buddhist practices. Consequently, they are also reflexively aware of how spearfishing brashly defies an environmental consciousness, and the meaning and significance of their own reconstructed ideas of nature can only be understood in the light of these larger competing forces. Towards the very end of my fieldwork, I asked one friend, Spark Plug, if I could post on my personal web site a picture of him in full spearfishing regalia holding high an amberjack that he had just bagged. His immediate response was proud approval, but after reflecting for a moment he balked, “Paul, perhaps you’d better not post that photograph on your web site, or else foreigners might think Taiwanese have no environmental consciousness [*huanbao yishi*].”

The global/Western referent of environmental consciousness goes far to explain why my “participation” in spear fishing was imperative for conducting fieldwork: only if I became “accomplice” to this “crime against nature” would these

quiet perpetrators trust me and make me privy to their secrets. At the same time, however, these spear fishermen disavowed environmental awareness each time they went spear fishing. Indeed, based on my participant-observation, they ritually and habitually “enacted” disavowal by displaying disregard or even disdain for nature. Immediately after returning to shore from a dive, for example, the first order of business is to race to the cooler and quaff a bottle of mineral water, as one becomes incredibly parched from breathing dry air in salt water for an hour. After a dive one day, Hammerhead and I simultaneously slugged our mineral water, him with his back to me. After finishing off his water, Hammerhead furiously flung the plastic bottle with demonstrative force into the drainage ditch in exactly the same motion as he turned around and faced me, becoming instantly reflexive about what he had done as soon as he realized that I had been watching him. Smacking his lips and baring his teeth, and still panting from the exertion of the dive, Hammerhead affirmed his “crime against nature” by uttering a line rendered emphatically succinct by being colloquially ungrammatical: “Taiwanese don’t [do] environmental protection!” (*Taiwanren bu huanbao!*).

Buddhism and Setting Free

No better evidence of this contemptuous attitude towards nature was my spearfishing friends’ response to the Buddhist practice of “setting free” (*fang sheng*). Before witnessing this ritual, I had listened to my friends narrate many times their subversive exploits during setting free ceremonies held on their White Lighthouse turf. As they told it, a business man would buy a truck load of fish and/or crustaceans indigenous to the local environment—amberjack, grouper, parrot fish, octopus, crab, lobster—and sponsor a Buddhist group to assemble at the shore and set the fish free on behalf of his own good fortune and that of his company. The spear fishermen who might happen to be at White Lighthouse when the fish truck and trailing caravan of

Buddhist-filled cars arrived would instantly phone buddies and announce, “setting free,” initiating a chain of communication about the event. Those spear fishermen who could, would head right out to White Lighthouse. Together, the spear fishermen would dive beneath where the Buddhists were setting free and capture the “living creatures,” cutting short their freedom. Perhaps the most oft-repeated story was of a time when an entire truck-load of crabs was set free and the spear fishing gang filled two giant coolers recapturing them. These crabs became the main entrée of memorable seafood banquets over the next few days.

The business men who might choose to sponsor a setting free ceremony need not be “Buddhist” in any strict sense. Certain Buddhist beliefs have become diffused in Taiwanese culture, and when any Taiwanese desires to finagle fate or fortune, he or she might choose setting free, among a rich range of other ritual possibilities (see Chapter 6). Buddhism maintains that the essence of Buddha (*foxing*) inheres equally in all living creatures (*zhongsheng*), making all life precious and all killing sinful. Throughout life, we knowingly or inadvertently kill countless living creatures, accumulating a celestial debt (*shazhai*) and building enmity (*yuanchou*) towards living creatures. The only way to pay back that debt and redeem oneself is through setting free, a highly virtuous and meritorious act. Setting free is an “action-oriented practice” (*jiji shijian*) that yields immediate results—the rescuing of life in imminent danger of being destroyed—and therefore constitutes a potent means for achieving “recognition” (*juewu*) of Buddha’s essence in living creatures, which is the most effective route to enlightenment. To be sure, setting free has an explicitly cause-effect, Karmic (*yin-guo*) orientation, and might be undertaken to change one’s fate, to cure an illness, to prolong life, or to save [future] relatives (*jiu qin*) alive now as “living creatures” later to be reincarnated as human beings (see Tang Jiyou 2004).

One day while out at White Lighthouse spear fishing with Hammerhead, Beaver Tail, and Wolf, a short pickup truck with a tall payload of two blue plastic

water tanks drove by us, proceeding past harbor security and entering the harbor without a hitch. I looked to Hammerhead but before I could ask what was going on he shouted, “*fang sheng!*” (set free!). Trailing close behind the truck was a caravan of about a dozen packed cars that one-by-one pulled into the parking lot just outside the harbor entrance. I was eager to observe the rite, and so told my friends that I was going into the harbor on foot. Beaver Tail was already on the phone apprising a buddy of the development. Hammerhead told me to report back right away if they were setting free big fish. I told the security guard that I wished to observe the setting free ceremony and he permitted me to enter, something he would not have done were I donning scuba gear and clutching my speargun. By the time I arrived, no fewer than thirty people were clustered around the truck. Most were middle-aged women, but there were also some younger and older ones. There were also a few men, a couple of whom were with the Buddhist group while the rest belonged to the truck company. Two of the latter had mounted the water tanks and were scooping fish into plastic crates and handing off the crates to members of the group, who then approached the edge of the dock and heaved the fish into the water. Octopi clung to the crates, so they were gingerly pulled out by hand and placed on the pier a foot or so from the edge and somehow instinctively crept slowly toward the water, taking upon themselves the final steps of their freedom. Most members of the group were wearing an identifying white T-shirt bearing the scripted Chinese characters for the Buddhist prayer chant “A mi tuo fo” on the upper left chest. All were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

I was invited to toss a couple of crates of fish into the water, and after doing so struck up a conversation with two women of the group. They presented me with a business card, which stated the name of their organization, “Buddhist Educational Foundation,” its Taipei address, and its status as formally registered with the ROC Ministry of Education. The women I spoke with explained that they gathered to “set free” once a month at different spots along the north shore. Affected by the conviction

manifest in the members' enthusiastic performance of the rite, I fumbled for words when one woman asked me what I was doing at the shore, finally proffering a throw away line about taking in the scenery. But I became even more uneasy when Hammerhead and Wolf showed up in their wetsuits to scope out the situation. Hammerhead's lips were swollen red from the pasty betel nuts packed in his cheeks and he had a look of fire in eyes as he copped a peak at the fish inside the crates as they were being heaved, one after another. When I caught his eye he signaled a question about fish size by conspicuously motioning with his hands, and I signaled back for him to stop. After inspecting for a while longer, Hammerhead called for a huddle to discuss the situation. Wolf concluded that there were some nice amberjack being dumped and that he was going to gear up and to move right in for the kill. Hammerhead agreed, but said he would first check out his favorite spot and then work his way around for the easy catch if he had no luck. Neither of them paid any attention to the Buddhists, and the Buddhists somehow knew not to pay any mind to them.

My spear fishing friends' disregard for "setting free" becomes comprehensible only if we recall that, at White Lighthouse, the sea is the receptacle of their expropriated patrimony—the estranged form of modern political-economic power. The Buddhist and environmentalist insistence on objectifying "nature" as "in-itself"--as a non-identical object to be protected and preserved--threatens to arrest this patrimonial value in an alienated form categorically "unknowable" and "unassimilable." From the perspective of these spear fishermen, then, the Buddhist attitude towards "living creatures" in particular, and the environmental movement's objectification of nature in general, amounts to a challenge to their effort to repossess their patrimony and thereby reproduce themselves. Through spearfishing, as we will see, these men strive to reappropriate their expropriated patrimony, but not from "nature" as an autonomous existence or as the harbinger of "essential" needs.

Evocative of Giambattista Vico's famous dictum that countered the jus naturalists of his own day--man can "know" only that which he created--as well as his prescient formulation of misrecognition that Marx would later recast as false consciousness (and also Arendt 1958:228; White 1978:197-199), spear fishermen go to collective ritual lengths to "create" the sea, through a totemic mode of metaphor, as a recognizable natural force, so that through spear fishing they repossess, metonymically, the value of their expropriated patrimony by corporeally assimilating, and ultimately recapturing, the misrecognized form of their own productive power (see Sangren 1991).⁴⁸ We must now return to the ritual protocols of spear fishing to comprehend the exact contours of spear fishermen's reconstructions of nature and how they maneuver to assimilate and repossess their expropriated patrimony.

⁴⁸ Three different editions of Vico's *New Science* were published between 1725 and 1744 (Vico 1948 [1744]). Marx is well known to have read and been influenced by Vico; moreover, many scholars have written about the ways in which Vico "anticipated the social theories of thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Freud, and Levi-Strauss" (White 1978:197).

Chapter 2

Patrimonial Value and the Social Poetics of Spear Fishing--Part II

Magical Spears, Dangerous Ghosts, and Taiwanese Fortuna

Given that my spearfishing friends were devoted divers, it is striking that none of them were “gear heads,” a personality type common to the scuba world owing to the endless technological innovations made to the sophisticated equipment required to breathe safely underwater and to facilitate human adaptation to diverse aquatic environments. The word itself, SCUBA, is an acronym whose cumbersome extended form was no doubt invented by a “techie”: Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus. Contrary to having a gear orientation, however, my spearfishing friends took pains not to fetishize scuba equipment (with the exception of the speargun, as we will see below) but rather to treat it as merely incidental. In fact, they often boasted of the battered and bruised condition of their gear, which was occasionally obsolete and sometimes damaged and repaired.⁴⁹ One day, while rinsing our gear after an outing, the severe state of disrepair of Shark’s BCD (another acronym—Buoyancy Compensating Device—or vest) caught my eye and I said to him, “Shark, I think it’s time for you to upgrade and buy a new BCD. This thing is threadbare and downright dangerous.” He responded proudly by explaining that this was his first and only BCD and that it had served him well for fifteen years of diving and that he had already replaced the bladder on it once. This cultivated Luddite-like posture toward scuba equipment was, I believe, a quiet protest of the modern technological developments that had rendered most of these men obsolete, and signaled an important spatiotemporal contrast between their spearfishing lifeworld, an achieved “reality” of

⁴⁹ Bernard found a similar attitude towards obsolete equipment among Kalymnian sponge divers (Bernard 1967:103).

their own making, and the urgencies of the commercial quotidian, an alienated reality into which they were born.

The symbolic wedge that shabby scuba gear drove between these two worlds was most pronounced with regard to these spear fishermen's treatment of their spearguns. Most of these men owned store-purchased guns, made ready to use according to factory specifications typically in Italy or France (a few of their guns were made in Taiwan), and they always purchased the most basic model, devoid of "bells and whistles." Upon acquiring a new gun, however, these men as a matter of course incorporated important personal modifications before using it, most basically by installing thicker rubber bands, inserting a surgical-tubing shockcord, engraving a lower notch in the steel spear (for more power), among others. Four Legs went furthest by crafting from scratch his own speargun, which entailed carving a barrel from wood, jerry-building a trigger mechanism, and grinding a spear from a steel rod. More significantly, however, these modifications were made in the name of producing a more "primitive" (*yuanshi*) speargun. Indeed, my spear fishing friends' often-expressed guiding principle for modifying a speargun was, "the more primitive the better." Although these guns were global commodities, circulating instantiations of the modern merger of technological innovation and mechanical reproduction, my friends applied their own labor power to them in order to localize them into their spearfishing lifeworld, and this meaningful universe was marked by its temporal remove from the contemporary capitalist mode of production.

These spear fishermen also localized and personalized their spearguns by spending a good deal of time handling, preening, and doting on them. They would assemble at the dive shop for conversation and tea regularly, many of them daily, and it was not unusual for one or more to pick up his speargun and fondle it, now checking the sights by aiming, now sharpening the tip with a file, now buffing the barrel with his palm. Through meticulous fussing, these men seemed to be passing perforce

something of themselves into their spearguns. They might also flesh out this sensuosity through storytelling, the proffering of permanence to fleeting feats by recounting among an audience of peers highlights of how their spearguns had performed for them recently at depth (see Arendt 1958:50). What is most noteworthy about these narratives was the way in which in the telling these men ascribed a considerable degree of agency to the speargun itself. It was the speargun that was “accurate,” “smooth,” and “responsive.” Moreover, the typical dénouement of a narrative was a bull’s eye—even though stories of missed opportunities could be engagingly told—and each such recounting was ritually brought to a close *and* sanctified by uttering, “magical spear” (*shenpen*). For some, *shenpen* was the name by which they habitually referred to their speargun—“Where’s my ‘magical spear’?” In other words, these men not only acted upon their spearguns in a way that radically localized them and incorporated them meaningfully into to their spear fishing lifeworld, constituting a critique of the guns’ “unknowable” origin in the global commodity loop. At the same time, they also *disavowed* their spearguns as reconditioned products of their own labor power and personifications of their “personal touch” by ascribing to them, in discourse and in deed, a “magical” or “sacred” agency, the efficacy of which was collectively “immortalized” through “peer recognition” (Brown 1988:63).

The sacred agency ascribed to magical spears is also shot through with official power, which through state law and a rigorous registration regime is inscribed—figuratively and literally, with a registration number--into each and every (legal) speargun. Spearguns (*yuqiang*), as I fatefully learned (more below), are expressly controlled by Article 9 of the “Guns, Ammunitions, and Knives” criminal code (*Qiangpao danyao daoxie guan zhi tiaoli*), and must be registered with official authorities and with the local police (see Tao Baichuan 1998). Registration requires three guarantors, each of whom must have a properly registered speargun and a clean

police record. This requirement mandates that each spear fishermen become a member of a community of spear fishermen and that they vouch and take responsibility for each other's conduct.

The registration process is also time intensive. Applicants must release their spearguns first to the authorities and then to the police, for a total of no less than two months. When the gun is finally returned to its owner, it is permanently branded with an official registration number and permeated with a certain aura of official power from its time in state possession. Consequently, the process of personalizing spearguns also entails the sublimation of state power into "magical spears," a local process of reification that accomplishes the "extraordinary personalization of state power" and "renders invisible the artifice of its production" (Coronil 1997:3). In its very own small way, therefore, the efficacy of "magical spears" at once instantiates and legitimates the mystified power of the "magical state."

The simultaneous localization and reification of spearguns also imitates and indexes a homologous process that these men performed on "nature" and connects, both metonymically and synecdochically, the magical efficacy of spearguns to the (estranged) powers of the sea. Through a range of ritual activities, these spear fishermen negated or denied the documented rhythms of the "natural" or "unreal" marine world of tides, sea level, wind waves, swell, water temperature, and currents—"unachieved" attributes of "nature" taken as "in-itself." Much to my anxiety, my spear fishing friends rarely looked at available charts or newspapers for marine conditions when planning a dive, and if sea conditions happened to be brought to their attention—for example by another friend hanging out in the shop while the spear fishermen were gathering their gear—they would ignore or even superciliously dismiss them. I sensed it was a matter of utmost importance to these spear fishermen that the sea appear and be apprehended as capricious, contingent, intangible, and indeed dangerous, unless or until prevailed upon. These men's demeanor toward the

sea bore a striking resemblance to Niccolo Machiavelli's classic characterization of Fortuna—the fickle “female” force that is “mysterious, seductive, vengeful, cunning, associated with the...unpredictable ways of Nature” (Brown 1988:89). This likeness was reinforced by the way in which these spear fishermen apprehended the sea, as I detailed in Part I, as encompassing and embodying key elements—political, military, economic--of the modern patriarchal universe from which they had been dispossessed and which they otherwise could not control, and therefore as “the very thing [they are] acting against, in an effort to master, control, or escape” (1988:89).

By shunning a formal marine forecast, for example, my friends denied that remote “secular” powers could predict local White Lighthouse sea conditions. This collective renunciation was an enabling precondition for their proximally efficacious “visual reading.” Less than a mile from White Lighthouse, upon reaching the apex of the short bridge linking Keelung and Peace Island, all heads would cast a quick ritual glance towards a tall bluff that came into view only momentarily.⁵⁰ From a glimpse at the bluff, we could observe the size and intensity of the waves smashing into the outer bank of Peace Island—this surf was my friends' visual litmus test for gauging the complete range of conditions extant at White Lighthouse, both on the surface and at depth. Each time we approached this bridge I became seized by a state of suspense—waiting for, or sometimes prompting, someone to take the initiative and express what everyone knew and therefore might otherwise go without saying. I was always anxious at this moment because this was not a forecast capitalized upon to produce some desired effect, to determine in advance a “sensible” course of action, like not to dive, for once we passed over the Peace Island bridge there was no turning back--the conditions gleaned at the bluff merely indicated the actual conditions we would momentarily face at White Lighthouse. Rather, my friends interpreted this “point of

⁵⁰ We accessed White Lighthouse, the outer-most entrance to Keelung Harbor, from Peace Island.

no return” knowledge metaleptically, as the fatefully contingent and mysterious “cause” they came to White Lighthouse to encounter—the fickle forces of Fortuna. And the comprehensive knowledge gleaned at the bluff rendered the act of crossing the bridge and proceeding ahead to White Lighthouse a deliberate *choice* made directly in bold defiance of whatever contingency Fortuna had presented them on that day.

Of significance to affirming this collectively contrived *causa mysterium* was the fact that the surf conditions revealed at the “point of no return” often ran counter to what ambient weather conditions would predict. A perfectly calm sunny morning was no guarantee that we would not discover sizable waves pounding the bluff. Conversely, a stormy gray afternoon might yield an unusually placid surf. From this single snapshot, these spear fishermen also uncannily discerned the tide, the swell, the current, and, most importantly, the likelihood of amberjack activity. Moreover, they insisted that on any given day the conditions at the bluff were to no degree indicative of those to be found at other dive spots along the north shore. What made White Lighthouse a unique and wholly circumscribed marine environment was the men’s conscientious preservation of prior unpredictability, which at once enabled and emphasized the mysterious openness of their visual reading. And if sea conditions revealed at the bluff were sharply incongruous with the ambient weather, one of these men might recite the classical Chinese idiom they reserved for such culturally intimate times and that heightened the suspense of passing the “point of no return”: “fire and water have no mercy” (*shui huo wu qing*). In this context, the two ideographs forming “no mercy” (*wu qing*) also carried the extended meanings of “ruthless,” “unfeeling,” and “lacking reason,”⁵¹ underscoring how these spear fishermen constructed the estranged power of the sea as akin to Machiavelli’s Fortuna—the fickle female force

⁵¹ See (Liang Shiqiu 1994).

that represents the dangerous, uncontrollable, nonsocial mirror image of their male friendship lifeworld.

For Taiwanese spear fishermen, Fortuna had a resolutely local essence, which they made most manifest during ghost month (*guiyue*). Each year, on the first day of the seventh month of the traditional Chinese lunar calendar (*nongli qiyue yiri*, which typically begins in late August), the gates of hell are opened, as they have been on this day since ancient times, and ghosts enjoy temporary release from the underworld. For the entire month, hungry ghosts, which are the uncared for souls of the “improperly dead,” wander about aimlessly searching for provisions and wreaking havoc unless amply appeased (see Weller 1985; Wolf 1978). At least once a week throughout ghost month, people make generous ritual offerings of (cooked) food and paper money to these lonely ghosts, in addition to burning (always odd numbers of) joss sticks on their behalf (Lin Jiazhen 2003). However, ritual festivities peak throughout the island on the fifteenth of the month, which is the day of Universal Salvation (*zhongyuan pudu*). In Keelung, especially, Universal Salvation festivities become famously carnivalesque and attract huge throngs of participant-observers, not only from Taipei but also from throughout the island (see Lin Qingchuan 2000a).

In Taiwan, according to a *Liberation Times* pole, a sizable majority of Taiwanese select calendrically auspicious days (*xuan rizi*) on which to undertake important tasks; for example, 87.7% select an auspicious day for a funeral, 84.5% for marriage, 81.3% for opening a business, and 79.8% for moving (Cai Zongxi 2000). During ghost month, however, most Taiwanese fastidiously go out of their way to “pursue good fortune and shun the course of calamity” (*qu ji bi xiong*), as it goes in one idiom often heard during the month, which means most imperatively to avoid any and all important activities, for the entire month is deemed dangerously inauspicious (Chen Xiulan and Zeng Jianhua 1999). Automobile dealers, to name but one prominent example, are forced to offer huge discounts during ghost month in order to

tempt people with cash savings into purchasing a car, which is typically taken to be taboo as the high cost categorizes the event as “important.” (Chen Xiulan and Zeng Jianhua 1999; Gao Jiahe 2000). Some banquet halls, among other businesses, opt to shut down every year during ghost month, using this time when people avoid celebrations of every sort to make repairs and take a vacation (Chen Xiulan and Zeng Jianhua 1999).

As my friends informed me during a conversation with them about ghost month, people take pains to avoid certain “places” considered to be particularly dangerous: hotels, because they are often built on grave sites and people commit suicide there, so one room is always kept empty for wandering ghosts; hospitals, because people die there and a morgue is on the premises; dangerous roads, such as mountainous ones where falling rocks are a threat; and especially the ocean, where people drown. They also spoke of Zhong Kui, the “deified ghost” who destroys “bad” ghosts, and told me about their spear fishing friend, Little Black, who lives on Green Island (Lü Dao) and who has a giant tattoo of Zhong Kui on his chest. When I took a trip to Green Island together with my friends, I had the opportunity to meet and dive with Little Black, and to spearfish with the sense of safety afforded by knowing that his colorful skin image of Zhong Kui was somewhere nearby to me keeping ghosts at bay.

Ghost month is merely an intensification of the Taiwanese quotidian cognizance of ghosts, which is affirmed in myriad ways throughout the year. During my first December in the field, I received an urgent phone call from my diving friends, who beckoned me to the shop to join them in a search-and-recovery dive for a dead body off the north shore. The day before, as I would learn, the husband and brother-in-law of Little Clean’s wife’s colleague had been swept off a rock and out to sea by a “mad dog wave” while fishing at Bitoujiao--both men were in their early forties. The brother-in-law’s body was recovered many miles down the coast in Yilan, where the

currents had swept it, but the husband's body was still missing. Little Clean's wife therefore volunteered him and his scuba buddies to perform a search-and-recovery dive to see if the body might have become trapped in one of the cavernous crevices characteristic of the undersea landscape in that area.

A Zhang, Little Clean, Little Big, Outback, and I packed our gear and raced to the shore. Once we reached Bitoujiao, we had to hike forty-five minutes across a dramatic rocky terrain that resembled sci-fi depictions of the moon, an effect exacerbated by a threateningly gray sky, before finally reaching our destination. We found the families of the victims cold, quivering, and hunkered down under a rocky ledge a safe distance from the loudly pounding surf, while a fire burned eerily in a spirit-money worship vessel set out alone closer to the water. The wife and two young daughters of the missing man came forward to greet us—they appeared completely exhausted and had heavy dark bags under their eyes. They were of course devastated by this down-turn of fate, but were most immediately concerned to resolve this tricky liminal period faced by the soul of their missing loved one, for without being able to perform proper funerary rites over the body, the soul risks entering the underworld and becoming a wandering ghost—explaining why our search-and-recovery dive was so important to the families. But it was nearly dark and conditions were too treacherous for us to attempt the dive that evening, so we planned to procure a boat for the next day to take us out beyond the rough and rocky surf, as long as the weather held up.

The next morning, the weather was fine, so Little Big, Outback, and I went spear fishing at White Lighthouse, where we filled a small cooler with amberjack and spotted grouper. After the dive, we darted down the coast to meet the others at Bitoujiao. The small fishing boat was over-extended with a captain and his skipper, five divers, our tanks and gear, a centrally installed worship vessel that was already burning, and scattered wads of paper spirit money. A Zhang directed the captain to stop around 150 yards off shore, from where we could see the family members of the

victims still mourning and their worship vessel still burning. The five divers each took hold of a section along a 120 foot rope—I was second in from one end. We jumped into the cold choppy water and descended seventy feet to the bottom, where we took our positions along the fully extended rope. Visibility was no more than 10 feet, which was quite decent, but not clear enough to see the diver on either side of me—I could only feel his presence on the rope. Our job was to move slowly forward in unison, searching under rocks and in crags for the body while preventing the rope from becoming snagged in those same spots.

Before boarding the boat, A-Zhang explained to me that I should call out quietly the victim's name while swimming along under water. He and the others insisted that this would increase the likelihood of the missing body turning up. He also instructed me as to how to address the missing corpse, if I should happen to find it: "If you discover the body, be careful not to gawk at or make eye contact with it. Moreover, you should neither think to yourself nor utter, 'how pitiful'; instead, you should say, 'come with me, I'll take you back home'."⁵² At depth, prompted by my own introspective exploration for the "meaning" of our open-water search for this corpse, these straight-forward instructions saturated my mind, removing any sense of morbidity from the collective undertaking and imbuing the missing body, wherever it might have been, with an animated spiritual existence. The collectively animated spirit of the missing corpse seemed to extend a compelling surreal "life force" to the undersea world in general, an ascription abetted by a number of factors: the remarkable ocean-bottom landscape of lunar-like rock and lava formations; the impressive abundance of aquatic life, most memorably a curious and colorful majestic bat fish that accompanied us from start to finish; the ashes and partially scorched fragments of spirit money that gently sprinkled down upon us like falling snowflakes

⁵² For a discussion of the kinship marginality of ghosts as "pitiful," see (Weller 1985).

from the vessel-toting boat pattering along above us; and the intense conviction of the victims' on-looking family members, whose persistent prayers were almost perceptible and endowed our search with a powerful sense of meaning and purpose.

We failed to discover the missing body, which turned up two days later also some distance down the coast in Yilan. Notwithstanding, the victims' family members appreciated our effort and presented each one of us with a fragrant "red [money] envelope" (*hongbao*) stuffed with an NT\$1000 note (US\$32). We accepted the envelopes and returned the money, requesting that it go to the boat captain and his skipper, who were not getting paid for taking us out. Just as after a successful hunt at White Lighthouse, we were all visibly charged following this precariously unambiguous encounter with Fortuna—with our sense of achievement attributable to the fact that everything went smoothly and that we all emerged safely--and perhaps particularly so given the more manifest mediation of ghostly forces triggered by the dead body lost at sea. After the search and recovery dive, my friends moved to incorporate this unique experience into their spear fishing protocol by calling for a seafood banquet that night at Po Ka, their favorite restaurant, and the cooler full of fresh fish that we had bagged that morning ensured a smooth ritual assimilation and familiar gustatory internalization.

If the sea is the most meddlesome habitat of ghosts, the opening of hell's gates in August happens also roughly to coincide with the onset of amberjack season, making ghost month the time during which you can hunt for these migratory (*huiliuxing de*) fish before the nasty northeasterly winter winds (*dong bei ji feng*) begin to bear down on the north coast. One late August day, Spark Plug, Silk, Little Big, Sunshine, Little Clean, and I planned to meet at the dive shop at 1:00 p.m. and then head off for an afternoon dive at White Lighthouse, in the usual fashion. Oddly, however, Little Clean never showed up, committing a friendship indiscretion referred to colloquially as "letting loose the pigeons" of those you stood up (*fang [shei de] gezi*,

see chapter 4). This was the first day of the seventh lunar month, but at the time I never made a connection between ghost month and Little Clean's no-show. The very next day, Little Clean pulled a repeat disappearing act, even though Silk and Sunshine had each confirmed with him by phone within an hour of our rendezvous time. And only a couple of days later, on another dive day, I rang Little Clean on his mobile from the dive shop fifteen minutes before one o'clock and he said he was on his way—but again, he vanished.

I was utterly perplexed by Little Clean's delinquencies, and somehow even more so by the merely mild, almost mechanical indignation registered by my friends, who somehow seemed not so surprised. I sensed that this was one of those awkward fieldwork moments where only the ethnographer was clueless, so I pestered my friends persistently for an explanation, but they were mainly silent. Eventually, in a half-joking tone, Spark Plug reminded me that the gates of hell had just opened (*gui men kai le*)—but no one laughed at what I initially took to be a joke. This prompted me to follow up by asking, "You're not suggesting seriously that Little Clean is afraid of ghosts, are you?" I glanced at Silk, and he raised his eyebrows repeatedly, indicating that I had stumbled into the territory of the truth, but I could extract no more information than this from my friends.

A few days after his no-shows, Little Clean appeared at the dive shop, ready for a ribbing for "letting loose our pigeons," and I confronted him directly about ghosts and ghost month. He would not admit being spooked by wandering ghosts; rather, he insisted that his wife desperately implored him not to dive, and that she applied heavy pressure by making him promise their two-year-old daughter that there would be "no diving" during ghost month. I asked him if his wife had made this demand of him every year, effectively depriving him of hunting during the prime of amberjack season. He explained that this was the first time and that the reason was because she feared his fate was running dangerously low, as he had lately lost a large

lump of money in the stock market and was in debt to a number of people, and those with bad fate face the highest risk of calamity during ghost month. Given that the sea was the archetype of “structurally anomalous” environments, making it the most “natural” home to vengeful ghosts, Little Clean’s wife—if not Little Clean himself—felt that he would be tempting fate and courting disaster by diving. I eventually learned that my friends were aware of Little Clean’s stock market tumble—indeed, he was in debt to some of them--and they therefore knew full well that his fate was wobbly and that he might be unfit to match wits with Fortuna, especially during this most volatile period when she flaunted her ghostly guise. This explains why the gang readily forgave Little Clean for standing them up—though they did not spare him obligatory remonstrations—and why no one pressed him hard to take up his speargun and resume doing battle with the sea (see Chapter 3 for more on forgiveness).

Inauspicious contingencies during ghost month also go far to fuel the regeneration of my friends’ collective cognizance of the sea’s estranged ghostly *yin* powers. In August 2000, the spear fishing gang was beset by an ill-fated series of ominous events. Only a couple of days after hell’s gates were opened, I was arrested at White Lighthouse for possessing an unlicensed speargun. At depth, I made the bad decision to swim through a fierce current rather than circumvent it by heading deeper down into the channel, causing me to deplete my air supply quickly and to surface well before the others. On shore, I was attending to my gear when a man in street clothes approached and struck up a conversation with me. After ten minutes or so of harmless chitchat, he asked me if I had a license for my speargun and flashed me a police badge. I underwent three hours of processing at the local precinct (*paichusuo*) and another three hours at the crime division (*xingshiju*), with my friends accompanying me the entire time. I had known that, unlike in the US, spearguns needed to be licensed in Taiwan, but because the process is Byzantine and could take several months during which your speargun remained in police custody, and because I

was unsure if a foreigner could even complete the process, I had decided to take the risk and forego the formality. I had also assumed that if caught I would, at most, have my speargun confiscated and be slapped with a fine. What I did not know at the time was that spearguns were controlled by the stringent legal code implemented during the martial law period that treats them just like conventional weapons, making their unlicensed possession a felony crime. Despite my friends' best efforts, they could not convince the arresting officer to let me go—he was intent on booking me, a flouting of the fraternal ideal of “human sentiment” or “compassion” (*renqingwei*) that my friends attributed to the “modern” professional pressure to meet a monthly arrest quota (*yueji*). In short, I was convicted as charged, but sentenced only to probation and levied a nominal fine (NT\$1200, or US\$38) (Lin Qingchuan 2000).⁵³ More consequentially, however, my speargun was confiscated and my lawyer urged me to make myself scarce at White Lighthouse for the time being.⁵⁴

It was only a few days after my misfortune at White Lighthouse that Silk met up with the fateful mad dog wave that left him trapped in the breakwaters for forty-five minutes, bruising his body and rupturing his metaphorical spleen. And only a couple of days after that, Little Clean was similarly pounded by one of these mysterious mini-Tsunamis, dispossessing him permanently of his speargun, but only after the sharp tip punctured his thigh, leaving him with a half-inch deep wound. After these three consecutive calamities in the first ten days of ghost month, talk among these spear fishermen of an unusual preponderance of angry ghosts at White Lighthouse was in the air. Knowing that my friends were forever vigilant to keep a safe distance from perceived harbingers of bad luck—people referred to in Taiwan as

⁵³ According to my friends, a couple of who, I subsequently discovered, had been similarly arrested in the past, the fine levied for possession of an unlicensed speargun typically exceeds NT\$30000 (US\$938).

⁵⁴ As the police themselves told me, I could continue to spearfish, but only by borrowing a licensed gun and only if the person to whom the gun was licensed is present. This is thereafter precisely what I would do.

“inauspicious ghosts” (*daomei gui*, more below)--I worried that my friends might have concocted some idea of my having a bad celestial account balance and therefore blamed me for triggering this string of seaside ghost-month disasters, as it all began with my arrest. For this reason, on top of the urging of my lawyer, I decided to stay away from White Lighthouse for the remainder of ghost month. But my friends made alternative plans intended to beat Fortuna at her own game.

With ghost month’s climactic festival day of the Universal Salvation just around the corner, my spear fishing friends planned to stage a ghost propitiation ceremony on the concrete platform at White Lighthouse. They told me they did this every year on the Universal Salvation, but typically perfunctorily. This year, however, they were intent on making a respectably sizable offering to what they deemed to be an unusual preponderance of littorally inclined “good brothers” (*hao xiongdi*), and they had now taken to using this common euphemism for ghosts so as to avoid the inauspicious effect of audibly uttering “ghosts” (*gui*), which is insulting (see Weller 1985:48). They talked of bringing out to White Lighthouse a folding table on which to place the food offerings as well as a proper worship vessel for burning paper spirit money. After the ceremony, they would don their dive gear and go hunting.

The significance of this conscientiously planned Universal Salvation ceremony must be understood within the wider historical and political context that ineluctably converges on the performance of this collective ritual act of local power production. In a discussion of the modifications that the Universal Salvation has undergone in Taiwan since the late nineteenth-century—in short, from pre-war “violent” performances that emphasized political marginality and the bandit metaphor to post-war “jostling” ones that stress sympathy for “pitiful” ghosts⁵⁵--Weller underscores

⁵⁵ Perhaps it is the contemporary regard for ghosts as “pitiful” that explains why, in Taipei if not also elsewhere, we find that Universal Salvation festivities might include offering the “good brothers” a “poll dance” (*gang guan wu*) performed by scantily clad “hot babes” (*la mei*) (Chen Shiyan 2002).

how the state has “never been comfortable” with this popular ritual and has pursued myriad means, albeit with little success, to repress or reinscribe it (Weller 1985). The contemporary contours of ideological censorship of the Universal Salvation have remained largely unchanged in the post-war period, with the Environmental Protection Agency’s (*Huanbao ju*, EPA) modern disciplinary discourse of “frugality” (*jiyue*) and “conservation” (*baohu*) merging with the momentum of the environmental movement and remaining most prominent.

In 2000, for example, the Taipei City Government set up an incinerator in Mu Zha hoping to make it an exclusive site for the collective burning of paper spirit money on the Universal Salvation. This “unprecedented” (according to the *China Times*) project was undertaken for presumably environmental and safety reasons, so that “neighbors” would be spared the fire hazard and polluting effects of burning spirit money in the streets (Chen Yingshan 2000). The official slogan launching the initiative read like a rhythmic couplet: “The Universal Salvation: burn paper money for the ‘good brothers’, don’t pollute your ‘good neighbors’,” subtly suggesting that “good neighbors” do not themselves burn spirit money (Zheng Shisu 2000). But if this public incinerator might have had disciplinary designs as a deterrent of local celebrations, the *Liberation Times* ran a headline that hedged the official bet by inscribing the Government as the chief ritual depository: “Muzha ghost month incinerator opens: [City Government] embodies essence of [celestial] paper-money central bank” (2000). As if in competitive response to the Mu Zha public incinerator, some local temples later on spent more than two million New Taiwan dollars to set up their own eco-friendly incinerators (Lu Jinzu 2002). And in a display of innovative eco-one-upmanship, an entrepreneur made a pitch to saving trees by adding the golden tinsel (*jinbo*) of paper spirit money to eco-friendly joss sticks (*huanbao xiang*), so the “good brothers” would receive the essence of the money form without the burning of paper money.

Such environmentalist modifications to the Universal Salvation embody an oblique “modern” critique of ghost month rituals; however, these disciplinary initiatives also have the paradoxical effect of affirming the perceived power of ghosts, as is evidenced by the burgeoning popularity of ghost month ritual observances. But this spirit of censorship has also been readily appropriated, or even exploited, to more manifestly critical effect. At Taipei’s centrally located flower market, for example, the Universal Salvation was boisterously celebrated with a benevolent Buddhist touch by replacing all traditionally requisite cooked creatural ritual offerings with one-hundred-percent floral-reconstructed replicas. So, for example, the ritual mainstay of “three sacrificial offerings” (*san sheng li*)—a complete chicken, a whole fish, and a rack of pork—was done to vegetarian effect in artfully crafted colorful chrysanthemums, among other flowers. Beyond being a profit boon for flower companies, a retinue of City Officials appeared on the scene formally to sanction the event, and to “change the traditional complexities of killing living creatures” (Huang Shuling 2000).

Appearing amidst the many “Living Section” articles of the *Liberation Times* describing activities across the island observing the opening of hell’s gates in August 2000 was a prominent headline reading, “[Aboriginal] maritime culture challenges (Han) ghost month taboo” (Huang Mingtang 2000). Due to decades of “Hanification” (*Hanhua*), aborigines have assimilated Han culture’s ghost-induced fear of the sea, which is generally alien to their own vibrant maritime culture. To break this Han hydrophobia, Amis of Taidong held hunting ceremonies at sea on days one and fifteen of ghost month in order to restore traditional aboriginal culture’s intimate connection to the sea and shatter the Han folk belief (*minjian xinyang*) in “good brothers” (2000). Here, the nativist recrudescence of aboriginal cache is, somewhat paradoxically, deployed to cast Han culture’s belief in ghosts as folksy and superstitious.

In a trenchant 1999 commentary appearing in the “Social Criticism” section of the *China Times* during ghost month, anthropologist Lin Meirong and psychologist Li Qingze strike at the patriarchal heart of the oppressive gender politics of Taiwan’s “inauspicious ghost culture” (*daomei gui wenhua*) (Lin Meirong and Li Qingze 1999). Lin and Li describe a pervasive form of institutional violence found in organizations, companies, groups, and families in which strong-minded and assertive individuals with their own ideas, views, and will are labeled “inauspicious ghosts.” The authors explain that this form of institutional violence fosters a “herd mentality” through factions, corruption, and the inappropriate exercise of “patriarchal authority” within a hierarchical power structure. However, it is the “inauspicious ghosts” who refuse to play the game, striving instead to retain their own subjectivity, preserve their own space of survival, and maintain their own creative spirit. Because these “trouble makers” do not submit to unreasonable institutional norms, they suffer myriad forms of discrimination and are excluded from the group. Lin and Li then turn the tables on this oppressive system by reminding all that Taiwan is a notoriously “inauspicious nation” in a world of nations—the number one “international inauspicious ghost”—owing to its inescapable history of hegemonic oppression at the hands of paternalistic China, pointing out that Taiwan is unable to say with certainty if it even “is” a nation. They call for Taiwanese to use this global-national perspective to reflect on their “inauspicious ghost culture,” and to taste what it feels like (*tihui*) to be someone who does not observe a corrupt system or unreasonable principles. In the end, they suggest that only by abandoning its “inauspicious ghost culture” and by allotting all people “reasonable” space for growth and self-determination will Taiwan be best prepared to meet the challenges and changes of the future (1999).

This montage of “enlightened” mass-mediated assaults on ghost culture necessarily, if indeterminately, collapses upon the meanings of all culturally intimate ritual performances of the Universal Salvation, and paradoxically constitutes the

propitiation of ghosts as a disreputable act of local identity construction. These critical public culture discourses also normalize a sharp secular-celestial boundary—a mutually conditioning synecdoche of the inside-outside national boundary—that reinforces imaginings of ghosts, along with their earthly counterparts, as excluded political remainders.⁵⁶ For my spear fishing friends, this cacophony of modern critiques merely fuels the crystallization of a compelling, because largely unreflexive, metonymic conflation of maritime ghosts, nature-*qua*-the sea, and the alienated form of their expropriated patrimony—constituting the triumvirate formula of an estranged force that I have encompassed under the analytical rubric of Fortuna.

My spear fishing friends described for me their performance of the Universal Salvation ceremony on the seaside platform of White Lighthouse, where the massive breakwaters and the giant cargo ships were cast as important props. Fifteen members of the spear fishing gang contributed a cornucopia of traditional and modern offerings, including a whole boiled chicken, pineapple and fire-dragon fruits, instant noodles, cookies, crackers, candies, and soda pop. They burned joss sticks on the offering table and paper spirit money in a small worship vessel, which hitched the tinselled quintessence of the money form to rising smoky pollutants that transported it into the ghostly underworld. The entire act of propitiation lasted an hour or so, after which time the spear fishermen geared up and headed for their hallowed hunting grounds, the meaning-drenched oceanic depths where they at once assimilated themselves to the natural forces of Fortuna and conquered her collectively conjured estranged power by bagging fish with their “magical spears.”

⁵⁶ In traditional Chinese culture, there was no sharp boundary between the secular and celestial worlds; rather, there was a fluid interconnection between heaven and earth, which together constituted a (tensely) harmonious whole.

Being the Phallus, Cross-Dressing, and Manly *Virtù*

As I have shown, Fortuna embodies the spear fisherman's "alienation from his context or political environment" (Brown 1988:114). She is, as Wendy Brown explains, a "figment of culture ideologically conceived as anthropomorphized nature"—the "seemingly naturalistic aspect of the political realm"—and her "power derives from man's thought and activity" (1988:114). In traditional Chinese thought, both ghosts and the sea are unambiguously associated with the natural female *yin* principle, which refers to relative femininity (not female entities) or the "shadowy inner" realm, in relation to the male *yang* principle, which is *yin*'s complementary masculine correlative (see Eberhard 1983:323; Sangren 1987:133). Situated within the alienating structure of the global-capitalist mode of production, however, *yin* is no longer best conceived of as a natural component of the fluid and harmonizing *yin-yang* cosmology (cf. Puett 2002). Instead, *yin* resembles more Machiavelli's Fortuna, with a symbolic twist that combines contemporary feminist critique and the commodity form: she becomes the object or Other of masculine desire as well as the representation or reflection of that desire, "an Other that constitutes...the site of a masculine self-elaboration" (Butler 1990:44); hence, men's desire to penetrate the "shadowy inner" depths at White Lighthouse and stage an encounter with Fortuna there. To recast this concept of Fortuna in a related psychoanalytic idiom, she is the female Other that lacks the Phallus but who, as the signifier of masculine desire, *appears* "to 'be' the Phallus" (1990:44). Judith Butler forcefully elucidates this point, emphasizing the power of the feminine position that I have generalized in the female figure of Fortuna:

For women to "be" the Phallus means...to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to "embody" the Phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through "being" its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity. By claiming that the Other

that lacks the Phallus is the one who *is* the Phallus, Lacan clearly suggests that power is wielded by this feminine position of not-having, that the masculine subject who “has” the Phallus requires the Other to confirm and, hence, be the Phallus in its “extended” sense.” (1990:44)

In the context of my spear fishing friends, Fortuna *qua* female Other “appears” as “natural”—or, more precisely, she appears as “nature”—when she is, in fact, a product of the peculiar alienated effects of men’s struggle for survival in a globalizing political-economy shaped by their own ever more unwieldy institutionalized forms of competition, power, and action (see Brown 1988:115). Due to the distal nature of this alienated “paternal economy,” men misrecognize its social origins in the capitalist mode of production. Consequently, they unfurl upon Fortuna *qua* symbolic object/Other a deep desire to repossess their expropriated patrimony. Spear fishermen most manifestly betray this structure of desire by mimetically recapitulating capitalism’s “dialectics of alienation,” here by actively and collectively endowing Fortuna with *reified* super-natural qualities, which are more proximal objectifications of their own individual and collective practices (see Sangren 1991). Through the dialectics of reification, men localize and en-gender Fortuna as the estranged object of a male desire whose alienated origins remain obscure, but whose objectification partakes of the power born of collective (mis)recognition or disavowal.⁵⁷ Through staging battle with Fortuna, spear fishermen engage masculine ideals of bravery, mastery, and glory, values precisely akin to the Greek notion of “manly *virtù*.” And given the spatial metonymy of political-economic power saturating White Lighthouse’s physical environment, these men’s struggle to repossess the objectified form of their own collectively produced power metonymically entails the corporeal accrual of their expropriated patrimony.

⁵⁷ I am drawing on the psychoanalytic concept of disavowal, which means denial with recognition; see (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973:118-121).

Greek *virtù* is the masculine alter-ego to Fortuna. As conceptualized by Machiavelli, it entails a quest for freedom and glory, most fundamentally by overcoming weaknesses and limitations through the correct combination of “discipline, patience, foresight, cunning, and strength” (Brown 1988:82-83). As Wendy Brown explains, the man of *virtù* tries to make himself “hard” and “determinate” by warring against softness, vulnerability, contingency, the intangible, and all that exceeds his control everywhere—“within, without, in mind, body, citizen, polity, and nature” (1988:117). But in trying to purge these undesirables from “his being, his surroundings, and his creations,” he gives them a new “power,” and they in turn threaten him “through *deception*, through *seduction*, or through *satisfaction*”—forces which here correspond to the problem of appearances (including objectifications), to the contingencies and alienations of capitalism and the commodity form, to the excesses or remainders of the political, in short, to Fortuna (Ibid., italics in original). To combat these forces, men construct myriad “barriers”—from concrete moles to collective (mis)recognition—which increase men’s distance and alienation from these forces (1988:115). Paradoxically, these “barriers” augment further the power of these estranged forces over and against men, a point differently nuanced in the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben (see Agamben 1998; Foucault 1980).

But Machiavelli was ahead of his time in conceiving of the relation between *virtù* and Fortuna as less “adversarial and oppositional” than “indebted and mimetic” (see also Brown 1988:118-119; Honig 1993:16). Political theorist Bonnie Honig puts it succinctly:

The highest overall excellence of Machiavelli’s man of *virtù* is his ability to be like *fortuna*, to be as capricious, unpredictable, and wily as she. True manliness means the capacity to cross-dress, to put on apparel and wield the accoutrements of the truest (because most false?) woman. *Virtù*, the capacity to beat *fortuna* consistently and well, is the talent for beating her at her own

game. The trick is to outwoman *fortuna*, to be a better woman than she. And only a man of *virtù* can do that. The talent of Machiavelli's man of *virtù* is his capacity to cross uncrossable lines (between male and female, man and nature), his willingness to take risks from which ordinary humans withdraw. (Honig 1993:16)

Butler explains men's indebtedness to Fortuna in psychoanalytic terms. If men are to affirm themselves as "having" the Phallus—thereby availing themselves to the problem of appearances inherent to the Symbolic—they must, once again, depend upon Fortuna to "be" the Phallus, to signify its power and dialectically confirm its identity by "being" its Other. But Machiavelli went further by recognizing the techniques by which men strive to reappropriate Fortuna's power and techniques for themselves—especially "the use of illusion, deception, coyness, cunning and masked intentions" (Brown 1988). His formulation places what today is called "marginal masculinity" at the center of "dominant masculinity" through the operation of mimesis, or in the context of spear fishermen, through an imitative process that Honig likens to "cross-dressing."

Donning dive gear can be viewed as akin to putting on apparel and wielding the accoutrements of the truest woman, not least because the elaborate set of equipment is what enables men to penetrate, to know, and potentially to conquer Fortuna's "shadowy inner" *yin* world. The very first step in the gearing-up ritual is to strip down, to remove ordinary street clothes, or sometimes even office clothes, as some of my spear fishing buddies regularly make for White Lighthouse directly from work. The last article of everyday attire to be removed is underpants, which are swiftly replaced with skimpy bikini-style swimming briefs. This switching from skivvies to Speedos marked a sensitive liminal moment in the cross-dressing process, for it seemed to be taboo for men to bare their everyday briefs or their buttocks in public. Stripping takes place *al fresco*, either alongside cars or, in nice weather, up on

the platform. Some spear fisherman habitually stalk a buddy during the strip down, looking to catch him unawares in the buff and snap his buttocks with a wet towel, or even slap them hard with the palm of a hand. If strangers might be strolling about, a man might perform the change into swimming briefs stealthily behind a towel wrap, in which case the towel always stands to be torn away at the vulnerable moment. Or a man might opt to slip into swimming briefs inside his car, in which case he could expect one or more sets of naked buttocks pressed against the car window, revealing plainly what he had postured to conceal.

But once the spear fishermen had successfully donned their Speedos, they marked the passage to cross-dressing with several minutes of mingling and swagger. Whereas it was taboo for men to bare their bodies in everyday underwear, it was entirely expected that, once in their Speedos, they parade about for while and shamelessly peacock, a time during which they poached betel nuts, pinched cigarettes, and engaged in playful repartee. The next step was to squeeze into a sleek 3 millimeter flexible neoprene wetsuit, as well as neoprene booties and gloves. These wetsuits are skin-tight, typically jet black with colorful trim, and insist upon body reflexivity. Once sheathed by one of these suits, the male body undergoes a symbolic gender transformation, from privileged blind-spot, normatively occluded from the purview of self and social scrutiny and oppressive standards of beauty, to visible object of the “gaze,” a subject position customarily apposite exclusively to women (see Lin 1999a).⁵⁸

Out of water, wetsuits are hot and rapidly raise body temperature, so once the men have donned them, they move swiftly to complete the remaining steps needed to reach full scuba drag. In short, they affix an inflatable vest (BCD) and a regulator valve to a large compressed air cylinder, which weighs no less than 35 pounds.

⁵⁸ A feature article in *Guanghua* on changing body codes in Taiwan calls attention to the traditional normativity of the male body as outside the purview of social or symbolic scrutiny; see (Lin 1999a).

Attached to the regulator valve are primary and secondary breathing devices, a gauges console (includes depth and pressure gauges as well as a compass), and a BCD inflator hose—each of which the men properly secures to the vest. They also clip to the vest the all-important fish stringer, which is a thick eight-inch-long spike strung to a piece of rope. Finally, the men scarf mask and snorkel around the neck, wrap a six to ten-pound weight belt around the waist, slide speargun onto the shoulder (through the rubber sling), and slip fins onto the wrist (by the heel straps). Once in full drag, the spear fishermen scramble immediately for the sea. Stronger men don their vest-tank-regulator rig on the platform, lugging the heavy load while climbing down the giant breakwaters to the rocky ledge; others lower their scuba rig separately to a waiting buddy below and then scale down the breakwaters without carrying the load. The sight resembles the frenzied forward advance of a small battalion of futuristic warriors, like a scene from a Mad Max movie.

If dive gear is men's portal to the sea, breathing and swimming underwater like fish therefore constitute a kind of drag, an imitation of Fortuna in her "natural" habitat. Judith Butler and others have argued that the performativity of drag reveals that there is nothing inherently natural about gender (see also Butler 1990; Coles 1994/95:72). In this context, however, the elaborate cross-dressing required to perform this undersea female impersonation entails a corporeal gender crossing from "man" to "nature," which compels an apprehension of Fortuna as *naturally* "being" the Phallus, whose symbolic power is metonymically fleshed out by embodying the alienated value of men's expropriated patrimony. But men do not stop by merely assimilating Fortuna; manly *virtù* compels them also to outwit her, and this is accomplished through the hunt.

Upon reaching depth, men cock the rubber slings of their spearguns and begin prowling through dark shadows in search of prey. A number of different species of grouper or sea bream, some quite large and all good eating, might emerge from the

rocky bottom—my friends refer to these game fish as “local” (*diyuxing de*) because they do not migrate. Amidst the multitude of White Lighthouse rocks that were their natural home, these local fish appeared and disappeared in a flash, giving spear fishermen no more than a second or two to point and fire. A bad shot into the rocks missed the target and could blunt the spear tip or even bend the shaft. Spear fishermen sometimes complained that the meat of these “local” fish was tainted by oil from the passing cargo ships, and that, even after seasoning and cooking, a hint of oil could be tasted. Generally speaking, these non-migratory fish were rarely passed over by spear fishermen when they appeared, but they were not considered ideal prey.

The fish that these men repeatedly talked about, and talked of dreaming about, were amberjack (*honggan*). A favorite code used by these spear fishermen to initiate a trip to White Lighthouse was, “I dreamed of amberjack last night,” and I took many a phone call on my mobile in which these were the first words uttered, even before the standard greeting. Out at sea, amberjack can grow to the size of big tuna, but at White Lighthouse they averaged about two-feet in length. Amberjack are prized by all Taiwanese as a sashimi delicacy, and the ones that we bagged especially so because they were wild rather than farm-raised. As my friends very often reminded me, amberjack are “migratory” (*huiliuxing de*). During the high season from September through December, they appeared mainly in furiously swirling schools of what seemed to me to be, based on recall rendered fuzzy due to the frenzy of every encounter with them, countless dozens of fish. But, as my friends assured me, amberjack were always traveling through the area, even when not furiously schooling, it was just that during the off-season you had to go to much greater depths to find them, but when you did they could be enormous.

The migratory nature of amberjack, I believe, went far to enhance their mystique among spear fishermen, as there was a strong sense that, fathoming nothing of man-made borders, they embodied the unbounded essence of limitlessness,

something akin to what Freud calls the “oceanic feeling”—“a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (Freud 1961:11-12).⁵⁹ By far the most frequently retold story of each spear fishing outing among my friends was the moment of encounter with schooling amberjack. From hearing countless of these retold stories, as well as from my own encounters with amberjack at depth, I am able to confirm that we all experienced the onset of a momentary but no less momentous feeling of “oneness” upon finding ourselves face-to-face with these sleek migratory creatures. And it must be kept in mind that these undersea sensations were typically mediated by nitrogen narcosis, or “rapture of the deep,” a condition induced by the anesthetic effect of nitrogen under pressure. These spear fishermen pushed the limits of time at significant depths as a matter of course; therefore, some degree of “rapture of the deep” was a normal part of every dive—and, as I describe below, there was also an occasional hit of “the bends.”

With visibility rarely beyond ten feet, you do not spot a school of amberjack and swim towards it. You move along slowly and remain ready for the silver flash of shiny amberjack to burst out of the surrounding blanket of blackness, which visibly and audibly vibrates owing to the roaring turbines of passing cargo vessels. My friends often boasted of having an acute “sixth sense” (*di liu gan*) that told them when and where the amberjack were going to rupture the trembling curtain of darkness. But no matter how prepared I made myself, each “out of the dark” appearance of the silvery fish seemed fateful and succeeded in thoroughly seizing me. These majestically beautiful fish had large, hyper-alert, hypnotically staring eyes, which hooked into me and went far to collapse all sense of self and surroundings into one. The sensation is like no other, a complete colonization of mind and body: breathing and cognition are momentarily suspended and a universal numbness sets in. In this

⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that another, more technical translation of *huiliuxing de* could be “pelagic,” which means “oceanic,” in the prosaic sense of living in the open sea.

suspended state, no matter how loud the cargo vessels might have been, I can only recall ever hearing a high-pitched hissing sound punctuated by an erratic clicking noise—and my friends too recounted in their story-telling how they became tuned into this distinctive song of the swirling amberjack. Once delivered to this paralyzing threshold of “oneness” by the beauty and fury of these shiny wide-eyed fish, the only route to full oceanic realization would seem to be death. I cannot recall ever making the conscious effort to collect myself and resume breathing and cognition. It was as if the rumbling cargo vessels, the thundering naval frigates, the barricading breakwaters—this concrete concatenation of patriarchal forces metonymically absorbed by Fortuna in the spatial environment of White Lighthouse--found themselves in the “totemic object” before me and baited my desire to capture and kill the amberjack.

As if possessed, I stiffen my back at a forty-five degree angle and fully extend my arm with speargun in hand, aiming just ahead of a speeding amberjack and pulling the trigger—all done in a split second with robotic efficiency. The powerful recoil of the speargun, along with the resounding rocket-like “woosh” of the spear’s release, literally knocks “life” back into me, and I feel empowered by having surrendered momentarily to Fortuna’s seductive boundlessness and survived the fleeting encounter. I release my speargun and grab the shock cord, pulling in the wildly flailing amberjack while slowly swimming towards it—spear fishermen refer to this as “flying a kite” (*fang fengzheng*). Upon reaching the struggling amberjack, I grab it with both hands and wrestle it to the ground. I then maneuver quickly, in a thickly rising plume of kicked-up dirt, to complete the catch and win the battle in just the manner my spear fishing friends taught me: by inserting the sharp tip of my steel stringer through the fish’s gill, out its mouth, and finally into its bony forehead, taking it out of its misery. For these spear fishermen, capturing the totemic object—especially amberjack--

constitutes the paradigmatic moment of outwitting Fortuna at her own game and repossessing their expropriated patrimony.

Structural Nostalgia and the Gift Society

The dénouement of the spear fishing ritual was circulating and banqueting over bagged fish, and this was when spear fishermen converted individual hunting achievements into shared community value. It was during this final stage as well that the sexual totemism of spear fishing manifested as a culturally and historically particular form of the “traffic in women” (Rubin 1975): if feminine symbolism figured in spear fishermen’s reenchantment of an otherwise disenchanted nature, and also in fueling their desire to capture the totemic object, through circulating and banqueting over fish these men revealed that their ultimate purpose was to cement male homosocial bonds (Sedgwick 1985:25-26). My objective in making this point is not celebratory but rather admonitory, both analytically and methodologically. Modern ideology has blinded us to the cultural intimacy of shadow zones, in part through its celebration of enlightenment as the “disenchantment of the world,” and especially “disenchanted nature,” which means, as Horkheimer and Adorno explain, “the extirpation of animism” and the end of “mystery” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993:4-5). But, to recall Andrew Shryock on the “richer content” of shadow zones, “these things are still with us, still real and significant” (Shryock 2004:14). The danger of overlooking the shadow zones is that our critical gaze glosses over the historical forces by which gender asymmetries are dehistoricized, when it is precisely these forces, as Bourdieu reminds us, that need to be comprehended and combated (Bourdieu 2001:viii). My aim, therefore, is to cast light upon, for the purpose of analyzing, one shadow zone wherein the reenchantment of nature emerges as a modern mechanism by which men dehistoricize the symbolic traffic in women.

What makes circulating and banqueting over fish an unusually powerful force of dehistoricization is that it partakes of what Herzfeld calls “structural nostalgia” (Herzfeld 2005:147-182). A byproduct of modernity’s temporal rhetoric of progress and change is a culturally intimate rhetoric of decay, which always invokes the idea of damaged reciprocity. This aporia of modern time guarantees that every generation will bemoan the loss of an era when life was simpler and more perfect, and for men this means longing for days when they were “more directly implicated in the reciprocities of hospitality” (2005:149). Among spear fishermen, the mutuality of circulating and banqueting over fish registers a critique of the commodification and rationalization of public culture through the enactment of Edenic imaginings of the gift society. The ultimate source of structural nostalgia’s potency as cultural intimacy, however, is also what defuses its *pragmatic* efficacy as modernist critique: structural nostalgia is a central legitimating component of modern state ideologies. As Herzfeld puts it, “almost any state ideology requires a narrative of progressive decay from which the bureaucratic state will now rescue the nation” (2005:152). The idealistic gift society is therefore evidence of a “moral space” reinvented and shared by both the modern state and these critics of modernity. Only by studying the shadow zones, however, is the “scandal” of this shared moral space exposed: the timeless spiritual basis of this shared moral space derives from the symbolic traffic in women, which, in the final stage of the spear fishing ritual, manifests as circulating and banqueting over fish.⁶⁰

As I have demonstrated, through the reenchantment of nature-*qua*-the sea, bagged fish embody the recuperated value of these men’s expropriated patrimony. It was by circulating and banqueting over these fish, however, that spear fishermen went furthest to overcome the alienating contradiction between individual and community

⁶⁰ In Chapter 4 I develop further this notion of the “scandal.”

born of the modern division of labor. The particular circumstances surrounding fish-giving were manifold. A spear fisherman who failed to bag a fish, for example, might ask for one to take home in order to appease his wife and feed his family. And spear fishermen were forever promising fish to friends, either to return some favor or to substantiate marvelous spear fishing stories. Often, spear fishermen delivered fresh fish immediately upon returning to Taipei from White Lighthouse, and I accompanied many a spear fishermen making these protracted rounds. On one day, with our bodies still brackish from an afternoon of hunting, Little Clean delivered amberjack to his supervisor at the office, to a buddy's wife who was preparing a meal for guests, and finally to a woman coworker's home in the tea-tree terraced hills of Mao Kong, as she had given Little Clean two *jin* of prize-winning Iron Goddess tea harvested and cured by her family. Through the circulation of patrimonial value, the gift of fish merged elements of classic Maussian gift-giving and the more instrumental *guanxi* practice customarily characteristic of Chinese society (see Kipnis 1997; Mauss 1990 [1950]; Yang 1994).

If the spear fishing ritual opens amidst gigantic instantiations of expropriated patrimonial value in the spatial metonymy of White Lighthouse, it closes by completing the circle with a culturally intimate spatial metonymy, namely, the corporeal ingestion of reappropriated patrimonial value through banqueting over fish. While these banquets sometimes consisted of large post-spear fishing lunches at a Peace Island open-air seafood restaurant, and occasionally of fish barbecues on the platform at White lighthouse, the ideal feast was a late dinner at a downtown Taipei seafood restaurant, one of a few where the owner was willing to cook a cooler full of fish provided by the spear fishermen themselves. A memorable banquet at one group's favorite restaurant, Bo Ka, during the fateful ghost-month described above illuminates several of my concluding points.

Only five days after my spear fishing buddies conducted their Universal Salvation ceremony at White Lighthouse, Hammer Head, Professor, Beaver Tail, Sunshine, Wolf, and Little Pearl spent another day spear fishing there. Little Clean and Golden Boy were also on location, but not diving. Upon surfacing from his second dive, Little Pearl was immediately struck by excruciating pain in one shoulder. Everyone knew that this was a classic symptom of decompression sickness, or “the bends.” These men not only push time limits at depth, allowing excess nitrogen to form bubbles in their blood vessels and tissues, but they are also inclined to cut short the mandatory three-minute safety stop at fifteen feet and to spend too little time off-gassing between dives. A number of these spear fishermen have therefore developed chronic pain in their joints, evidenced by the Chinese medicinal patches (*goupi gaoyao*) some of them routinely wear on different parts of their bodies. During this dive, however, Little Pearl had pushed his luck in battling Fortuna too far and surfaced with an acute hit of the bends, and the gang rushed him immediately to the local Keelung decompression chamber. There is perhaps no better evidence of these spear fishermen’s anti-modern collective characterization as a “community bound by fate,” with each man dependent on and sworn to one another, than the fact that the entire gang present at White Lighthouse on that day, including Little Clean and Golden Boy, joined Little Pearl *inside* the decompression chamber for the entire four-hour treatment.⁶¹ These men reasoned to me that they were killing two birds with one stone, keeping their stricken buddy company and taking advantage of the opportunity to clear their own systems of accumulated nitrogen bubbles.⁶² The treatment successfully

⁶¹ “Community bound by fate” (German: *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*) is the term used by a former commander-in-chief of a German U-boat force to characterize a U-boat crew. A similar expression is also used by Jürgen Habermas to refer to a premodern modality of collectivity, see (Boyer 2001:225).

⁶² I do not know if, medically speaking, these non-stricken spear fishermen were doing themselves any harm or good by undergoing a four-hour decompression session; however, I have never heard of such a practice before.

relieved Little Pearl of his symptoms, and the gang called for a banquet that night at Bo Ka in order to feast on their cooler-full of fish.

Twelve men showed up at Bo Ka, but conspicuously absent, given the decompression incident of the day, was Little Pearl. When Sunshine asked about Little Pearl's whereabouts, Wolf, Little Pearl's sidekick, responded with one word, "Mahjong."⁶³ Beer was ordered and a few guys made bottom's-up toasts to get things going. The main course was the usual fare of amberjack done three ways: sashimi, baked jaws, and fish-head miso soup. There were also striped sea bass and parrot fish, and these were steamed whole. Hammer Head chose to mark the feast as somewhat special by calling for giant sea snails, which were served one each on a small plate. Other trimmings included braised escargot with cilantro, deep-fried octopus lips, squid casserole, boiled crab, stir-fried noodles and rice, and baby bamboo with mayonnaise. The greens of choice, as always, were sweet potato leaves (*digua ye*), a special treat that Wolf referred to as, "eating nostalgic" (*chi huaijiu de*), as some of these men recall foraging for wild sweet potato leaves during the austere times of their youth.

As the dishes began to emerge from the kitchen, I toasted individually the two new guys at the table whom I had just met, and Sunshine explained to me that they were friends who were new to diving and not yet ready for White Lighthouse but would be soon. The two guys then reassured Sunshine that they were nearly ready to begin hunting. Sunshine added about one guy that his mother was a well-known nativist-activist who was involved in local politics and had done jail time as a political prisoner during the martial law era, and with that a few more toasts were made. This guy took the attention as a cue to make a demonstrative gesture of belonging to the group by reaching with his chopsticks for one of the petrified amberjack eyeballs staring up from a baked jaw. He proceeded to bite down on the white marbly bead,

⁶³ Whenever I queried my friends as to Little Pearl's occupation, they told me, "Mafia." I eventually learned that Little Pearl ran an underground mahjong casino.

producing a loud crunching sound that caused several of us to cringe. Not to be outdone, Shark followed suit by crunching down another eyeball.

At one point, Black Belt, who had not been at White Lighthouse that day, asked for details about what had happened to Little Pearl. Little Clean played the role of proxy, retelling the story that Little Pearl had relayed to him. Little Pearl descended down off the platform between corner's one and two. At a depth of about 80 feet, he spotted a big *gaji* (a species of jack) that taunted him by remaining only just out of range as it moved slowly away. Little Pearl gave chase, and the *gaji* led him down to 130 feet. Running out of air and time, Little Pearl took a desperate shot and missed, after which he began heading back toward the platform. Before reaching the platform, however, he was nearly out of air, so he had to surface in the open sea without performing a safety stop. His shoulder began aching during the long surface swim back to shore, and the pain became acute as soon as he exited the water.

Other men soon began recounting tales of their undersea experiences that day, detailing in particular their encounters with the swirling amberjack. When you consider just how disconnected from the everyday is the intimate world of shared reciprocity these spear fishermen nostalgically imagine and enact through their feasting and narrating, one could aptly say they had succeeded in becoming workers, hunters, and critics in a mode of production otherwise conducive to conformism, specialization, and *Gesellschaft*. As the group became increasingly absorbed in the food and story-telling, I glanced at Sunshine who had an unmistakable expression of relaxed satisfaction on his face. Upon catching my eye, he leaned over to me and offered a meta-narrative in a softer volume than that of the vociferous tales being told by the others: "This is what we love to do most. We've been doing this for fifteen years. We even used to have our own restaurant. We would catch fish ourselves in the morning and simultaneously serve and feast on them at night. By the way, you know why Little Clean was at White Lighthouse today but not diving? We heard that

a local skin diver found a speargun and we tracked the guy down today. Sure enough, he had found Little Clean's gun, so we called Little Clean and he immediately left his office and came out to retrieve it. Look at him, that's why he's so happy tonight, even though he had to shell out 1500 *yuan* to the skin diver for finding and returning his gun."

Little Clean picked up that Sunshine and me were talking about him and immediately decided to recount, yet again, the story of my recent arrest at White Lighthouse. To corroborate my criminal status, he added that traffic tickets with photos capturing me either speeding or passing illegally on his motorbike (which he had lent to me) were piling up on his kitchen table.⁶⁴ The temporal circulation of these narrative performances was grounded in the spatial circulation and ingestion of fish, and both participation and observation impressed upon me the degree to which this double form of sharing produced a powerfully palpable and perduring sense of community. For these spear fishermen, the structural nostalgia of the gift society was intended to reconstitute identities as part of, rather than in alienated opposition to, community (see Lipset 2004:206). It also opens a window on one dimension of the argument that will be developed throughout this dissertation, namely that the nation space and modern power are constructed out of cultural intimacy.

⁶⁴ Before I bought my own motorbike, I had borrowed an older one from Little Clean. Because the motorbike was registered to Little Clean, my traffic tickets, which were generated automatically from roadside cameras, were charged and sent to Little Clean.

Chapter 3

The Political Public and the Socio-Sexual *Agôn*

Introduction

In this chapter, I describe and conceptualize how the male associational dynamic of the public realm in Taiwan entails the mutual engagement of “politics” and “sexuality.” Drawing on Hannah Arendt, I argue that the public realm is the site of action and power—Arendt’s definition of “political”—and that one of its main constitutive ingredients is the making and keeping of “promises,” a concept with affinities to the Chinese virtue of “trust” (*xin*), canonically conceived as the proper basis of male friendship relations among equals.⁶⁵ As I will show, the making and keeping of promises are performative public acts that, in conjunction with the corollary act of “forgiveness,” establish “wordly” webs of durable relationships that ground and guarantee power and authority.

In practice, however, there is a problematic ambiguity in this formula of world-building public action as grounded in promises and forgiveness. Male domination, which hinges on excluding female agency from the public realm and defining the domicile as normatively female, demands that the foundational public acts of promising and forgiving obtain chiefly among men. Consequently, these otherwise world-building performatives tend toward the paradoxical production of “unworldly” homosocial intimacy (e.g., the “fragile scholar” or *caizi*) or exploitative brotherliness (e.g., secret societies or sworn brotherhoods), which have long constituted an inherent, if ambiguous, threat to the hierarchy and necessity of patriarchal domination. Herein,

⁶⁵ Trust-based Friendship (*pengyou*) is the fifth of the five cardinal relationships originally discussed by Confucius and around which Chinese philosophers built a moral and political universe (see Introduction).

I argue, lay a fundamental explanation for the historical existence of a shadowy pre-public realm of “sexualized women” (see Willet 1997:320). These penumbras of “dangerous women,” shadow zones of cultural intimacy that will be a focus of this chapter and the next, punctuate public culture with pockets of heterosexual secrecy that mediate male homosociality, preserving the space of worldly action among men. In so doing, however, world-building performatives are transformed—in a not fully transparent way—into a gender-delineated constative, which serves as a public font of nonidentity where personal and national images of authenticity and purity converge.

In contemporary Taiwanese society, with the concomitant rise of consumer capitalism and the culture industry, dangerous women have become embedded within the circuit of commodities. This development has destabilized public patterns of patriarchal domination, presenting new possibilities and challenges for women. In particular, “sexuality” has emerged as a potent mass-mediated commercial value, saturating the public realm with instrumentalist compulsions that threaten to valorize the private or individual self over the worldly public one. This convergence of sexualized women and consumer capitalism has also threatened to expose the secrecy of the sexual shadow zone; however, the veil of secrecy itself has not been lifted, rather it has been transported from a mysterious penumbral place to a universally lived and imagined public space. I call this new public space, in which market forces mass-mediate the gender-delineated dialogics between self and Other, the “socio-sexual *agôn*,” adopting a term developed by Cynthia Willet in a different context (Willet 1997, 305).⁶⁶

The key defining characteristic of the socio-sexual *agôn*, in my analysis, is the ever-more pervasive public visibility—both actual and representational—of sexualized

⁶⁶ Willet uses the term “socio-sexual agons” to describe the “conflicts that instigate plot and character development,” especially in Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s (Willet 1997:305-306).

women, from “special service” hair-stylists and masseurs to bar-club hostesses and betel-nut beauties. Being both *perceived* through spatial practices and *conceived* through representations of space, the social-sexual *agôn* is, to employ Henri Lefebvre’s term, a “representational space”—“space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols” (Lefebvre 1974:39). Because these images and symbols are mass mediated, the important condition of “secrecy” to the shadow zone of sexualized women has been exploded by commodity spectrality and recuperated within the space of fantasy availed by the “visible invisibility” of the commodity form. In contemporary Taiwan, as I demonstrate below, the female body—everywhere provocatively visible but only partially exposed—has become a mass-mediated imaginary zone of cultural intimacy and a key contested site of the socio-sexual *agôn*.

If, as Song Geng argues in his recent study of masculinity in traditional China, “Chinese gender ideology” was more power-based than sex-based, I argue that in the contemporary context the socio-sexual *agôn* is a contested representational space where both politics and sexuality are intimately interrelated (Song Geng 2004). The socio-sexual *agôn* conspires to preserve the patriarchal political community in three key respects: 1) It dissolves the danger of a political public that might pose a threat to hierarchy and necessity, which obtain chiefly in the spheres of work and home; 2) it suppresses the “modern” stigma of male homoerotic desire associated with homosocial intimacy; and 3) it affirms through the commodity form a heterosexual structure of desire generative of male fantasies, which, as I demonstrate in the following chapter on flower-wine drinking, reproduce the legitimating patriarchal homology between personal and national images of authenticity.

Promises, Forgiveness, and the Political Public

Especially since the events of 1989 in China and Eastern Europe, the notion of the public realm in Chinese East Asia (to adopt Robert Weller’s term) has attracted a

tempest of interest. To portend the prospects of democratic development in contemporary China, scholars have taken up Jürgen Habermas' influential argument on the transformation of the public sphere in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe (Habermas 1989), and have sought to discover the “sprouts” of civil society in Chinese tradition. Typically, this work has entailed a quest to identify “intermediate associations” independent of the state and unfettered by local particularistic ties (e.g., family or kinship). As Robert Weller explains, these “horizontal associations” should: “(1) be voluntary, that is, based on the free choice of autonomous individuals; (2) act with civility, that is, accept the rights of others to disagree (thus ruling out organizations like gangsters); and (3) respect the legitimacy of the state while in turn enjoying a free space for action guaranteed by the state” (Weller 1999:15). As to whether or not the roots of traditional Chinese culture might have sprouted such civic institutions, the literature remains split (1999:15).

As I see it, “civil society” frameworks fall short by coupling as a requirement for democratic political action a misguided conception of “free space” and the stable existence of formal (or semiformal) intermediate associations operating within these spaces. When agency adheres too firmly in “informal” (i.e., free) activity unorganized around a “collective will” the upshot is believed to be individualism, which, within civil society frameworks, is antithetical to durable social influence and leads to atomization, alienation, and atavism. Robert Weller argues that, in Taiwan, informal associations are all that remain between family and state as an independent source of social capital after formal associations are co-opted or repressed. He puts the problem plainly:

By its nature, this [informal] sector is less well organized to promote national change, but, as Taiwan shows, it is also the resource out of which a formal civil sector can be created when the state steps back. The communal and semicomunal end of the informal sector is especially important in this

because the voluntary end really does tend to dissolve into individualism if there is no formal structure. (Weller 1999:110)

If for Habermas it was private life (the *oikos*) that prepared the people for collective participation in the “free space” of the public sphere, in Taiwan, according to Weller, preparation for action in the political public is fostered in informal voluntary associations—free of the state and at something of a remove from particularistic ties. I wish to illuminate a more fundamental understanding of public life and political action not as premised on action preconditioned elsewhere but rather, following Arendt, as the product of public action itself. In so doing, I focus on promises and forgiveness and show how these performatives constitute the basis of initiatory action and durable bonds among a plurality of men.⁶⁷

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt famously explains that binding oneself through the *action* of making promises establishes within the “ocean of uncertainty” “islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men [*sic*]” (Arendt 1958:237). Correspondingly, forgiveness, which is the “only reaction which does not merely react but acts anew and unexpectedly,” is the necessary and only remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started out by action (1958:241). Without being “released from the consequences of what we have done,” continues Arendt, “our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victim of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break

⁶⁷ While there is nothing inherently gendered about the public bonds born of promises and forgiveness, I argue that the socio-sexual agon is the key to understanding the persistence of the sharply gender delineated social relations of trust in Taiwan as well as the different values and possibilities associated with the public versus private realms. As one Taiwanese man confidently insisted during a conversation on gender and politics, “women will never go far in Taiwanese politics; even the women vote for the men because they don’t trust women, they trust men.” This man’s remark reflects the ideal of an identity between trust and men rather than empirical reality. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I develop further the agonistic dimension of Taiwan’s political public and make the case for its immanent potential to transcend its own gender biases and initiate true democratic change.

the spell” (1958:237). The most compelling characteristic of these acts of promising and forgiving is that they confront the most “elementary problems of human living-together” (Arendt 1963:175), which means, for Arendt, that these acts are public rather than private and can function only under the “human condition” of plurality (see also Calhoun 2004).

Arendt maintains that only by being bound by a plurality of others to the fulfillment of promises can we “keep” our identities and realize fullness of personality. In other words, it is the absence of the performance of these acts of binding and dismissal among a plural “multitude of spectators”—rather than the inability of a “common will” to coalesce within formal or informal associations--that would condemn us to the isolation and anomie of individualism—“a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the *presence of others*, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfills, can dispel” (Arendt 1958:237). Moreover, it is only amidst a plurality of agents that “men” can remain “free agents” and therefore make and remake the world, as it is the “constant mutual release,” or forgiveness, from everyday trespasses inevitable to the “constant establishment of new relations within a web of relations” that “refurbishes their constant willingness to change their minds and start again” (1958:240). Since one cannot be bound by a promise to himself [*sic*] or forgive himself, the presence of others, of spectators within a plural public, sustains one’s willingness to overcome, transform, and continue--requisite capacities if one is to “be trusted with so great a *power* as that to begin something new” (1958:240).

For Arendt, our ability to make promises to each other is the most fundamental means by which we achieve the *power* to act successfully and to create beyond our individual capacities or intentions. Binding and promising are “foundational” acts that keep power intact and constitute a “stable worldly structure” to house men’s combined power of action. Arendt formulates the coupling of action and power as follows:

The grammar of action: that action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men; and the syntax of power: that power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between spaces by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and keeping of promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty. (Arendt 1963:175)

Arendt's insight of politics as built on a plural public woven together by promise-based networks is highly compelling, especially as a framework for understanding male sociality in the public realm in Taiwan.

Rendezvous and Mobile Phones

A defining characteristic of male friendship in Taiwan is the palpable sense of being enmeshed in webs of close-knit relations constituted of shared agreements, pledges, assurances, and guarantees—in short, of mutual promises. The most basic promise is the agreement to be somewhere at some specified time, and for many Taiwanese men a Byzantine regime of daily appointments is their primary modus operandi. These rendezvous very often materialize for no practical purpose beyond perhaps “brewing tea.” For example, one friend might say to another, “Come to my office tomorrow at noon for tea. Little Clean's coming by to submit his bid for the mutual aid association. Slim and King said they will be there. Can you make it?” Agreeing to show up is no minor act, as it establishes a covenant that accrues “power” to all those enjoined in the engagement through the mutual subjugation of a small piece of future time, which is otherwise wide open and unpredictable. And this power obtains only to the extent that the promise to be there made by all those involved is fulfilled. When unexpected circumstances compel one to break a promise, the pull of this power manifests most acutely in the felt need to confirm cancellation with a phone call. If one simply does not show up, each friend stood up will instantly reproach the

delinquent when they see him again by uttering one of two ubiquitous Taiwanese colloquialisms—“*huang dian le* [you’ve rocked the point]” or “*fang le women de gezi* [you let lose our pigeons].” Such remonstrations, by announcing the transgression, have the effect of declaring the resumption of normal friendship relations an act of forgiveness, which is by definition unexpected and therefore also an originary act of creation or world-building.

The medium of communication that effectively facilitates these face-to-face fraternal rendezvous amidst modern urban forces of atomization, alienation, and sprawl is the omnipresent mobile or cell phone (*shouji*). According to Taiwan’s Bureau of Statistics, cell phone accessibility (*shouji pujilü*) is 100% and the ownership rate (*shouji chiyoulü*) is the highest in the world, with each person on the island possessing an average of two mobiles (24hrs Staff 2004; Liu Tao 2004). Cell phones are the main thread that knits the fabric of Taiwanese social life, and, at least in terms of sight and sound, there is barely any discontinuity between the all-pervading images and sound bites of mobile advertising and the lived public space of people busily coming, going, and calling.

In Taiwan, it is all too convenient to acquire and activate a mobile. In addition to the option of opening an account and being billed monthly, different carriers offer a variety of prepaid cards, which are available at any street-corner convenience store. Some of my friends utilized these prepaid cards to activate, unbeknownst to wives, a secret second (or even third) mobile, dedicated exclusively to communication with girlfriends, hostesses, or other sexualized women of the intimate shadow zones. The Taiwanese penchant for multiple mobiles reflects a strategic use of the device to partition communication and correspondingly lives.

Not long after I became part of one friendship circle, members of the group grew frustrated with their inability to contact me on impulse and involve me in impromptu gatherings or events, so one guy lent me a spare mobile: “Now when we

call you, you have no excuses. You better be there.” This was my first experience using a cell phone, and it took a few weeks before I became proficient at storing numbers, retrieving messages, and carrying the device on my person (so as not to lose it). Before too long, however, I began to feel and experience how the mobile enhanced the force of interpersonal bonds, and how it gave new meaning to the act of “giving your word” by keeping you perforce and perpetually in communication with others during each hiatus between in-the-flesh get-togethers. And one is by no means “free” in Taiwan to turn off one’s mobile and disengage from confreres (or family) at will. When someone’s mobile is turned off, irritated friends failing to get through crossly disseminate the fact as if spreading a nasty rumor: “Wolf’s mobile’s off. Beast! What gives? No doubt up to no good.” Indeed, friends are bound by a tacit agreement to keep mobile communication open, and violators face the same remonstrations as when breaking a promise. And if one’s mobile is discovered to be off when it “definitely” should be on, one can expect a bottlenecked inbox of contemptuous messages from irate friends.⁶⁸

In *Heidegger, Habermas and the Mobile Phone*, George Myerson sets up and analyzes an encounter between two different utopian visions of communication, namely that expounded by two great twentieth-century German philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Jürgen Habermas, and the twenty-first century postmodern “mobilized communication” currently in ascendance (Myerson 2001). Mobilized communication, Myerson argues, emphasizes sheer scale of interconnection as well as individual freedom, which is defined as “being in control” as a separate and distinct individual (2001:19-20). If “the medium is the message,” mobilization is the medium that turns

⁶⁸ A man who turns off his mobile also invites suspicion from his wife, should she try to call him. Indeed, when carousing at “special” *a-gong* teahouses (see next chapter), my friends rarely turned off their cell phones. If a man’s mobile rang during a round, he would dash out the front door of the teahouse and take the call outside—this was preferred over having a wife ring a deactivated mobile. These cell phone practices have recently been depicted in the film by Chinese director Feng Xiaogang, *Shouji* (Cell phone, 2004). One theme of the film is precisely how the philandering protagonist is betrayed by his cell phone, which allows the women in his life to discover his deceitful carrying on.

everything around into a system, replacing connectedness with coordination, insight with information. What we are left with, ideally, is efficient communications between “inanimate objects,” meaning specifically that the new agents of communication are “devices and their systems” (2001:28-29). As Myerson explains:

This is a language in which communication has no human agents at all. It is simply a flow of messages, registered in terms of a financial cost. So you check into the system in pursuit of individual desires or aims, and that’s the nature of your individual participation. From there, individual agency is swept aside by the sheer flow of traffic through the system. (2001:29)

For Heidegger, by contrast, communication begins when an individual gives meaningful expression to “discourse” and is consummated in the hearer’s “understanding,” which refers to the “closeness” (in the spatial sense of “proximally close”) of the responding voice to the original (2001:49). Habermas retains Heidegger’s ideal of meaningful expression and proximally shared understanding, but he adds more sense of “argumentativeness, or difference,” which is the basis of his principle of “communicative rationality” (2001:49-50). Communicative rationality is about achieving mutual understanding—the definition of “authentic communication”—by being open to criticism and giving “good reasons” for beliefs, decisions, and actions (2001:74). Communicative rationality is the core of Habermas’ formulation of the “lifeworld,” which is a “lived environment” endowed with “my and our meanings, lived from within, layered with our interpretations” (2001:64). Habermas contrasts communicative rationality with “instrumental rationality,” which entails “successful self-maintenance” and the strategic pursuit of one’s own interests and goals. If communicative rationality constitutes the meaningful essence of the lifeworld, instrumental rationality is conducive only to superficial identities characteristic of “lifestyle”—and mobile communication, according to Myerson, heralds the triumph of lifestyle over the philosophers’ deeper sense of lifeworld (2001:64).

Echoing Habermas' own grim prediction, Myserson believes we are looking towards a mobile future "where communication is incorporated into money and power" (2001:63). To communicate, continues Myserson, "will mean the same thing as to exchange money" (2001:63). But this vision assumes the fall of public man and collapses communication into the realms of necessity, in particular work and family: "As people hand over their lives to be shaped by money or the rules of the power game inside their company or even their family, less and less of life is explored through the dialogue in which one seeks to be understood by others, and to understand them in return" (2001:32-33). It also overlooks the fact that, at least as is the case in Taiwan, the telos of the bustling mobile montage of appointments is very often face-to-face gatherings, where the quest for and appreciation of shared understanding is alive and well. I once asked my friend Quick which was more important to him, family or friends. "Intimate family (*hen qin*) like brothers and sisters are certainly important," Quick explained, "but friends are even more important because they understand (*liaojie*) you." Quick's response reinforces the fact that "understanding" is a central value of friendship relations in Taiwan, and the exploding proliferation of cell phones has made it possible to preserve the friendship lifeworld in the face of postmodern forces of depersonalization.

In Taiwan, the public realm as I conceive of it, as the socio-sexual *agôn*, is bifurcated. On the one hand, there is the consumer economy dominated by capitalist forces (I examine the sexual dimension of this domain below); on the other, there is the male lifeworld in which "power" hinges on shared understanding, particularly as born of the dynamic of promising and forgiving among friends. Mobilized communication is employed in each sphere according to the dominant mode of practice there, and it simultaneously facilitates their partitioning "and" interpenetration. It is the interpenetration of these two realms that precludes a pessimistic prediction of the rise and predominance of "system integration, where people are glued together by

common rules and procedures” (2001:35). Indeed, even where “system” is pronounced, integration is rarely anonymous, and almost never autonomous from communicative rationality where people are connected through a common understanding that is always in the process of being worked out. One practice where instrumental rationality would appear to be the operative principle, but in fact is predominated by communicative rationality, is mutual aid associations.

Mutual Aid Associations

“Mutual aid associations [*huzhuhui*]” or “bidding associations [*biaohui*]” are a pervasive and prominent part of Taiwanese social life among all classes of people. Telling of the instrumental bias with which they are typically interpreted is the fact that scholars translate them as “rotating credit associations” (see Freedman 1979; Tsai 2002; Weller 1999; Winn 1994). It is important to note, however, that these associations are equal parts medium of credit and measure of individual credibility—as one of my friends put it, “Chinese are very concerned about credibility [*xinyong*].” Almost without exception, each of my friends held one or more shares in one or more mutual aid associations at any given time.⁶⁹ These associations were continually being formed and finished, and life for some of my friends at times became a pressure-filled hiatus around making heavy monthly payments. On three separate occasions during fieldwork, I was asked by friends to lend them a sizable sum of money for the expressed purpose of making their monthly association payments. In each instance, my friend named a date for repayment and reimbursed me in full on that date, as promised.

⁶⁹ It was rather usual for certain of my friends to have two or more shares in a given association. When I met with him to discuss mutual aid associations, Silk had shares in four associations and his partner, Slim, had shares in five.

Another friend, who allowed his personal debts and aid association obligations to multiply to an oppressively unmanageable extent, initiated the formation of yet another mutual aid association in order to draw the pool and settle his outstanding balances, in effect consolidating his debts. Due to the acute severity of the situation, the association head rigged the bidding to ensure that his indebted friend would successfully draw the inaugural pool. At least a couple of other shareholder-friends were aware of this violation of association ethics, but given the circumstances they willingly released the colluding parties from accountability, in effect forgiving the over extended friend for allowing his debts to run amuck. Indeed, the very act of joining this association by all those men aware of the urgent impetus behind its formation amounted to an *act* of forgiveness, affirming a publicly formed personal bond by pardoning what was done for the sake of who did it (see Arendt 1958:241).

Despite the ubiquity of mutual aid associations, there has been relatively scant anthropological attention given to them. And those studies that have explored the extra-economic role of associations have focused on the significance of the fact that women also engage in this shadow zone of social activity (e.g., Tsai 2002; Weller 1999). It is important to note, however, that in Taiwan mutual aid associations *tend* to be gender delineated.⁷⁰ Especially in a society where gender roles and values are differently defined, the social significance of men's and women's associations is differently nuanced. It is therefore worthwhile to look more carefully here at the dynamics of male aid associations, especially in the light of my argument of a plural political public built upon mutual promises among men.

⁷⁰ There are of course exceptions. For example, in a pool hall frequented by many of my informant-friends, the on-site manager was a woman who prepared food, served drinks at the bar, and often gambled at poker with male friends. This woman was also the wife of the pool hall owner and sister of one of my informant-friends. She obtained a special cache among the pool hall regulars and was never treated in the same manner in which these men treated other women, be it bar girls or their wives. This woman was also considered a reliable mutual aid association head and was regularly serving in this capacity during my fieldwork.

While there are different formats, the typical mutual aid association that my friends were involved in was conducted as follows: An individual would take the initiative to organize a mutual aid association—often at the behest of one or more friends in need of quick access to a sizable sum of money--and this person would become the “association head” (*hui shou*). An association head was typically someone well connected and with a reputation of successfully running these associations and attracting reliable shareholders. The trust placed in the reputation of the head is sizable and the success or failure of an association hinges heavily on his (or her) trustworthiness, as the head is responsible for making monthly dues payments on behalf of any members who might default. The head also handles on a monthly basis a sizable sum of cash, and I occasionally heard of a head—either from my friends or through the media--who disappeared with aid association funds.

Shareholders were generally solicited by word of mouth, but especially by the individual initiative of the head, who placed phone calls to friends asking if they would be interested in joining. Based on what I learned from friends, the motivation for participation in aid associations was more commonly “social” than “economic.” Most shareholders in a given association were not participating because they “needed” a large lump of money but rather out of a sense of obligation to the head, to the group of friends who might have constituted the majority of participants, or even specifically to those shareholders known to have been in need of a large sum of money. In my friends’ associations, the shareholders typically knew each other, most often as friends. In a few instances, my friends identified members who were not personal friends of theirs, but were friends of the head.

An aid association lasts for the number of months equal to its number of shares plus one month, for the association head; so, for example, an association with 35 shares runs for 36 months. In the inaugural month of the association, the head automatically draws the pool, without any bidding. In each succeeding month, any

member can bid to draw the pool, and each shareholder is allowed to draw the pool only once for each share he owns in the association. The minimum bid (*di biao*) is specified in advance, and for an association with a base monthly payment (*hui kuan*) of NT\$10,000 (approximately US\$313) per shareholder (this was the most common base monthly payment), the minimum bid was typically NT\$1,100. The winning bid amount, which tends to be much higher earlier in the association's life when competition to draw the pool is keen, represents the amount by which the base monthly payment is reduced in that month for all "live" shareholders (a "live" shareholder is one who has not yet drawn a pool). So, in the second month of a 35 shareholder association, if the winning bid is NT\$1,800, then the winning bidder draws a pool of $(\text{NT\$}10,000 - 1,800) \times 34$, or NT\$278,800 (US\$8,713).⁷¹ In all succeeding months, all "dead" shareholders (those who have already drawn a pool) must pay the full base amount of NT\$10,000, while the remaining "live" bidders continue to pay the base amount reduced by the winning bid amount for that month. Financially, therefore, it obviously pays to draw the pool later rather than earlier, as you will have made smaller monthly payments up to that point, will have needed to make a smaller bid to win the pool (and therefore have taken away a larger pot), and will have remaining fewer "dead" months at which to make monthly payments of the full amount. The reigning belief about mutual aid associations among my friends was that those who draw the pool before the association is half expired lose money, while those who draw the pool after the association is half expired break about even. In other words, while mutual aid associations extend credit to those in need of capital—especially important as the average Taiwanese cannot meet the heavy collateral requirement for bank loans in Taiwan (see Weller 1999:66-67; and Winn 1994:197-204)—what they constitute for the majority of shareholders at any point in time is not

⁷¹ This type of mutual aid association is called "*nei biao*." There is also "*wai biao*," which works differently in terms of the way in which "interest" is effectively charged.

a financial investment but rather “social embeddedness” within a web of friendship relations founded on mutual credibility, or, more specifically, on the promise by all to make monthly payments for the duration of the association. Through their monthly payment and withdrawal cycle, as well as their long-term duration, mutual aid associations can also be viewed as a culturally intimate strategy intended, as Pierre Bourdieu explains, to “neutralize the action of time and ensure the continuity of interpersonal relations,” in short, “to keep friendship going” (Bourdieu 1977:7; see also Herzfeld 2005:171).

Robert Weller recapitulates the conventional interpretation of mutual aid associations as comprised of “personalistic ties of trust” (Weller 1999:68). The notion of “personalistic ties” as used in this social context is problematic because it is pregnant with pre-existing meanings that obscure present ethnographic realities. First of all, personalistic ties are typically taken to be “ascriptive” or “quasi-ascriptive,” which here means given by birth or early formative socialization; for example, ascriptive ties might include those of family, kin, neighborhood, or classmates (1999:69). The meaning of “personalistic” therefore facily succumbs to canonical conceptions of Taiwanese (and Chinese) society as being “particularistic” or “traditional” rather than “modern,” “open,” “civic,” and “rational.” This overdrawn dichotomy, which has Western orientalist roots, marks the former as antithetical to democratic change, or, in revisionist readings, as uniquely conducive to “democracy with Asian characteristics.” By foregrounding promises as initiatory public action, however, I view mutual aid associations not as expressive of preformed personalistic ties but rather as constitutive of durable social bonds and public identities per-formed, *de novo*, within the public realm, albeit the shadow zones of cultural intimacy. Being *of* the pre-public shadow zones, the bonds born of mutual aid associations are therefore also *for* the public.

Night Diving and “Tacit Assurance”

The contexts in which concrete variations of this ethic of promises and forgiveness manifest are manifold. Extreme circumstances brought to my attention a particularly powerful practice of promising that obtained among my night-diving friends. A couple of the several cohorts of spear fishermen with whom I regularly dove had jobs that made daytime diving during the work week impossible for them. These men therefore became avid night divers, and grew fanatically obsessed with the exceptional risks, challenges, and sensations of spearfishing in pitch darkness. They became so self-possessed by their derring-do that they taunted daytime divers by flaunting their bravado. Indeed, some of the most courageous and successful daytime spear fishermen were genuinely spooked by the mere thought of night diving.⁷²

Typically, Native Son would ring me on my mobile at some point during the day and announce a night dive. No matter how early he rang me, for the remainder of that day I experienced an acute sense of nervous exhilaration that intermittently manifested in heart palpitations, shortness of breath, and aggravated bowel syndrome.⁷³ My anxiety was due not merely to the thought of battling nasty waves and unpredictable currents in pitch darkness or being unable to see what might be swimming alongside me outside the narrow beam of my flashlight—the usual sources of night diving concern. Rather, my uneasiness derived from the fact that my friends failed to observe even the most basic night diving safety precautions that I was taught in dive training classes—devising a clear dive plan, positioning a shore light at the

⁷² For a time, I too became hooked on night diving, and some of these sublime nocturnal adventures were so surreal that, even when recalling them through rereading fieldnotes, they emerge from my memory as a dreamy admixture of terror and transcendence.

⁷³ These symptoms became increasingly acute during the drive to the shore and lasted right up until I entered the water; almost without exception, I had to stop to “take care of business” during the one hour or so drive out to the north shore and even scuttle off behind a secluded rock to do so again right before donning my wetsuit. My friends eventually accepted this as a “normal,” but never uncommented upon, part of my pre-dive routine. When recounting our adventures to others, they would often invoke as evidence of how unnerving night diving was the fact that it literally scared the crap out of me. But here this was no loss of face because most of my friends drew the line at night diving and would not even entertain the possibility of joining us.

point of entry, toting a surface light overhead, following the buddy system. These lapses intensified the usual night diving anxieties and further availed the event to an unsettling assortment of otherwise avoidable hazards—getting lost, being struck by a passing boat, becoming trapped in fishing line or an abandoned fish net (very real possibilities along Taiwan’s heavily fished coast), finding yourself too far from shore in the event of an emergency (such as running out of air), or being swept away by the unpredictable currents that plague Taiwan’s coast. Only upon broaching the issue of safety lapses to Native Son, Four Legs, and Tripper on one memorably harrowing late-night commute to the shore did I learn that my friends allowed the risks born of these lapses to raise the stakes of that which they relied upon as a substitute—“tacit assurance” (*moqi*).

On this particular evening, it was raining torrentially at 7 p.m. when Four Legs and I arrived at the dive shop. Even though partially paralyzed from the waist down from an adult accident, Four Legs was a remarkably strong diver; moreover, he was supremely passionate about scuba—and especially hunting, for which he crafted his own speargun--and I always thought that this might be because it was only when prowling for prey under water that his handicap was erased. I told Four Legs that this kind of rain suggested a storm at sea and that it would be insane to attempt a night dive.⁷⁴ Four Legs first commented that I seemed to have lost some “nerve” since we began night diving together over a year ago. He then began to apply steady pressure. He first reminded me of our special spot, a small bay forty-five minutes further down the coast from our usual dive site that had a safer entry point shielded from the big waves. I replied that it was not worth driving two-hours in this deluge in order “maybe” to make a successful entry. Four Legs then reinforced how integral I was to their relaxed and fun atmosphere, adding somewhat gratuitously that I had “promised”

⁷⁴ A storm at sea creates dangerous waves and a powerful surge.

I would go. Moreover, as if divulging a secret, he made certain I understood that in order to “give me face” Native Son might say it was okay if I wished to back out but that he would “curse you behind your back.” I finally agreed to go along but made it clear that I would not dive if conditions were too treacherous.

Native Son and Tripper showed up around eight o’clock. They displayed only excitement about the torrential rain and hurriedly went about gathering their gear and loading the SUV. I volunteered to drive, figuring that this might serve as compensation in the event that I decided not to dive. Something about the atmosphere of these late-night littoral jaunts—perhaps the devious sense of defiance derived from expropriating “life” from “darkness” combined with the anxious anticipation of a sharply disadvantaged encounter with the fickle forces of Fortuna—made for wickedly unrestrained, no holds barred conversation. No topic was out of bounds and no depths of the personal were off limits during these nocturnal drives to the coast. That night, the blinding rain, which intensified dramatically as we neared the shore, seemed to amplify our usual quotidian disconnect, not least by concentrating all attention within the cramped SUV, a claustrophobic sensation accentuated by my forward-leaning driving posture as I strained to catch a glimpse of the road behind each swipe of the overextended windshield wipers. Four Legs was as passionate about discourse as he was about diving and that night had us in teary-eyed stitches as he ingenuously divulged the micro-techniques of oral sex as well as “coming” in unison with your partner during intercourse. After an hour or so, we arrived at our usual spot only to witness giant waves driven by a powerful surge smashing against the rocks. Entry was impossible under these conditions, so Native Son motioned for forging on to our special spot. Four Legs and Tripper automatically agreed, but I somehow sensed they began to harbor reservations.

As I struggled to steer the SUV along the winding coast through torrential rain, we debated the prospects of doing a dive in the storm. I decided to raise the issue of

night diving safety procedures, and for the first time in more than a year of diving with these guys I threw the training book at them. I mentioned the importance, especially in dangerous conditions, of a dive plan, a shore light, a surface light, and strict adherence to the buddy system. I added that without the assurance of these precautions, I was reluctant to risk doing a night dive in this storm. Native Son, Four Legs, and Tripper responded without deliberation with what seemed like a well-rehearsed and coordinated rejoinder. They explained to me how night diving buddies develop “tacit assurance” (*moqi*), an unobtrusive mutual awareness of each other’s underwater location and dive habits that was a prerequisite for “safety and relaxation.” In particular, they explained, this tacit pact entailed the responsibility always to remain within rough eye-shot of each other, but not too close so as to disrupt hunting or present a danger, as each diver is carrying a speargun with a range of 10 to 15 feet. When night diving, this meant that each diver independently went about his hunting business—stealthily searching in crevices for lobsters and under rocks for sleeping fish—while also remaining aware of the dim, hazy illumination of the dive lights of the three or four other divers gently maneuvering in the general vicinity. Indeed, I eventually realized that what my friends were trying to tell me was that it was precisely the *absence* of formal procedures—including the monitoring of tides (which directly impact currents)--that availed the night diving experience to the ambient contingencies and uncertainties necessary for *moqi* to obtain. In other words, the guarantees provided by formal safety precautions would have preempted the special intersubjective efficacy of *moqi*, which may be likened to a mutual promise that is at once a modality of action, a manifestation of mutual understanding, and a source of stability.

Native Son concluded the lesson on *moqi* with a negative example involving Cruiser, who, he explained, was a diver without *moqi* because he paid no mind to his own whereabouts vis-à-vis that of the other divers. On one night dive, Cruiser

apparently wandered off and became entangled in fishing line and had to be rescued—this type of night diving habit, Native Son cautioned, was unacceptable because it destroyed their sense of safety and relaxation and could lead to an “accident” (*chushi*). As if to reinforce the degree to which *moqi* entailed mutual agreement, Four Legs declared as we arrived at our special spot that none of us would dive unless all four of us agreed to do so. The wind and rain were fierce and the rocky ledge so slippery that we had to crawl to the edge, where even inside the bay we discovered a powerful surge pounding out a warning to stay away that each of us tacitly understood.

The analytical significance of viewing promises and forgiveness as an initiatory source of “limited” or “partial” stability in the “in-between” shadow zones of the plural public realm cannot be understated. Totalizing strategies of self-mastery, coherence, and autonomy require the “excessive and comprehensive ordering of the self” (Honig 1993:85)—and we will examine one such totalizing initiative in national military training in Chapter 6. Conversely, the performatives of promising and forgiveness are spontaneous modes of action that set up “islands of predictability” that necessarily remain “*partial* land masses” because once they “lose their character as isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty...they lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating” (1993:85). “Only the fragile stabilities of promising [and forgiveness],” explains Bonnie Honig, “are consistent with the freedom that is action and with [a] view of the self as a site of struggle” (1993:85). But these in-between islands of stability are also conducive to the production of particularistic intimacy or brotherliness, a kind of excessive closeness with a propensity toward unworldliness, which manifests as the obliteration of self-affirming distinctions and the creation of subcultural hierarchies. It is the socio-sexual *agôn* that mediates and mitigates these tendencies by reinserting gender-delineated spaces between relations among men.

The Socio-Sexual Agôn

Taiwanese cityscapes are visibly sexualized. Walking through any city or town, one is assailed by “signs,” both subtle and explicit, that convey the message that women are available to please men, for a fee. “Special service” beauty salons (*meirong dian* or *lifa dian*) and massage parlors (*anmo dian*)—often flagged by a signboard bearing the Chinese character either for “pure” (*chun*) or for “flower” (*hua*)—dot city streets (see Zhang Dachun (Datou Chun) 1996, pp. 100-101). The unmistakably discrete storefronts of “special teahouses” (*teyue chashi*), which might be trimmed with colored lights or adorned with traditional paper lanterns, signal to men that the pampering hostesses of the flower-wine drinking world are never far away. Sexualized female services are also structured into younger hipster hangouts, from popular bubble tea cafés (*paomo hongcha*), which offer the conversational company of young hostesses, to omnipresent pool halls, across the front of one of which I found stretched a bright red banner reading, “young beauties at your service” (*mei shaonü dengchang fuwu*). Perhaps most infamously ubiquitous since the mid-1990s, however, have been “betel nut beauties” (*binglang xishi*), scantily clad young girls perched in roadside glass display booths who make and sell betel nuts.

According to Michel de Certeau, “the moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place” (Certeau 1984:103). If for Certeau to walk in the city is “the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (1984:103), in urban Taiwan ever-present public signs of women selling sexualized services unambiguously interpollate hierarchical heterosexual norms, forging powerfully durable “pretenses of the proper” (1984:103).

Military Paradise

During the early years of KMT rule, brothels tended to be concentrated in and around military bases.⁷⁵ Two types of brothels predominated: “military brothels” (*yingji, ba-san-yao leyuan*, or *junzhong leyuan*, the latter literally meaning “military paradise”), which were established and run by the KMT to serve its defeated and exiled military personnel, and “private brothels” (*si yaozi*), which emerged nearby to military bases as a more affordable alternative for rank-and-file soldiers.⁷⁶ Military brothels maintained a procedurally and temporally regimented protocol, one which acknowledged military rank by providing preferential treatment for officers. In some instances, they were set up as recreational hang outs where soldiers could drink tea and play pool before and after “pleasure” (*yule*). Touted as more “hygienic” than private brothels, military brothels were intended to ensure that soldiers—who were permitted neither to resign from service nor to marry—had a “safe” socio-sexual outlet where they would avoid confrontations with civilians (see Li Ao 1996:160-223).

According to Li Ao, the influential Taiwanese writer-critic, it is hardly unusual for militaries everywhere to provide, in one way or another, the services of women for their soldiers. What is historically unprecedented about Taiwan, insists Li, is the KMT’s effort to bring “all” brothels—or, more accurately, all public female bodies--within its control. The KMT once heralded its military brothels as “virtuous governance” (*de zheng*) due to their presumed standards of health and hygiene. In the martial law era, as Antonia Chao argues, there was a powerfully enforced parallel of media representability between the female body and the national body—the former physico-symbolic, the latter geo-political--which was structured around the essentialized notion of “integrity” (Chao 2000:264). In a 1996 essay, Li mocks the

⁷⁵ This would include military bases run by the KMT as well as those where American troops were stationed during the Vietnam War.

⁷⁶ It goes without saying that private brothels also served civilians.

KMT's paternalistic claims about the ethico-hygienic integrity of military brothels as "propaganda" and declares that the flourishing of "private brothels" alongside the military ones "explodes the KMT's fantasy of unifying all brothels under the normative banner of the Three Principles of the People" (Li Ao 1996:166).

While military brothels are a thing of the past—all but extinct by the late 1980s--the historically formative imbrication of national military culture and male sexuality, as mediated by the female body, is preserved in popular sexual idiom, which still commonly assumes a professional military jargon. For example, a popular term for a brothel is "battle front" (*pao zhendi*); a bed for sex might be called the "cannon table" (*pao tai*); ejaculation prior to contact is an "air explosion" (*kong zha*); premature ejaculation becomes a "flash assault" (*shun fa*); holding back ejaculation is dubbed a "dilatatory tactic" (*yanqi*); and to be impotent is to "fire blanks" (*kong dan*) (see 1996:170). When bantering about sex, my friends invariably deployed one or other of these martial metaphors.

Embedded within these martial metaphors is the memory of the soldier's agonistic encounter with the indentured prostitute of the "battle front," euphemistically referred to as "military paradise." What staged the conditions for competitive combat were the rules of the game. One "ticket" for one round of "pleasure" bought you forty minutes, within which time you had to complete four stages: "pleasure" (stripping, foreplay, and a limit of one ejaculation), "washing" (which was done in a separate room), "getting redressed and tidied up," and "exiting." Because of the rule that "pleasure" formally ended as soon as the soldier ejaculated, if a prostitute could "finish off" a soldier quickly then she could free some personal time for herself between rounds. Moreover, because a soldier feared losing face by emerging too soon before the forty-minute round was up, he might choose to transform a potential indignity into prestige by "adding a round" (*jia jie*), sending the message not only that he could afford to buy more time but, more importantly, that his

stamina required it. Indeed, according to Li, one privilege afforded to officers was that the placard reading “round added” was displayed on the “battle front” door as soon as they entered it.

The strategy most commonly adopted by prostitutes to finish off a soldier promptly was to “pump-and-grind” (*yaodong*) exaggeratedly as soon as the soldier mounted her. Especially given that these rounds were pricey for soldiers, those who experienced a quick ejaculation felt both “defeated” and “cheated.” Consequently, “no pumping-and-grinding” became the soldier’s “military paradise” mantra. However, prostitutes had little incentive to be obliging, so soldiers pursued counter-strategies to prolong pleasure, including buying and applying various ointments. Interestingly, prolonging intercourse by withholding ejaculation is a paramount male preoccupation in ancient Chinese bedchamber manuals as well as in the formulation of virility concoctions that remain a specialty of traditional Chinese medicine (Festa 2004). In this context, however, the preoccupation with endurance was mediated by concerns about money and martial prowess, and disruptive confrontations between soldiers and prostitutes over this competitive performance issue were usual.

The agonistic sexual tensions between soldiers and prostitutes were also exacerbated by the exploitative conditions of the latter’s work, which Li describes as akin to a “meat market”:

What most gives “military paradise” the feeling of a “meat market” is the fact that the prostitutes had to receive a daily minimum number of “guests” but no daily maximum. On pay day or national holidays (e.g., Sundays), each prostitute typically served between thirty and forty guests. But serving thirty or forty guests was by no means deemed proficient. Only if she served over fifty would she receive a bonus. At the Nabalín “military paradise,” there were even competitions held among prostitutes, who were judged based upon both speed of service and quantity served (of course each woman easily exceeded

fifty or sixty guests)—and firecrackers were exploded to congratulate them. When I learned of this I could not help but wonder what planet these people could be from. It is difficult to imagine how one person could endure washing his or her hands fifty or sixty times a day, but having sex fifty or sixty times is utterly unfathomable. But this was life at Taiwan’s “meat markets” under the “virtuous governance” of the KMT. (Li Ao 1996:172)

According to my informant-friends, military paradise has largely disappeared, but “civilian” brothels and special teahouses still thrive. Moreover, beyond actual experience, legend, raconteur, and a popular genre of nonfiction called, “military training stories” (*junzhong gushi*) (e.g., Shen Yunsheng 1993), perpetuate the agonistic sexual component of national military training that initiates men into the vibrant, diverse, and multi-tiered courtesanal service industry available to them in sexualized shadow zones of the public realm. One popular nonfiction volume, *Military Paradise (Junzhong leyuan)*, suggests a correlation between the dismantling of the military brothel phenomenon and the rise of homosexuality and more than alludes to the way that military brothels mediated the homoerotic tensions born of the intense male bonding cultivated in military training. A chapter entitled, “Never bathe with women?” opens with a cryptic anecdotal dialogue, the meaning of which becomes clear only as the chapter unfolds (Lin Qinglan 1993:82):

“Never bathe with women,” blurted soldier Zhang Debiao, studiously reciting from the handbook of the big ten principles for living harmoniously with civilians (*aimin shida shouce*).

“Wrong! It’s ‘Always bathe under cover!’” amended the battalion chief.

“When did the principle change?”

“Oh! Probably...about the time of the arrival of AIDS.”

The chapter is interesting because in divulging the fact of homosexual activity in the military it also awkwardly reveals the indirect way in which military brothels

had served to maintain the “secret.” The author, Lin Qinglan, begins by pointing out a (Foucaultian) paradox, namely that although in Taiwan there has been an explosion of “sexual information” and “sex education,” there nonetheless remains no sense of sexual normalization. This is evidenced, Lin maintains, by the fact that people still satisfy their sexual needs in all sorts of ways. He then suggests that soldiers are no different in this regard—visiting military brothels and engaging in homosexual activity. However, Lin asserts that soldiers are exceptional in the degree to which they fastidiously unite in preserving the secret of their sexual pleasures, and he uses a common idiom, *xinzhao buxuan*, which is a nearly precise synonym of *moqi*, the one used above by my nocturnal spearfishing buddies meaning “tacit agreement, understanding, or assurance.” Lin expresses “admiration” for this unified hush-hush, adapting another common idiom that traditionally applies to the family by replacing the character for private “domicile” (*jia*) with “military” (*jun*): “Never air dirty military linen in public” (*jun chou bu ke wai yang*) (1993:82-83).

But accompanying the disappearance of military brothels is not simply, speculates Lin, the increase of homosexual activity. More significant, and this seems to be Lin’s main point, is the loss of military brothels as the public secret that constituted the hetero-normative legitimacy of fraternal unity—now everyone talks about military brothels. As the anecdotal dialogue above now makes plain, the disappearance of military brothels has unleashed a new discourse of homosexuality as taboo. In other words, without the public secret—“never bathe with women”—the “private secret” about men is no longer unthinkable; now, the stated rule is “*always* bathe under cover.” This disclosure has destabilized the hetero-normativity of fraternal unity, the ideal of which necessarily turns on two sides of a single coin—intimacy and sociality—with both sides appearing as “heads.” But with the transparency accompanying the loss of the public secret, the double-sided coin has been exposed as false.

Notwithstanding, Lin acknowledges that military brothels have been replaced by privately run “special teahouses”—among a host of other “special service” establishments--which have expanded well beyond the environs of military bases and into penumbral regions of cityscapes throughout Taiwan. Significantly, these special services are embedded within Taiwan’s highly commercialized consumer culture, so that “sex” is accessible only through the manifold mediations and alienations of the commodity loop. Consequently, what might once have been a fee-for-service transaction whose dénouement was physical has now become a commodified structure of desire animated by the recursive cycling of “authentic” memories, images, and fantasies and, in most instances, the deferral of the object (physical sex). In the new socio-sexual *agôn*, as we will see, sexualized women are desired less as providers of sex, per se, than they are, as Lin Fangmei, Chairwoman of Taiwan’s National Youth Commission, puts it, as purveyors of “sex-fantasy services” (Lin Fangmei 2002).⁷⁷

Betel Nut Beauties

During the four years that I lived in Taiwan, I grew quite accustomed to “reading” and “decoding” the vaguely veiled signs, at once penumbral and apparent, of sexualized services ubiquitously available to men in public urban spaces. Beauty salons and barber shops, KTV clubs and dance parlors, hot spring hotels (*wenquan* or *san-wen-nuan*) and massage parlors, tea houses and (certain) Japanese-style restaurants—these are staple public spots, some more shadowy than others, and potential providers of special services found in all Taiwanese cityscapes. And men need not patronize these places to garner “profit” from them; indeed, all men accrue a certain symbolic capital from their very public existence, whether they abstain or

⁷⁷ In hostess clubs, as I detail in the next chapter, women might even assert crass fee-for-service “sex” as a subversive strategy, in order to explode men’s fantasies of authenticity with the irrefutable finiteness of the object.

indulge. The mere fact that everyone “knows” of these “secret” establishments and that they “might” offer special female services go far to shape and reinforce male imaginings of their privileged public status vis-à-vis women, and to reaffirm, however subtly, the normative value of gender-delineated hierarchy within a plural public whose progressive potentiality hinges on forgetting the necessity of this vertical value. Consequently, it is not insignificant to their public efficacy that these places are at once shadowy *and* visible.

My friends seemed to know at a glance, and loved to point out, if a place was “special,” typically by uttering in a mischievously hushed tone the following line while squinting an eye behind a pointed finger as if locking onto a bulls-eye: “*That place keeps the ‘shady secret’*” (*Neige difang jiu you ‘hei’ de*).⁷⁸ Also impressive was how seemingly appraised my friends were on the prices charged at each special place for the different services offered, even though I could be fairly certain that they were not patrons of most of these places. The company of a hostess at this club, a “half-package” (*ban tao*) at that beauty salon, a “full-package” (*quan tao*) at this massage parlor—naming the service and fee seemed to be a performative act by means of which my friends produced and maintained a clandestine discursive “menu” and proclaimed their privy to its secret.⁷⁹

But with the rising invisibility of state power owing to its market-mediated diffusion, as Antonia Chao argues, there has been a corresponding compulsion to render the female body visible, making it a site where the competing forces of authentication and commodification clash and converge (Chao 2000:243-246). Consequently, not all sexualized services for men have remained within vaguely visible penumbral city spaces. In the mid-1990s, scantily clad young girls,

⁷⁸ I translate *hei*, which most commonly means “black,” as “shady secret,” which is one of its recognized extended meanings, as in *hei shehui*, which refers to (the illegitimate) “underground or secret society.” See Liang Shiqiu’s *Far East Chinese-English Dictionary*.

⁷⁹ “Half-package” and “full-package” refer to oral sex or a hand-job and intercourse, respectively.

occasionally under eighteen-years old (Li Hanchang 2000), began appearing provocatively perched in road-side glass display booths throughout the island--these are Taiwan's "betel-but beauties."⁸⁰ The betel-nut beauty was introduced by betel-nut merchants in order to lure business in an increasingly competitive retail market in which approximately two million people, or nine percent of the population, chew betel nuts, which are a stimulant (Chuang 2002).⁸¹ In less than a decade, betel-nut beauties have spread like wildfire throughout the island. In Taoyuan County, for example, where Chiang Kai-shek International Airport is located, there were roughly 1,700 betel-nut stands in 2002, with no small number of these lining the busy roads between the airport and downtown Taipei (Chuang 2002a). And given the "nativist" flavor of betel-nut chewing, betel-nut stands tend to be even more pervasive throughout the southern parts of the island, where "native" Taiwanese culture is more pronounced. Indeed, the betel-nut beauty has emerged as a "unique cultural marker" in Taiwan (Chuang 2002a), and her arrival has been affirmed by an annual island-wide betel-nut beauty contest, which is conducted online, by a 2001 Lin Zhengsheng film featuring mega-star Zhang Zhen whose English title is "Betel-Nut Beauty," as well as by the fact that the beauty has remained a persistently controversial media phenomenon.⁸²

Betel nuts in Taiwan come in two varieties commonly prepared for chewing: white lime (*bao ye*) and red lime (TW: *chi-a*). Betel nuts are acidic, so a pasty lime, which is alkaline, is used to flavor the nuts. Red lime is more pungent, and is typically sandwiched along with another nut (*lao hua*) in the center of a halved betel nut,

⁸⁰ My friends date the appearance of betel-nut beauties back to around "1995 or 1996"; however, Taoyuan County (which has become especially well-known for its betel-nut beauties) Betel Nut Association Secretary-General Peng Tien-le has stated that an exact date of the appearance of the betel-nut beauty is difficult to determine, but "probably back in 1998" (Chuang 2002).

⁸¹ Betel-nut stands actually serve a much larger clientele than this number suggests, as they also sell cigarettes, bottled water, and other beverages. As the owner of one betel-but booth put it, "I bet we sell more cigarettes every day than all 7-11s put together" (Ho 2000:290).

⁸² The Chinese title of the Lin Zhengsheng film is "*Ai ni, ai wo*," which translates as "Love you, love me." It is quite common for Taiwanese films to have separate Chinese and English titles that do not translate into each other. In this case, however, the English title is quite apropos, as the film is a love story about a betel-nut beauty and the racketeering world of betel-nut stand operators.

producing a sweet, mint flavored stimulant. Once exposed to air, the meat of a betel nut will turn brown, like an apple's, so the halved betel nuts used for red-lime preparation are often bleached with unhealthy chemicals. For the white lime variety, the betel nut is not halved, so the meat is not exposed and no unhealthy chemicals are used. Instead, white lime is spread onto an edible leaf (*lao ye*—neither a betel nut nor a *lao hua* leaf), which is then used to wrap the betel nut, producing a bitter flavored chew. The betel-nut beauty spends most of her time perched at a counter in a glass booth preparing and packaging mainly these two varieties of betel nuts. Cars pull up to the curb and the beauty ritually alights from her glass loft, typically gingerly in high-heel or platform shoes, and approaches the window of the car to take the order, which, in addition to betel nuts, might include cigarettes, bottled water, or some other beverage.⁸³ It is when the beauty approaches the car to take and deliver the order that Taiwan's betel-nut buying ritual becomes agonistically acute.

Buying betel nuts was requisite to my friends' spearfishing routine and symbolically signaled the spatiotemporal passage from the cosmopolitan cityscape of Taipei to the quaint harbor town of Keelung. After traversing a thirty mile or so stretch of highway—with our ride repeatedly punctuated by a talking radar detector that barked, "Mr. Driver, you're speeding!"--we would exit in Keelung, where the ocean instantly came into view and our first order of business was always to stop at our favorite betel-nut booth. One stand became our favorite owing to the young and stunningly attractive beauty who worked there, and each time we pulled up we looked forward to discovering what new outfit she might be wearing and to detecting how much of her body was uncovered for us to see. Even though we could—and in other contexts often did--either yell or hand signal our order, thereby saving the beauty one round-trip stroll to the car, when spearfishing was on the agenda we deliberately

⁸³ To be sure, even non-betel-nut chewers might patronize betel-nut beauties for cigarettes and/or beverages.

waited for her to approach us before ordering and savored her two visits to the car window.⁸⁴ Moreover, betel-nut beauty protocol entails two things, both of which we also expected when our stop was part of our spearfishing routine: that the beauty would, upon reaching the car, bend forward at the waist in order to look into the car window and reveal more of her breasts than was already showing, and that she would then query us in her signature cloyingly pettish whimper (*sajiao* or *zhinen de tongyin*): “What do you want?”

“What do you want?” is the betel-but beauty’s innuendo-laden question that, in conjunction with the conflicting images of purity and disrepute that her young bared body has been ideologically constructed to signify, converts the transitory road-side transaction into the transcendent circuit of male desire. My friends’ responses to the betel-nut beauty’s query varied, but the tenor was typically one of two: either they would engage the beauty somewhat earnestly and sensitively, as if seeking to strike a chord of genuine friendship, or they would indulge in patently flirtatious repartee, as if transgressive sexual teasing was the required code of access to the authenticity inherent in her body. In one encounter with a young beauty, my friends casually queried her about school, her family, and her future career plans. They awkwardly persisted with the concerned conversation, appearing satisfied only once the beauty dropped her professional pettish whimper, at which point I sensed that she also became self-conscious of her skimpy sexy attire, which could not be similarly removed. But more often, my friends played up the sexual teasing typically staged in

⁸⁴ The hand signals my friends sometimes used to communicate with the betel-nut beauty from a distance were interesting. On one stop at a betel-nut stand, I was sitting in the passenger seat and another friend was seated in the back. As soon as we stopped, the friend in the back seat reached his hand out my front window and signaled in a split second as follows: a short chop, resembling a karate chop at the wrist, a flash of five fingers, and a subsequent flash of two fingers. The chop signaled the split red lime variety of betel nuts; the five fingers referred to the fifty-*yuan*-sized box; and the two fingers indicated two fifty-*yuan* boxes. A moment after my friend fired the hand signals, the betel-nut beauty approached the car with the order. From what I observed, men derived from this non-verbal communication a strong sense of affirmation of mastery over the betel-but beauty and, more generally, of the public etiquette that confers privilege.

these exchanges. On one occasion, when the beauty approached me at the passenger seat window, my friend sitting in the back leaned forward and addressed her: “Why are you wearing so much today? We can’t see a thing. How about giving our ‘foreign friend’ a peak at your little breasts? What do you say?” The young beauty twisted and giggled and, affecting an exaggeratedly performative pettish whimper, replied, “Nah...I’d rather not.” The tentative rejection is not a denial but rather a deferral that reasserts the tensile force integral to the socio-sexual *agôn*, ensuring that male desire is rekindled and remains restlessly inseparable from striving and opposition.

As the public milieu that mediates the excess of intimacy born of male bonding through promising and forgiving, the socio-sexual *agôn* is a powerful force in cultivating the contours of male desire. The socio-sexual *agôn* not only affirms these desires as normatively heterosexual, but it defines their “normative” object as a “forbidden” and “dangerous” sexualized female who is necessarily of the penumbral public realm and not of the home (more on the home below). The potency of the forbidden public female as the object of male desire is widely reinforced not only by the roadside reality of betel-nut beauties, but also by popular representations of her in fiction and film. One day, while lounging on a coffee shop couch, I began flipping through a pile of magazines. On the cover of the Chinese edition of *Cosmopolitan*, I noticed the byline for a story under the heading “Sex Adventure”: “She finally escaped from those cold old betel-nut beauty days” (Meigui 2000). The plot of the story centers chiefly on one betel-nut beauty, Snowy, who rises out of the “dark world” of “selling female sexuality” and becomes a successful lawyer. However, her liberator is a male of the dark world, Big Brother, who operates a chain of betel-nut stands run by a hired harem of betel-nut beauties. Especially noteworthy, however, is the fact that the story does not deliver graphic or steamy depictions of sexual adventure, as billed in its heading. What makes this urban adventure “sexual” is precisely the fact that it is

the tale of a betel-nut beauty which turns on the convergence of the socio-sexual *agôn* and male fantasy.

The narrative opens with stereotypical evocations of the betel-nut beauty's seductive display of youthful fecundity, as well as a stereotypical exchange between a beauty and a cab-driver customer (Meigui 2000:183):⁸⁵

A dazzlingly sexy red lace bra propped up her still ripening breasts, youthfully plump like a pair of milky white pigeons. Her string panties were skimpily swathed with the same dazzling red lace, fastened only by a dangerously precarious butterfly knot. Her understated lingerie was ostensibly overspread by a super-short and freely-flapping diaphanous skirt, 'now visible, now invisible' (*hu yin hu xian*), inciting the hearts of drivers coming and going to follow suit and wildly flutter. Her fine facial features were sharply accentuated by a thick coat of intricately applied make-up mimicking a smiling mask, which hid the sadness behind her sexy entreaties to passing drivers.

"Oh my, Brother Liu, I haven't seen you in quite a while. You forgot all about me, haven't you?" As soon as she spoke, her childlike pettish whimper pointed up a sharp contrast with her stunningly mature beauty. "Only a 100-yuan box? Could 100 yuan worth of betel nuts possibly be enough for you? I know. I know. As soon as you leave me here you'll cross the bridge and buy more from the girls over there. Huh. I'm not gonna pay any mind to you."

The strong and robust cab driver pulled a long face as he stretched his head out the car window and reached for his box of betel nuts. As he took the

⁸⁵ Cab drivers and truck drivers are considered to be the archetypal consumers of betel-nuts and clientele of the betel-nut beauty. The reasons are as much cultural as practical: betel nuts help to keep these drivers alert, while their blue-collar status is believed to render them vulnerable to superficial sexual compulsions.

box, he gave the beauty's soft and slender wrist a gentle twist and tauntingly queried, "Well, how much is enough for me?"

"Add another zero, at the very least."

The beauty returned to the car with 9 boxes of betel nuts stacked up in her two hands. Brother Liu pulled out a \$1000 *yuan* note and stuffed it into the beauty's petite lace brassiere, planting a pinch in passing on her tender breasts that left a swollen red hickey beaming against her milky white skin.

"Ouch. That hurt..."

Hearing the beauty's fragile protest, Brother Liu produced an obscene smile and sped away.

As the car's exhaust evaporated, Snowy's smiling mask turned expressionless. She returned to her glass booth and took her seat behind a sign that flashed the stand's name in flickering neon, "Little Hot Pepper Betel Nut." All the locals knew that this betel-nut stand had a hot little beauty with a cold name and expression.

The story then explores Snowy's personal background. Her family is poor, and her parents drink and gamble. They demand that their daughters go out and sell sex at fourteen. But Snowy was frail and feisty, and proved to be nothing but trouble for the pimp. One night, a local underworld gang member, "Big Brother," rescued Snowy from an ally where the pimp was beating her and gave her a job selling betel nuts at one of his stands. Snowy worked hard to master the craft of making betel nuts, and garnered a reputation for selling the highest quality product. She regularly complained to the *laoye* distributor for peddling substandard leaves and lime, and one day the distributor advised her: "Snowy, just wear less clothing and you'll sell more betel nuts. No need to work so hard. Since when must a betel-nut beauty be a connoisseur?" Snowy shot back: "Even though we dress skimpily, we don't sell our wares. What we sell are betel nuts, and we want our customers to have the best. Isn't

this so?” Although Snowy was equally earnest and conscientious with her schoolwork and earned excellent marks, she was expelled from high school for being a betel-nut beauty.

Snowy nonetheless obtained school textbooks from a sympathetic teacher, and continued to study hard with the hope of returning to school. While sleeping in her bed one night, she was awakened with a fright by a strange man. The man informed an alarmed Snowy that her parents had sold him her virginity. Terrified, Snowy fought free and escaped through the window, running hysterically through the streets. Just as her father and suitor caught up with her, Snowy’s boss, Big Brother, arrived and once again rescued her, this time taking her to his home, where he gently cleaned her up and calmed her until she fell asleep. Snowy was eternally grateful to Big Brother, and offered him any and all he wished of herself. Everyone assumed Snowy would stay and become Big Brother’s girl; instead, Big Brother set her free—both from any debt to himself and from the dark world.

Snowy began life anew, taking her own apartment in the city and returning to her studies. She completed vocational high school and then went on to graduate from law school. Her choice to study law stemmed from an acute awareness that “reality is full of traps,” and she desired to understand every in and out of these traps in order safely to distance herself from them. Her combination of intellect, streetwise, and beauty made her a formidably successful lawyer. Throughout these productive years of pursuing her career, it is important to note, she eliminated any trace of men from her life and “lived like a nun.” Only this way could she disremember her origins and especially the dark world where she beckoned roadside business with her bared youthful body and solicitous waving hands.

One day, Snowy appeared at a detention center to tender bail for a high official’s son. She noticed a man slouched and manacled against the wall—it was Big Brother, now aged. In a rush, the faded memories of her shadowy past, rendered

opaque by a thin cover of dust, flooded her mind. After pulling some strings with the in-charge, Snowy squatted beside Big Brother and uttered softly, “I’m your lawyer.” Big Brother showed no sign of recognition. Despite the onslaught of painful memories, Snowy shed not a tear, smiled faintly to herself, and departed with fiery determination in her eyes. Only now was she truly unfettered from the haunting memories of her dark past. While being ushered to his cell, Big Brother peered back to watch Snowy take her leave. He smiled faintly to himself, recalling the hazy memory of that chilly morning when Snowy turned her back on the dark world and walked away, filled with fiery determination.

While most superficially this is a story of one betel-nut beauty’s liberation from the shadow zone into which uncontrollable circumstances deposited her: “No one is born a betel-nut beauty,” is Snowy’s reply to another beauty’s comment to the effect that Snowy looked so much like a student that it was a shame she was a betel-nut beauty. But what is the significance of the story’s fixated sexual framing, which includes not a single sex scene? Indeed, at a deeper level of meaning, the story constitutes the convergence of male fantasy and the socio-sexual *agôn*. Snowy is not only rescued twice by a man whose livelihood entails exploiting young girls, but she affirms a patriarchal fantasy of male virtuosity when, in the end, she rescues her liberator-oppressor, in effect erasing his status as “oppressor” by affirming him as worthy of redemption by the oppressed. Snowy furthermore authenticates the virtuosity of the socio-sexual *agôn*: “Life beyond the dark world is a lot tougher than I imagined it would be. Indeed, I discovered that the hearts and minds of the people who dwell in the dark world are no uglier than those of the outside world.”

For Snowy, then, the trade off of fleeing the dark world and achieving independence in the outside world—a world she idealized and that animated her desires—is a life that is cold, sterile, and lonely. This “monastic life” (*shenghuo de wanru xiunü*) is often the fate of women excluded from the “webs of relations” woven

of public acts of promising and forgiving among a plurality of men. In the public realm, many women find an avenue of qualified commercial integration within the socio-sexual *agôn*, where female sexuality can be a high-priced marketable commodity. But because women are made to embody the unsavory sexual stigma and hierarchical realities of this dark world, most would choose, if they could, to be free of the masks and memories of the dark world. Conversely, what men ineluctably embody through public acts of promising and forgiving are intimate “islands of security,” which are integral to the “actual” functioning of their power and privilege. If these “islands of security” are in practice held afloat by an “unmanly” mode of homosocial intimacy—whose flip-side is the specter of homoerotic desire--the socio-sexual *agôn* serves as a pivotal gender-delineated mediation that reconstitutes the hierarchy and necessity of hetero-normative masculinity. Once again, it is the “visible invisibility” of the public secret—the socio-sexual *agôn*—that buttresses hetero-normative masculinity and preserves the efficacy of the private secret, to wit, that in the last instance male power is built upon a culturally intimate foundation of homosocial desire.

Fantasy, the “Three No’s,” and “Tacit Permission”

It is interesting how the betel-nut beauty’s panties have become a metaphor for the visible invisibility of the socio-sexual *agôn* as a representational space of fantasy. In the *Cosmopolitan* story, Snowy’s “semi-transparent” (*ban touming*) clothing--in particular her panties, “now visible, now invisible” (*hu yin hu xian*)--is the very first image described, constituting a synecdoche of the “sex adventure” itself. The betel-nut beauty’s “safety panties” (*baoxian ku*), as they are otherwise referred to, are also a topic taken up in Josephine Chuen-juei Ho’s conversations with Taiwanese sex workers. Safety panties are nontransparent skin-colored tights that beauties usually wear beneath their regular panties, so that a revealing sexy panty only appears to be

revealing the “real.” As Ho explains about safety panties, “Their size, shape, and color are deliberately designed to give off a certain degree of ambiguity. In other words, ‘safety panties’ do not simply cover over the private parts; more often than not, they function as an imaginary space where flirtations or fantasies could take place” (Ho 2000:290). One safety-panties wearing beauty dramatized for Ho a typical exchange with a customer who remarks, “Look! I can see your panties!” The beauty, having no need to feel shamed or embarrassed, then jokingly responds, “Really? But what you see may not be my panties! It may be something else!” And when the customer persists and identifies the color of the panties, the beauty follows up by way of concluding the transaction, “Oh! You got me!” or “Oh no, how do you know?” Ho explains that this exemplifies how the panties empower betel-nut beauties to manage verbally “a moment of possible harassment [by turning it] into a moment of fantasy” (2000:290-291).

Safety panties or none, Taiwan’s betel-nut beauties have been swept up in a competitive brinkmanship of baring their bodies. By 2002, bikinis and thongs had become something of a norm, and no small number of beauties had even been reported going topless. But without a law expressly addressing these public practices, crackdowns could only be made tangentially. Between January and August 2002, for example, the Hsinchu City Police Department reported arresting 480 betel-nut beauties and their employers for violating the Teenagers’ Welfare Law, the Social Order Maintenance Law, the Road Traffic Management and Punishment Law, the Business Registration Law, among other regulations (Li Hanchang 2000). In October 2002, however, the Taoyuan County Government responded to the escalating roadside public strip show by enforcing a controversial “three nos” policy: no breasts, no bellies, no buttocks. In addition to mandating that breasts, bellies, and buttocks be well covered, the new rules also require beauties to wear nontransparent clothing over brassieres. The policy quickly became a hotly contested national issue, and in the

several weeks before and after the implementation date the major dailies published one editorial after another expressing a diversity of views. These competing voices manifest the tensions inherent within the socio-sexual *agôn*.

The betel-nut beauties, themselves, became highly vocal critics of the policy, claiming the right of free choice to wear whatever clothing and to bare however much of their bodies they wished. One beauty, nicknamed Hsiao Ju, was quoted in Chinese and English-language newspapers as saying, “I have a beautiful body, and I also love to show my pretty clothes to customers. What’s wrong with that?” (TTStaff Writer 2002). The Collective of Sex Workers and Supporters mobilized in support of the beauties, with members staging a protest at the Taoyuan County Hall and baring their navels before cameras while shouting, “My belly button is guaranteed harmless and it’s very cute” and “My body, my job, my own business” (2002). Collective members also reiterated the beauties’ complaint about a double standard, calling attention to the fact that sexily dressed young women are hired to attract business at automobile exhibitions and computer shows and that high-profile popular entertainers such as A-Mei (Zhang Huimei) and CoCo Lee (Li Wen) routinely bare a lot more than the beauties do during their performances (2002).

A strong feminist voice also rallied behind the beauties. For example, sexuality studies scholar Josephine Ho argues compellingly that sexy attire empowers betel-nut beauties not only to make money and take control over transactions with customers but also to be active agents in the production of pleasurable fantasies, both for customers and for themselves (Ho 2001; Ho 2000). Lin Fang-Mei, Chairwoman of Taiwan’s National Youth Commission, is also wary of allowing the beauties’ bodies to become the main object of contestation, reiterating that it reveals a double standard and adding that it conceals more fundamental issues. Lin protests the strong patriarchal impulse to protect the public realm from female nudity, and points out the paradox that nudity at art venues is tolerated and that, as the media’s fondness for

printing fleshy front-page photos of Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jeou in skimpy jogging attire makes plain, it is perceived as “fresh and healthy” when men expose their chests, legs, and arms while running or swimming. The fundamental problems concealed by the fixation on the public exposure of female flesh, explains Lin, are the lack of work opportunities for teenagers, the excessive planting of betel-nut trees on hillsides, the occupation of public land for planting, illegal business practices by betel-nut stand owners, and the poor working conditions that compel workers to resort to chewing betel-nuts as a stimulant.⁸⁶ Moreover, Lin goes furthest in emphasizing the bias of the government’s clamping down on the beauties (the employees) and their dress habits rather than on the traders (the employers). “The more scantily clad a woman is, the more she becomes the subject of a patriarchal society. She may even therefore end up being sacrificed by misguided policy. This is a common blind spot of government in its dealings with the sex industry—all it sees is sex” (Lin Fangmei 2002).

If we consider that the crass capitalist compulsions driving the beauty’s escalating nakedness threaten to saturate the public realm with an excess of naked necessity and explode the visible invisibility of the socio-sexual *agôn*, then it is perhaps not so ironic to find Taoyuan County Commissioner Chu Li-luan defending his “three nos” policy by asking, “Are [beauties] truly free if they are forced to dress in such a way by betel-nut traders to attract business?” (Zhu Li-luan 2002). Chu calls for respect for “fundamental social norms” and insists that women’s bodies should not be trapped within the commodity loop and treated as a “tool for competition.” But Chu’s simultaneous championing of the betel-nut beauties’ “freedom” and of “fundamental social norms” reflects a certain ambiguity, which is overcome by his final remark: “We have always emphasized that what needs to be banned is ‘excessive exposure’” (Ibid.). To be sure, at stake for the patriarchal establishment in the “three

⁸⁶ Betel-nut trees have relatively short roots and their excessive planting on hillsides is frequently blamed for deadly mudslides during rain storms (e.g., TTEditorial 2002).

nos” policy is, in the last instance, less the betel-nut beauty’s freedom or fundamental social norms than that which is most antithetical to the visible invisibility of the socio-sexual *agôn*: “excessive exposure.”

A large-scale study of the sex industry sponsored by the Taipei City Government offers a glimpse at the attitude of authority out of which the “three nos” policy derives. The Taipei City Government commissioned research experts from Academia Sinica, Taipei’s premier research institution, to undertake a multi-faceted sociological study of the City’s sex industry and to “formulate possible recommendations to the policy on the sex industry and sex trade” (Qu Haiyuan 2001:I-V).⁸⁷ One component of the study entailed conducting formal interviews with “opinion leaders,” which included twelve city government officials, four councilmen, six representatives of civic groups, two reporters, and four scholars. What researchers and opinion leaders mean by the “sex industry” is “prostitution,” broadly conceived, which for them includes “flower-wine drinking.” Betel-nut beauties, it is important to note, are typically considered to be an adjunct to the “sex industry,” insofar as they sell “sex fantasy services.”

In general, opinion leaders maintain the view that the sex drive is natural and, therefore, that the sex industry is “normal” and “ineradicable.” For example, concerning the governments inability effectively to control the sex trade, eighty-five percent of the informants affirmed the view that, “sex is a basic human need, and therefore difficult to ban” (2001:34). At the same time, however, sixty-two percent of informants paradoxically also agreed that, “male narcissism conditions the view that the sex trade is normal” (2001:34). But these seemingly contradictory views are actually mutually reinforcing: if the sex trade is “normal” and “ineradicable,” then so is male narcissism. This normalized imbrication of the sex trade and patricentrism

⁸⁷ I am grateful to Yang Wenshan of the Sociology Institute of Academia Sinica for providing me with copies of the reports resulting from this study.

perhaps goes far to explain why seventy-seven percent of the informants acknowledged what my informant-friends unanimously took for granted to be true, namely that “the sex industry and the official bureaucracy are in collaboration with each other” (2001:35). Indeed, one informant from the sex trade study went so far as to declare that “flower-wine drinking culture” (*jiudian wenhua*) should be eradicated, and that the starting point of such an effort must be to clamp down on its primary consumers: government officials and people’s representatives” (2001:12).

To explain the problems with legal control of the sex trade, one informant reiterated that government officials, the police, and the sex trade mafia are in cahoots, adding that: “There is not total control. There is only the ban (*jinzhi*). But the ban is not thoroughgoing. Typically, it’s up to a given mayor to pour his sweat and blood into ‘clean-up’ campaigns, and each mayor adopts his own methods; there’s no unified control, only chaos. In fact, the sex trade thrives at all times with the ‘tacit permission’ (*moxu*) of the offices responsible for implementing the law.” This apparently paradoxical coupling of “the ban” and “tacit permission” calls to mind the logic of the ban as conceptualized by Giorgio Agamben. As I explain further in chapter 5 with regard to mahjong gambling, far from forbid, the ban in effect “includes” while marginalizing; or, in Agamben’s terms, the ban creates an “inclusive exclusion” (Agamben 1998). In this instance, the ban shores up “sovereign” power by extending “tacit permission” while also stigmatizing and marginalizing—in effect, by creating an exception that confirms the rule. In this light, the “three nos” policy can therefore be understood as a ban that creates a “state of exception” in which the betelnut beauty’s body is at once spectralized and scandalized. In the broader context of the sex industry, the ban at once recapitulates and reinforces the visible invisibility of the socio-sexual *agón*.

Work and Home: Transparency, Hierarchy, and Necessity

In stark contrast to the socio-sexual *agôn*, work and home are places without spontaneity and without secrets. On the job, transparency and accountability are organizing principles, and “necessity” ensures disciplined adherence to codified rules. In the economy, Max Horkheimer writes, “man is reduced to a mere function of one or other economic factor: wealth or technically demanding physical or mental work” (Horkheimer 1972:114). At home, naked paternal authority is the unassailable truth, with family integration being a function of the vertical subordination of individual desires. As head of the family, the man is bound by a sense of economic and social responsibility for wife and child, a basic duty that functions to make the family a strong conservative force in society. Indeed, the authority structures of work and home, of the productive and reproductive economies, are mutually reinforcing—duty to wife and child demand that men adapt to the circumstances of the productive economy and do their utmost to better their positions there, while being the family breadwinner is integral to paternal authority at home. If the socio-sexual *agôn* promotes spontaneity, struggle, and reconciliation, with pockets of secrecy giving play to existential desires and interpersonal alterity, work and home hinge on the “sacrifice of human desires to a cathartic or otherwise overly abstract truth” (Willet 1997:308).

During fieldwork, I detected a sharp and steady sense of conflict and rupture between men’s public life among friends, on the one hand, and work and family life, on the other. With few exceptions, my friends were married, had children, and were living in small nuclear families. Precisely due to this fact, I found the phenomenon of men gathering daily directly from work at different “men’s clubs”—a pool hall, a dive shop--and hanging out late into the evening quite astonishing, especially in the light of the tremendous cultural preoccupation with the “Chinese family.” Indeed, these men rarely headed home after work for a family dinner; they mainly took their meals on the fly, either at the “club” among friends or alone at a food stall on the street. And I

learned as well that their wives and children often did the same; especially if the wife worked, she and her children would separately grab extra-familial meals, on the way home from work or school. If this on-the-go pattern of repast, which weakens the traditional centripetal force of hearth-as-home, might help to explain and sustain Taiwan's remarkable road-side food culture, it simultaneously casts into sharp relief the prominent rift in value and vibrancy between the realms of necessity and non-necessity in Taiwanese social life. Moreover, it lends substantial salience to the notion of the "school of life," for, as Horkheimer puts it, "the small family in most cases offers very inadequate conditions for human education as compared with the pedagogical possibilities present in society at large" (Horkheimer 1972:101).

It was the case that less than half of my friends' wives held jobs, though often part-time. In one atypical case, my friend and his wife were both full-time professionals, and their three-year-old daughter lived with grandparents in Taizhong City, about a two-and-a-half hour drive from Taipei. Towards the end of each work week, a battle invariably ensued between my friend and his wife over whether or not to spend the weekend with their daughter in Taizhong. My friend's wife spent at least three weekends a month in Taizhong, and she would have liked her husband to do the same. My friend, however, averaged closer to one weekend a month in Taizhong, and perhaps an additional Sunday—leaving Taipei late Saturday night or early Sunday morning after squeezing in a day together with friends. Notwithstanding, my friend was unrestrained in his expression of love for his daughter, who rang him regularly throughout those weekends when he chose to remain in Taipei. I recall my friend routinely taking a call from his daughter on his mobile during our drives to the shore for a day of spearfishing. He never failed to remark with weighty sincerity how moved he was by these simple exchanges with his still baby-talking daughter, and in the same motion with which he placed down his mobile, he pressed down harder on

the accelerator, driving him faster and further from the necessity born, paradoxically, of the very same desire for freedom that was taking him away.

In most cases, my friends preferred that their wives stay at home and take care of the domicile and children. A friend with one child would not permit his wife to take a job, though she often resentfully expressed the desire to do so. When I asked my friend why he would not allow his wife to work, he responded: “I make enough money. My wife doesn’t need to work. If she took a job, it’d make me look bad.” Without question, being a provider-father was an important component of a complete male identity among my friends, and one measure of success in this capacity was having a wife and child—and it was something of an ideal if this uterine family belonged primarily to the home. To be sure, it mattered much for my rapport with friends that I was married, even if my wife was not with me during fieldwork. And I could not begin to count how many times my friends beseeched me to have children, despite the fact that, or perhaps because, it was precisely this patriarchal “non-choice” that constituted the birth of “necessity” in their lives.⁸⁸

The fundamental Chinese idea of a strong interdependence between work and family, or labor and familial devotion, has been noted by a number of China scholars (see Harrell 1985; Potter 1988). Stevan Harrell, in a study of a village of industrial workers, miners, and small entrepreneurs in northern Taiwan, argues that the font of Chinese industry and diligence adheres in an “entrepreneurial ethic,” which is a long-term quest for the security of the “economic family” or *jia* (Harrell 1985:216-217). In a study of emotion in rural Chinese social life, Sulamith Heins Potter concludes that the capacity to work for the benefit of the family was the single most significant element of the villagers’ evaluation of the quality of the marital relationship (Potter

⁸⁸ I call having children a “non-choice” because my friends had children as a matter of course, as an automatic outcome of life-cycle momentum, and never entertained the prospect of not having them. In candid conversations, a couple of friends did confide in me that I was better off without children. My choice not to have children might have introduced to my friends the very fact that childbirth is a choice.

1988:202-203). Harrell, especially, emphasizes that in Chinese culture hard work for the family unit is not only a pervasive practice but also a pronounced value, an ideological edifice held up to explain a wide variety of experiences. How, then, do we reconcile the interdependent work-home system of hierarchy and necessity with the spark and spontaneity of the socio-sexual *agôn*?

As mentioned in the Introduction with respect to the “fifth cardinal relationship” of friendship, Gödel’s theorem offers a compelling point of departure: the axiomatic basis of a given system cannot be guaranteed within the confines of that system, but only by another one of greater power (Gell 1992:283). The patriarchal power that resides in the exploitation of hierarchy and necessity therefore must be referred to a different systematic level of analysis. My argument here is that the compulsions of work and home constitute the precondition of a system of greater power, one premised not on the sacrifice of desire to an abstract truth, but rather on its opposite: the agonistic dialogics of desire discharged amidst plurality, non-necessity, and initiatory action. A bordered realm of necessity to which all are bound is a requirement of partial or compartmentalized freedom from necessity for the privileged few. The system of greater power that affords men freedom is the socio-sexual *agôn*. But it is only by being both inside and outside the realm of necessity that men accrue reflexive, transcendent, perspectival power over this realm, and it is the affirmation of this greater power through the achievement of a greater fullness of personality among friends that is ultimately what is at stake in the socio-sexual *agôn*.

The importance to men of preserving access to the realm of non-necessity, even when necessity was pressing hard, was made patently manifest to me during fieldwork. One friend, Silk, became married during my time in the field. Silk married relatively late, at age thirty-eight, so he had grown quite accustomed to enjoying his “freedom,” even though he had been seriously dating his fiancée for several years and

all along referred to her as his “wife” (*laopo*).⁸⁹ As Silk’s wedding date drew near, a gang of friends worked hard at playfully provoking his anxieties by reminding him that his days of “freedom” would soon be over—no more long afternoons and evenings playing pool or mahjong, no more late nights carousing at hostess clubs, no more weekends of seaside spearfishing. Indeed, Silk’s presence among friends began to diminish well over a month prior to the big day, which inspired friends to stick him with a new nickname, “Taiwan’s most exemplary ‘new man’.”⁹⁰ One day, in response to our needling about how exceptionally “possessive” Sophia (Silk’s fiancée) was, Silk reassured us that he had a formula for reestablishing his freedom after marriage: “No problem. Soon after I’m married, I’ll give Sophia a little baby to take care of at home, and then I’ll have my freedom back again. It’s as simple as that.”

When another friend, Little Big, a cab driver with three children, passed up spearfishing with a gang of buddies on an ideal weather day because his wife had become hysterical over family finances and implored him to put in more time on the road, a buddy asked him who wore the pants in his home. He countered with indignation: “Hey. I’m the big boss (*laoda*) in my house. I do what I want to do. I come and go as I please.” Little Big adapted to his wife’s intense pressure to work by adopting a dynamic strategy of diversification. When spearfishing came under fire, he played more mahjong. When mahjong became the target of attack, he switched his emphasis to girlfriends—and at one point he had two with whom he arranged regular

⁸⁹ It is common for a guy to refer to a serious girlfriend as his “wife.” This is not simply a verbal convention. This is a way in which society powerfully interpolates the telos of marriage into dating culture. One reason Silk had put off marriage for so long was because he had to wait for his fiancée to reach “proper” marriageable age—she was close to twenty years younger than him.

⁹⁰ As I explain at greater length elsewhere, the “new man” is a progressive, feminist-inspired discourse that became pronounced in the 1990s. In short, the “new man” discourse challenges patriarchal ideology and calls for Taiwanese men to share household responsibilities, overcome their fear of intimacy (*weiju qinmi*), and reflect on their inner selves. This discourse portrays Taiwanese men as pathetically oppressed by traditional norms and expectations—especially a competitive obsession with success, social status, and power, so much so that they are unable to cultivate meaningful interpersonal relationships with members of either sex. The “new man” discourse sympathetically reaches out to men, inviting them to return home after a hard day at work and discover intimacy, contentment, and themselves through a modern family lifestyle together with a caring wife and children; see (Festa 2004).

rendezvous. And when his wife grew suspicious of his fooling around, she was then prepared to be lenient about his spearfishing. The point is that Little Big's response to the intensification of "necessity" always and in turn entailed an intensification of "non-necessity"; if the former constituted the concrete precondition of transcendence, the latter consolidated the perspectival power and fullness of personality needed to resolve and rise above the otherwise stifling material demands of the former.

The stifling effect of necessity was made literally manifest by the fact that my friends tended to become uncharacteristically quiet at home. Far from delighting in the agonistic dialogics of the socio-sexual *agôn*, my friends tended to seize up, and shut up, as soon as they crossed their household thresholds. The authority-oriented ambience of the domicile seemed to demand that they collect themselves before their wife and child, in effect sacrificing the spontaneous world-building impulse alive in the socio-sexual *agôn* to the duty orientation and vertical subordination of desires required in the home. Perhaps no better illustration of this is the tragically extreme example of my friend A Hong's doused sexual desire for his wife. One day, in a candid conversation while returning to Taipei from the shore, A Hong engaged me on my family life and once again implored me to have a "small baby." Given that A Hong's son had been born little more than a year ago, I asked him if his life had changed at all since he became a father. In the course of his response, he shocked me with a surprising admission. He told me that since his wife had given birth he had not once had sex with her and could not bring himself to do so. When I asked him why, he responded: "I just can't. It's not that I don't love her. But after she gave birth, I developed a 'sexual aversion' [*yanxingzheng*] towards her. I simply have no desire to have sex with her. So I 'take my meals outside in the wild' [*da ye shi*]." I told him that I felt sorry for his wife and he followed up sympathetically by saying that he did too.

“Outside in the wild” is perhaps an apropos characterization of the socio-sexual *agôn*, at least in contrast to work and home, and A Hong’s story reveals how the work-home system of hierarchy-necessity can be oppressive for wives who tend typically to be denied access to the “outside” whither desire is displaced. But the socio-sexual *agôn* is also the realm of recursive market mediation, which exposes desire to a complex nexus of mass-mediated forces that entangle male “webs of relations” within deep cultural, historical, and especially political significations. In Chapter 4, I examine the articulation of male fantasies with nationalist ideologies through an in-depth ritual analysis of flower-wine drinking.

Chapter 4

‘Drinking Flower Wine’ in Taipei Hostess Clubs

In drunkenness the universe is large

In the wine pot the days are long

Shi Nai’an, Outlaws of the Marsh

Introduction

This chapter examines how postwar ideologies of national authenticity and purity fuel men’s “flower-wine drinking” fantasies. I structure the chapter into five parts. In the first part I present two brief ethnographic descriptions of typical flower-wine drinking experiences—one at an upscale KTV hostess club and the other at a plebeian *a-gong* teahouse. In the second part I sketch the social history of flower-wine drinking in Taipei, and then review current media and scholarly discourses on hostess clubs. Against this background, I build my conceptual framework and define my main analytical point of departure. Part three is a detailed analysis of the flower-wine drinking adventure, from pre-outing protocols through the three ritual stages of a round of carousing to flower-wine discourse beyond hostess club borders. In the fourth part I outline the shifting discursive terrain of Taiwan’s postwar nationalist ideologies, especially as embodied in three idealized figures at the core of men’s flower-wine drinking fantasies: the mainland sister (*dalumei*), the aboriginal girl (*yuanzhumin xiaojie*), and the young maiden (*meimei*). I conclude with a brief discussion of the cash nexus and gender politics of flower-wine drinking.

Ethnographic Settings

It was 10:00 p.m. on a Friday night in downtown Taipei. I was with the gang in our seedy underground hangout—Nine-Ball King, a pool hall-*cum*-men’s club not unlike other ones found on most blocks throughout the city. We had been there since late afternoon, chewing betel nuts, bantering frivolously, and playing pool. Some of my friends were rotating through a poker game in a dim alcove where the stakes are always steep. Mafia was brewing traditional-style tea (*gong-fu cha*) for a few regulars in the small roach-infested lounge area around which are scattered a dozen busy pool tables. Silk was dishing out his daily nine-ball licking to his usual challengers, clearing the table one after another. At one point, I caught his eye from the bar and he shot me a couple of quick eyebrow flaps, here an unambiguous signal. I glanced over at Little Clean, Silk’s inseparable sidekick. Strutting alongside an adjacent table, he was peacocking proudly his “signature gesture” (*zhaopai dongzuo*): rolling together the tips of the forefinger and thumb of each raised hand to pantomime the crude caress for which lower-class hostess clubs (*chashi* or teahouses) are nicknamed—“*momo cha*” or “touch and feel tea.”

An hour later, Silk, Little Clean, Thumbs, Shark, Big Brother Lou and myself were lounging with restrained eagerness on imposing chairs in the noisy anteroom of an exquisitely ornate KTV hostess club. A manager conferred with Big Brother Lou several times before escorting us to a similarly lavish private room. We sat spread out along a black U-shaped sofa that wrapped snugly around a rectangular knee-high tea table. Built into the front wall was a large TV screen that continually displayed powerfully thumping music videos, casting a flickering light throughout the otherwise pitch dark room. Thumbs and I took turns visiting the pristine gilded wash room, which invoked the feeling of a five-star hotel suite. Golden Treasure, our elegant manager perhaps in her mid-thirties, soon entered to welcome us back and to take our order for alcohol, snacks, and hostesses.

A wealthy entrepreneur, Big Brother Lou was covering all expenses and therefore arranged for our entertainment. He consulted with Silk, who expressed an interest in Wei Wei, a “mainland sister” from Fujian Province, and Xuan Xuan, a quiet girl from the quaint harbor town of Keelung, a place of special reverence to us being our spearfishing Mecca. Soon after Golden Treasure took her leave, six young hostesses filed in, each one scantily uniformed like a playboy bunny and each one knowing exactly who to sit beside. We had met some of them before, such as Wei Wei and Xuan Xuan, while others were new. Two busboys also arrived carrying trays with hot towels, snacks, ice, beer, and whiskey, which the hostesses assiduously poured and served. From a thick pile of \$100 *yuan* notes stacked on the table before him, Big Brother Lou presented each waiter with \$200 *yuan* (around US\$6), one of several tips they would receive each time they returned to tidy the table and replenish the drinks.

Following introductions, we conversed privately with our hostesses while they engaged us in drinking games. I switched between the Taiwanese finger-guessing game (*hua-quan* or *Taiwan quan*) and the dice-bowl game. Intermittently, one of us would call out for a communal bottoms-up and the hostesses would join us in downing a glass of beer or shot of whiskey. Every twenty minutes or so, the hostesses rotated rooms (*zhuan tai*). Our initial hostesses were back within an hour and Big Brother Lou discretely asked each of us if we approved. He then summoned Golden Treasure and instructed her to “straightjacket” (*kuang*) all six of them for the rest of the night, an option that runs roughly US\$300 each. When guests are good natured, hostesses prefer to be reserved, though they must always do as told by the madam. Before long, we each had our hostess wrapped in our arms, if not also sitting on our lap.

I could see Little Clean and Shark absorbed in the exploration of their hostesses’ breasts. Silk yelled over to me above the pulsating video, “Paul, check out Thumbs, he’s doing his ‘porn movie’ [A-*pian*] routine again...that beast [*chusheng*]!”

Thumbs was prostrate and pumping exaggeratedly on top of his hostess, who was completely smothered but for her upward-projecting legs. We all laughed at the staged performance, including the hostesses. At one point, my hostess and Little Clean's decided to elicit our help in defrocking Shark so, they argued, he would not forget about them during his next fortnight in the mainland, where he worked for half of every month. We knew that a hostess earned a cash bonus if she produced a pair of guest's briefs at the front desk, so Little Clean told them they had to make the first move. Xuan Xuan, Shark's hostess, instantly caught on and it was 3-on-1. Amidst the pandemonium I heard clothing tear. In a flash, Shark's trousers were at his ankles and he was desperately holding fast the front of his briefs with both hands; the rear was shredded and all but gone. Silk roared with laughter and predicted Shark's imminent defeat. At that point, Little Clean went over and urged Shark to relinquish the spoils, offering his sweater vest as a waist wrap. Shark surrendered and the hostesses backed off. He slipped off his tattered briefs from behind the vest and flung them. "Keep them," he barked with mild indignation as he yanked up his trousers.

Eventually, it was time for singing. Each of us selected a song from a thick menu book and took turns belting out a solo into a large microphone, always to the resounding applause of the hostesses. The hostesses followed up by performing a few duets, after which Big Brother Lou again called for Golden Treasure and asked to have the girls leave with us [*chu chang*] for coffee and a midnight snack. Golden Treasure got her price from Big Brother Lou without negotiation and authoritatively commanded, "Go and change girls, street cloths, now!" Being about 2:00 a.m., the night was still young so, I later learned, Big Brother Lou had to pay yet another US\$300 each, the same as the house price to take a hostess to a love hotel.⁹¹ As we readied ourselves to leave, Golden Treasure held a brief conference with Big Brother

⁹¹ The house fee does not include the hostess' fee, which she sets at her discretion.

Lou over the bill, explaining carefully each fee charged. In case of police, we were asked to leave without the girls and to follow a circuitous route to the 24-hour restaurant just down the road. The girls were chauffeured separately. Once seated inside, they told us their driver had circled the block three times before letting them out. Each girl ordered a fancy desert and a tall cappuccino or latté. We ordered only one of the latter. We sat and made small talk for an hour or so as the girls—who now in their street cloths appeared startlingly young—poured into their cakes and ice creams like kids in a soda shop. After exchanging cell-phone numbers and promising to visit them again soon at the club, we all went home. My friends estimated that Big Brother Lou parted with nearly US\$4,000 for our four-hour adventure, well more than double the sum we occasionally divided evenly at less extravagant clubs when Big Brother Lou was not around to treat us.

While riding my motorbike from Nangang to National Taiwan University for my late-morning run, my cell-phone sounded from my chest pocket. I pulled over and took the call. “B-a-o-l-u-o,” the cloying voice murmured, deliberately over-drawing the falling and then rising tones of the two syllables of my Chinese name. “What are you doing?” I hollered, knowing instantly that it was my buddy Crooner. “Na Na just rang me, she wants us to visit her today. She misses you. She said she called you but you didn’t pick up. Where are you?” “I’m on my way to go running. I take it you finally got paid. What about Baby Face and Sleeping Bear?” I inquired. “They’ll be here at noon. Of course I got paid, but you know I don’t need money. My mistress [*xiao laopo*] will always cover me. Hurry up with your run, will you.”

Crooner, Baby Face, Sleeping Bear, and I caught a cab and headed for our favorite little fish ball noodle shop in Dadaocheng, a quaint part of town by the Dan Shui River that time seems to have left behind. After slurping down our noodles and wiping clean our oily lips, Crooner and Sleeping Bear stocked up on cigarettes at a

betel nut stand and we leisurely strolled around the corner and down the narrow muddy path of a quiet alley toward Na Na's tearoom. As we approached the inconspicuous steel door that interrupted a long succession of tiny residential apartments along a single-story brick tenement, Crooner pulled out his mobile and rang Na Na. The door opened simultaneously with Crooner's first knock and the madam, Wen Wen, who was also the owner of the place, greeted us by boisterously announcing each of our names. She singled out Crooner's status as our mascot by embracing him with a flamboyant hug as he swooned into her open arms. As she buried Crooner's head into her collarbone, Wen Wen shot the rest of us a wink and extended her free hand out for us to grab, while informing us in a welcoming voice that Na Na was getting ready and would be with us in a few minutes.

There were eight small flimsily partitioned booths off either side of a single hallway extending between a rudimentary rear kitchen and the cramped front reception area. Behind the small front desk cases of Taiwan Beer were stacked seven-feet high, stopping just below the hanging altar where several incense sticks burned at the feet of the small earth god statue (*tudi gong*). The sound of vinyl accordion doors sliding open and snapping shut punctuated the din of lively chatter and the shrill of tinny karaoke as hostesses busily buzzed in and out of rooms.

Wen Wen ushered the four of us into one of the cramped makeshift cubicles with flimsy wall panels that fell about a foot short of the ceiling and that were decorated with a befittingly out-of-place wood-grained wainscoting. We sat on stools evenly dispersed around a rickety round table almost too large for the room. The floor was sticky from beer and the table only slightly less so. Wen Wen presented Crooner with the hostess menu, a chart with the hostesses names listed in the vertical margin and room numbers across the top so guests could see which hostesses were on that day and how many rooms each of them was rotating through. "Take six," Wen Wen advised Crooner. "No, we couldn't manage that many, five will do," Crooner replied.

The fee was a flat \$300 yuan (US\$10) for each hostess. Soon after Crooner made his selections and Wen Wen departed, a busboy entered with hot towels, a fruit plate, sunflower seeds, peanuts, and marinated bean pods. I slipped the busboy a \$100 yuan note (US\$3.00) before he exited. While unraveling his hot towel, Crooner rehearsed his usual admonition: “Use this towel only to wipe your hands, never put it to your face.”

The hostesses began to slip in one by one through the vinyl sliding door. Upon entering, each hostess gave us a perfunctory greeting and immediately went to work preparing the drinks. They poured warm beer into a pitcher of ice, but we declined their request to add tomato juice. Baby face drank only Taiwan sake diluted with water and ice. Once the drinks were ready and poured, the hostesses in turn extended to each one of us a formal greeting followed by a bottoms-up toast. All drinks were taken in small shot glasses. Each hostess added an identifying marker to her glass—for example, one or more sunflower seeds or a tiny chunk of watermelon on the end of a toothpick. Crooner referred to Li Li as his mistress and, as a sign of their intimacy, they barely acknowledged each other when she first came in. Usually one hostess would leave when another entered, so there were never more than three in the room at any one time. Na Na finally made her entrance and sat next to me. Na Na was an Ami aborigine from Taidong (a city in the southeast) and enjoyed waxing nostalgic about the simpler lifeways back home. Once introductory toasts were completed, the hostesses began randomly challenging us at drinking games, which is when things started to loosen up.

Before long Crooner had Li Li in his arms and was speaking softly to her. Sleeping Bear was also snuggling up to his hostess. Na Na was always very busy and never stayed more than a few minutes or so before Wen Wen’s staticky voice blasted over a speaker instructing her to go to another room. When Li Li rotated rooms, Crooner didn’t mind embracing other hostesses. After we were all tipsy and

completely relaxed, Crooner called for the coin-operated karaoke machine, which was rolled into the room by a busboy. We sang, danced, and drank without inhibition until Crooner eventually called for the bill by announcing loudly that he had other ladies waiting for him at another place.

Wen Wen entered with the bill and within a few minutes all five hostesses had assembled in the room for the first time. It was customary for all hostesses to be present when the customer paid the bill. Although we all chipped in and split the tab—which was around US\$120—Crooner orchestrated the event and distributed to each hostess directly her US\$10 fee, adding a few bucks for any hostess that spent more time than usual with us. Na Na escorted us to the door, thanking us profusely and urging us to be careful and to come back soon.

Social and Historical Context

In the Taiwanese historical imagination, “drinking flower wine” (*he huajiu*) is a romanticized form of high culture, even though plebian hostess clubs have always thrived alongside the more exclusive ones, whose existence in Taiwan one scholar traces back to the late Qing period (before the turn of the twentieth century) (Chen Huiwen 1999:76-87). In 1917, during the Japanese occupation period (1895-1945), Taipei’s most renowned hostess club, Jiangshanlou, was established in the heart of Daodaocheng, at that time a vibrant commercial port at the forefront of northern Taiwan’s modern development.⁹² Stories abound of prominent historical figures, especially wealthy merchants and refined men of letters (*wenren yashi*), holding momentous meetings at Jiangshanlou and having affairs with the club’s talented and elegant hostesses, then known as geisha (*vidan*).⁹³ These geisha are said to have

⁹² The incident that sparked the February 28, 1947, uprising occurred in Dadao Cheng.

⁹³ The Japanese occupation period poem, *Ode to Jiangshanlou*, composed by the prominent literati Liao Xi’en, captures how even then drinking flower wine performed the ruse of suspending quotidian

received three to five years of artistic training in dancing, singing, and playing a musical instrument before “coming out” (*chu ju*) (Chen Huiwen 1999; Ji Huiling 2001; Minshi Editor 1980).⁹⁴ Gu Xianrong, a Japanese loyalist and ardent Confucianist, is said famously to have gathered more than 200 gentry for a banquet at Jiangshanlou to plan the building of the Dalongtong Confucian Temple over local cuisine and in the company of geisha (Wang Haowei 1998:132).⁹⁵ In a recent *Minshengbao* article, a Taiwanese writer waxes nostalgic:

Inscribed on the geisha’s body is not only her life history but also the modern history of Taiwan. How many notable historical figures have they been with? How many great historical events have they witnessed? Former Vice President Lian Zhan’s grandfather and author of *A General History of Taiwan*, Lian Yatang, had an intimate relationship with the distinguished geisha Wang Xiangchan. The first meeting between Liang Qichao and Jiang Weishui to discuss Taiwan’s independence was also held at a famous flower wine club in Dadaocheng. (Ji Huiling 2001)

When I broached the topic of Jiangshanlou in an interview with a Dadaocheng native now in his seventies, a broad smile beamed across his face for the first time in our conversation. He explained that simple tea rooms providing a humble class of hostesses were commonplace in colonial-era Dadaocheng and that as a young man he caroused at these clubs five days a week together with his buddies. What he dwelled on most, however, were the highlights of his one memorable evening living it up among the stylish geisha at Jiangshanlou, where his construction crew was invited to

anxieties and reconnecting men with more meaningful images, most commonly sought in the past (Zhuang Yongming 1999):

The city wall knows bygones are bygones,
Of Jiangshan only the mansion still stands;
Throngs of patrons come to sip wine and chant poetry,
But what sorrows are buried deep in their breasts?

⁹⁴ See Jiangshanlou’s official website: www.ttv.com.tw/homev2/pgm/drama/JiangShan/default.htm.

⁹⁵ In 1930, the well-known writer and Taiwanese language advocate Guo Qiusheng was manager of Jiangshanlou (Minshi Editor 1980).

attend a banquet to celebrate breaking ground on a big project. Unlike when discoursing about his career and aspects of economic development in Daodaocheng, he became noticeably sentimental and nostalgic, even dreamy, when describing flower-wine drinking culture and especially when relaying anecdotes about geisha, which he repeatedly insisted were all true.

Some of his geisha tales suggest that inscribed on the geisha's body was not only the eventual history of modern Taiwan but also the physical and ideological struggles of gender relations. This is exemplified in one of his stories about a trick played on an infamously proud and picky Jiangshanlou geisha for not returning the affection of a wealthy but plain looking merchant. To seek revenge, the jilted merchant spared no expense to spruce up an indigent but handsome street beggar and dispatched the imposter to seduce the over-assuming hostess. Once the hostess had fallen in love with the made-over beggar, his true identity as well as that of his benefactor was revealed. Disgraced, the geisha fell from fame, lost her distinguished clientele, contracted venereal disease that left scars on her face, and passed her remaining days as a Dadaocheng street beggar singing songs that implored others to avoid her mistakes.

Apocraphal or not, the tale clearly serves a disciplinary design, issuing a threat to women who dare to be selective of their men, especially in a way that inverts oppressive standards of beauty. Such disapprobation of female agency is, however, also a form of recognition, affirming what Chen Huiwen observes in her study of Dadaocheng women, namely that geisha were historically significant as the first class of women to appear in the male-dominated public realm, earning their own living as well as social recognition (Chen Huiwen 1999:87). But if all objectification is a forgetting (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993:230), any enduring recognition of the geisha's historically progressive labor seems somehow disremembered in popular representations of today's hostesses. For example, the recently concluded prime-time

TV serial drama entitled “Jiangshanlou,” which was a nativist romanticization of colonial-era geisha culture, inspired an outpouring of nostalgic reportage on flower wine culture. In this sentimental spate of “structural nostalgia” (see Chapter 2), geisha are esteemed as embodying “the most beautiful page in Taiwan’s history” and sharply distinguished from today’s hostesses, who are rarely other than harshly disparaged as pathetic purveyors of sexual services (*mai-yi* versus *mai-chun* or *mai-shen*) (e.g. Ji Huiling 2001).

In contemporary Taiwan, drinking flower wine at hostess clubs is a nearly compulsory group activity of male friendship among all classes of men in Taiwan. From bubble tea cafés to *a-gong* teahouses, piano bars to KTV nightclubs, the Taiwanese cityscape, both visible and underground, is pregnant with a variety of hostess clubs, which men of all stripes regularly visit for libation and repartee in the company of women. Writing in 1998, sociologist Hwang Shuling estimates that Taiwan’s “astonishingly large” and “ever flourishing...sex industry” is comprised of no less than several tens of thousands of hostess clubs (Hwang Shuling 1998).⁹⁶ However, there are no reliable figures for this fugitive industry, which Wang Haowei describes as intimately imbricated in Taiwan’s modern historical development (Wang Haowei 1998:132). Most hostess clubs, especially the smaller ones, are unlicensed and operate underground in urban and suburban penumbras (Liao Xiaolong 2002). Others are incorporated to conduct some routine business, like a pub or dance club, but run hostess clubs on the sly. Incorporation is granted for a narrow range of purposes in Taiwan, but there is little monitoring of what businesses actually do (Winn

⁹⁶ I translate *a-gong dian*, *chashi*, and *bingguoshi* as *a-gong* tea rooms. These generally refer to small, seedy, largely blue-collar hostess bars where hostesses are mainly in their thirties and forties, though there are younger hostesses as well, especially in smaller towns where fancier clubs are few or absent. Popular perception closely links *a-gong* tea rooms with sex; indeed, Liang Shiqiu, in his Far East Chinese–English Dictionary, offers one translation of *chashi* as “brothel.” This is a misperception that echoes official discourse and popular media representations.

1994:184-89).⁹⁷ Consequently, hostess clubs turn up in some unseemly spots, like at the rear of a medical clinic, in the basement of a nursery school, in the living room of a private apartment, or buried at the back of many a breakfast sandwich shop (*sanmingzhi*) (Chen Huiwen 2000; Wu Huiling 2001).⁹⁸

Flower wine culture is popularly portrayed as entwined with the male culture of power, money, and corruption, not to mention sex. A day rarely passes in Taiwan's press without some public official, entrepreneur, or gangster being implicated in a flower wine scandal. In July and August 2001, for example, the major dailies spilled copious pages of ink on an exploding epidemic that the *China Times* dubbed, "flower wine school principles"—an unfolding list of education leaders, including Taipei's superintendent of schools, discovered to be hostess club devotees (Shi Wennan 2001). Most notorious among these "prurient principles" (*huang xiaozhang*) was Yong-chun Junior High Principle Luo Rongzhi, whom investigators found to have visited over a hundred hostess clubs in a year, sat with more than two hundred hostesses, and maintained an open account at Taipei's "Singapore Dance Club" (Jiang Zhaoqing 2001; Shi Junyao 2001; Zhang Qikai 2001; Zheng Ruyi and Dong Menglang 2001). Concurrently, Taizhong County Assembly Chairman Yan Qingbiao was embroiled in an even more highly publicized and protracted case for drinking flower wine routinely on public funds (e.g., Ma Ruijun 2001). These episodes barely scratch the surface of a media tempest that took its typically bizarre twists and turns on the glossy pages of Taiwan's tabloids (e.g., Chen Yusheng 2001). With Taiwan then preparing to enter the WTO, Vice President Lu Xiulian and Taipei City Mayor Ma Yingjiu each stepped

⁹⁷ Winn explains that, in the United States, a corporation can be formed to engage in any lawful business, and once incorporated a license may be sought to engage in a line of business subject to regulation. In Taiwan, however, "incorporation is granted only for narrowly defined purposes, and anything for which permission is not granted is not allowed" (Winn 1994:186).

⁹⁸ I have visited more than one *a-gong* teahouse located inside a shop with a breakfast sandwich (*sanmingzhi*) signboard hanging over the front door.

forth and called for concrete action to remedy the embarrassing flower wine scourge (Lin Tinghua, et al. 2001; Shi Wennan 2001).⁹⁹

Scholars have probed beyond media representations of hostess clubs as dens of iniquity where high-profile figures solidify cliques and swap resources. Their analyses tend to emphasize the role of flower wine culture in fortifying the presumed driving force behind male lust and avarice: traditional masculinity. In his best-selling study of Taiwanese men, psychiatrist and cultural critic Wang Haowei argues that the intensely competitive nature of male culture leads men to pursue the hostess' warm and pleasing demeanor, which by contrast magnifies their inherently fragile masculinity (Wang Haowei 1998:132-34). Men incorporate hostess clubs into their interpersonal etiquette of entertaining friends and associates, Wang explains, and thereby convert female-butressed masculinity into social and economic capital.¹⁰⁰ Where Wang views drinking flower wine as a unique context-bound reconciliation among competitive men, Avron Boretz conceptualizes the hostess club as a "patrilineally-modeled social institution" characteristic of those found throughout "cultural China," past and present (Boretz 1996:257-58). Carousing, Boretz concludes from fieldwork in Taizhong and Taidong, is a ritual competition in which norms of hierarchy are instantiated and reproduced as men vie to enact the masculine idiom of male prowess and reaffirm their identity within stratified cohorts (1996).

Taiwanese sociologist Hwang Shu-Ling calls flower-wine drinking culture "the major rite" of masculinity and gender socialization in Taiwan (Hwang Shuling 2002). Based on interview data, Hwang identifies different class-based flower-wine mediated masculinities—the dominant classes play power games and accumulate

⁹⁹ Taiwan was formally admitted to the WTO on November 11, 2001.

¹⁰⁰ On inspiration from Freud, Wang argues that men's castration complex underlies a collective subconscious fear of the "restoration" of matriarchal society that serves to consolidate a patriarchal culture hinged on the subordination of women (Wang Haowei 1998:130-32).

capital while the working class revels for recreation and to display sexual vigor.¹⁰¹

Although Hwang states that carousing at hostess clubs is not about sex, per se, but rather about bolstering masculinity and cementing male bonds, she nonetheless frames flower-wine drinking as part of Taiwan's "prostitution system." Consequently, Hwang conceives of masculinity less as socially constructed than as parasitic, emerging as a by-product of the ways in which flower-wine drinking-*qua*-"sex-buying" (Hwang Shuling 2002:28) is exploitative of women, including hostesses, professionals, and wives.

These prevailing popular and scholarly representations view flower-wine drinking, at base, as a "social engagement" (*yingchou*), as an instrumentally motivated outing in which men convert heterosexual play into homosocial bonding for some calculated purpose of economic or sociopolitical gain, be it among gang members or business associates.¹⁰² This interpretation of hostess clubs is misleading because it is only partially accurate. First of all, men much prefer to, and most often do, carouse with friends who are not business associates.¹⁰³ And, based on my experience, even

¹⁰¹ Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that Hwang's analysis is styled as a systematic sociological study based on interview data, I find that many of her observations amount to the uncritical reproduction of stereotypes about flower-wine drinking. Based on my fieldwork experience, even when stereotypes are not radically wrong, they tend to miss the point when not critically analyzed for what they are (see Herzfeld 2005:201-209). For example, while there are certain differences in the flower-wine experiences at upscale versus humble clubs—and while it may not be incorrect to ascribe a degree of class-based distinction to these experiences—the men who choose one experience or the other cannot be easily distinguished based on class. Even men with money and stature, for example, might opt for a humbler hostess club experience (e.g., that of the *a-gong* teahouse), in part because the service there is generally far more personalized. Catherine Frank, in her study of strip clubs in the United States, also observes that men's social class does not determine the class of hostess club experience they might choose (Frank 2002). As if appealing to the intuitive idea that "you get what you pay for," Hwang also asserts that classier clubs offer more "personal" and "desexualized" services. I found no such correlation. Classy KTV hostess clubs tend to hew to formal protocols and can be very crudely sexual, with hostesses dressed in revealing playboy bunny uniforms, while the experience at the most humble *a-gong* teahouse, where hostesses dress in street cloths, can be very informal and highly personal and entail no more than playful sexual banter.

¹⁰² For an interesting discussion of affective versus instrumental relationships among groups of Taiwanese men, see (Gallin and Gallin 1977:89-97).

¹⁰³ Indeed, the vast majority of my friends expressed an unequivocal antipathy toward drinking flower wine when the context is *yingchou*, because they said that among associates they "can't really have a good time" (*wan bu qi lai*).

when actual or potential associates carouse, it is an unwritten rule, one which hostesses enforce, that there is no serious “shop talk” inside hostess clubs. In other words, even if relationships affirmed through carousing might otherwise and elsewhere serve some instrumental purpose, flower-wine drinking is a precondition precisely *because* it is always and necessarily premised upon non-utilitarian meanings. Consequently, by permitting “utility” to occlude the apprehension of *yingchou* discourse as ideological, critics of flower-wine drinking paradoxically partake in the hypostasization of normative masculinity, affirming its pragmatic compulsions of hierarchy and necessity (Zizek 1999:90).

The *yingchou* discourse therefore resembles Roland Barthes’ notion of “myth,” whose circuit of meaning and form reproduces the “physique” of the perpetual “alibi” (Barthes 1972 [1957]:117-127).¹⁰⁴ In Barthes’ myth: “The meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning. And there is never any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place” (1972:123). In the discourse on many significant aspects of men’s culture, including flower-wine drinking, the “edifice” of normative masculinity presents the “trans-ideological” form that drains temporal meaning into a spatial concept—*yingchou*--in effect reifying meaning at a spatial distance (Zizek 1999:98). It is therefore a small step from Barthes’ myth to Horkheimer and Adorno’s objectification, which would suggest that “*yingchou*” ideology, by presenting a “purely signifying and purely imagining consciousness,” also entails the suppression of memory and recognition (see also Barthes 1972 [1957]:123; Horkheimer and Adorno 1993:230). Indeed, when I queried my friends’ wives about why their husband’s visited hostess clubs, they unanimously invoked the alternating fullness and emptiness of the alibi: “*Yingchou*. It’s a necessity. Men can’t avoid it and expect to

¹⁰⁴ In her study of Tokyo hostess clubs, Anne Allison adapts Barthes’ notion of the “alibi” to explain the dynamic between work and play; see (Allison 1994:166-167).

get anywhere in life.”¹⁰⁵ And upon hearing a summary of my (alternative) analysis of flower-wine drinking, one friend mused for a moment and then commented that my analysis was interesting and seemed on target but neglected the importance of “doing business.” When I “reminded” my friend of that which his invocation of the alibi had allowed him to forget, to wit, that for over two years I had accompanied him, other friends, and occasionally associates on most of their hostess club outings and that never once were we “doing business,” he bridled and responded, “That’s true.”¹⁰⁶ If, as Slavoj Žižek suggests, the material externalization of ideology always suppresses a “scandal” (Žižek 1999:88-101), what, we might ask, is the scandal of flower-wine drinking concealed by *yingchou* ideology?

In this chapter, I examine flower-wine drinking among groups of men who frequent hostess clubs mainly as friends. My point of departure is to step out of the “revolving turnstile” of *yingchou* ideology in order to restore spatiotemporal depth to flower-wine drinking, which I analyze as a culturally intimate ritual process wherein antagonistic social, political, and economic forces clash and converge (Barthes 1972 [1957]:123). I argue that flower-wine drinking is fundamentally a fantasmatic quest for male authenticity, the value that maintains the consistency of subjects and the solidarity of groups, and that this structure of desire at once imitates and instantiates the spatiotemporal mode by which the nation-state reproduces official ideologies of national authenticity and reconstitutes itself as a continuous subject of national history. Moreover, by lifting the alibi’s veil of male instrumentality, I reveal how hostesses

¹⁰⁵ The media, to a degree that is difficult to underestimate, most forcefully affirms the alibi of *yingchou*. Indeed, politicians publicly appeal to the alibi to defend flower wine drinking, as was made patently plain in the plea by councilors island-wide when the Taizhong County Council Speaker and Vice-Speaker were sentenced to long prison terms in 2001 for spending more than NT\$50 million of public funds on flower-wine drinking over a 1.5-year period: “How are we supposed to talk business if we don’t drink? How are we supposed to work? Why don’t we just shut down the Councils!” (Hwang Shuling 2002:16).

¹⁰⁶ It is only when I asked my friends to explain “why” they caroused at hostess clubs that they invoked the *yingchou* alibi. When I queried them about *yingchou*, they unanimously drew a sharp distinction between *yingchou* and an outing with friends, and most of them even claimed that they mainly or even only carouse at hostess clubs with friends, thus revealing the ambiguity inherent in the alibi.

actively mobilize money and sexual play as counter-conducts that threaten to expose the scandal at the core of men's flower-wine fantasies and official ideologies of national authenticity.

During my fieldwork, I made no less than fifty visits to all sorts of hostess clubs in Taipei City and County with different groups of informant-friends. These men rarely caroused on a company expense account, so drinking flower wine for them was not a company-sponsored outing that remakes them as workers wedded to a masculine corporate ethos, as Anne Allison found in her study of corporate masculinity among the Japanese *sarariiman* (Allison 1994). Indeed, only a couple of my friends were coworkers at the time of fieldwork, though a few of them were initially acquainted in this capacity, having worked together or been business associates at some point previously in their lives. And although their groups did tend to reflect an "ethnic" concentration of either Taiwanese or mainlander background, they did not do so with any meaningful consistency and ethnicity was not an organizing principle of their groups. Instead, I found their shared identification to be chiefly friendship-based, built upon regular participation in social activities, the most meaningful of which being the disreputable ones I examine in this dissertation.

The Flower Wine Adventure as Ritual Sacrifice

Conceptual Framework

My fieldwork experience convinced me that there is much more to drinking flower wine than seeking psychological comfort, replicating the patrilineal kinship structure in a different context, or accumulating economic and symbolic capital among associates. First of all, flower-wine drinking entails a distinctive, but nonetheless diverse, medley of signifying practices that, as I will show, disengage the experience from the teleological norms and compulsions of the quotidian, demarcate a boundary of difference between men and women, and bond men together as friends. I view this

dynamic of separation and communion as the basic structure of the flower-wine drinking experience. This oppositional logic entails the ritualized creation of alterity and the union of men in a moral friendship community. It therefore also follows the basic structure of sacrifice expertly analyzed from the perspective of the gender dichotomy by Nancy Jay, who explains that “integration, constituting the oneness of anything, is not possible without differentiating it from other things” (Jay 1992:18).

For Jay, sacrifice is a patriarchal remedy for having been born of women and is at home in agrarian and pastoral societies where extended family structures (lineages, clans) organized around productive properties are concerned with creating and maintaining intergenerational inheritance between males (1992:xxiii-xxv). Taiwan is a large-scale, post-industrial society that has undergone extensive urbanization and whose foundation of social organization resides no longer in lineage and clan structures; nonetheless, socio-political power persists as a male franchise. It therefore follows that the gender dichotomy and its attendant logic of differentiation-and-integration remain integral to processes of social reproduction. In order to understand these processes, as many have argued (see also Bourdieu 2001; e.g., DeGlopper 1995:29-30), we need to identify and examine practices and institutions outside the domicile, where men (especially) spend most of their time building and maintaining social relationships that “do not repeat familistic organization or familial functions” (DeGlopper 1995:29).¹⁰⁷ Toward this end, I aim to demonstrate that an anthropological model of sacrificial ritual retains vital interpretive integrity, and the

¹⁰⁷ In a chapter on personal relations from his book on Lukang (Taiwan), DeGlopper cites Morton Fried’s 1953 monograph on “non-kin” relations in Ch’uhsien, a small city in Anhwei Province in east central China: “‘It is apparent that the citizen of all classes in Ch’uhsien lives much of his life beyond the orbit of relationships provided either by his family or the kinship system in which he is involved. On the basis of the field data we have concluded that most of the extra-kin contacts and associations do not repeat familistic organization or familial functions.’ Fried devoted much of the book to pointing out what should have been obvious but was not; namely that Chinese society was a large-scale society that had for centuries rested on an extensive division of labor and a monetary economy, and that the ‘fabric’ of that society contained many strands beyond that of kinship” (DeGlopper 1995:29).

hostess club is a paradigmatic public site, importantly of the shadow zone, where the gender dichotomy and sexuality are central to this ritual process.

I do believe, however, that a more versatile conceptual apparatus is needed, one capable of encompassing the ritual logic of sacrifice within social and historical fields of signifying practices much wider than the ritual context per se, because now more than ever, to turn a phrase by Jay, the *way* it is done is not *what* is done (Jay 1992:1, *emphasis added*). In the typical approach to sacrifice, the ritual is interpreted in terms of an encompassing cultural cosmology, with the implication that once contingent historical circumstances break down this cosmology, so collapses the significance of sacrificial ritual as a means of social and cultural reproduction (see Jay 1992). The thrust of my approach will be to integrate the logic of sacrifice with a dialectical analysis of space-time and fantasy. Through space-time analysis, I conceptualize how men bracket the compulsions of the everyday and move the issue of identity to a new plane by activating historically embedded layers of authenticating political and cultural meanings (see Goffman 1967:185). I treat fantasy as a mode of objectification, closely implicated with the commodity form, where authenticating values appear in estranged form and which men seek to reappropriate through flower wine drinking. My emphasis on authenticity therefore aligns closely with that of Katherine Frank, who found complex issues of authenticity at the center of men's experience of strip clubs in the United States (Frank 2002). Whereas for Frank the definition of authenticity is rooted in the everyday, my approach hinges on separation from the everyday as a trigger for reactivating nationalist ideologies misrecognized as authentic values rooted, following the logic of structural nostalgia, in a timeless and pristine past.

At the heart of my approach are insights from a special mode of authentic experiencing that Georg Simmel calls an "adventure" (Simmel 1971:187-198). The most conspicuous feature of the adventure is the same bounded sense of

spatiotemporal separation from the routinized time of the mundane world that is central to the flower-wine drinking experience. The sensitivity of Simmel's adventure to distinct modalities of space-time conforms especially well to the multiple temporalities unique to social life in Taiwan (see Introduction). These different temporalities invoke different histories and cosmologies and constitute a complex nexus of codes that configure popular practices and official discourses and that Taiwanese shift between and negotiate in the course of their everyday lives.¹⁰⁸

Standing independent of but contiguous to the chained activities of the quotidian, which unfold in a succession of metonymically connected “nows,” the adventure takes on a self-sufficient, unified form that, as Simmel puts it, “appears to be held together by its own inner core” (Simmel 1971:189). This inner core refers to a stable essence of meaning that Simmel characterizes as being uniquely “analogous to the totality of life itself” (1971:190). The adventure is therefore distinctive because it is organized around a core that instantiates essential characteristics of the “wholeness of life” (1971:187), which otherwise for Simmel is a highly improbable supposition under capitalist conditions of modernity where rapid change is unassimilable by any “ultimate source of meaning” (Duara 1998:287). Based on my flower-wine fieldwork data, I found this inner core to be a particular synecdochic manifestation of patriarchal ideologies of national authenticity, which, as I explain below, men recuperate in misrecognized, phantasmagoric form as the authenticating basis of male friendship identity.

Simmel speaks of the apprehension of an adventure as necessarily “dreamlike,” which perfectly describes the wistful state entered into by my Dadaocheng interviewee in the previous chapter as he recalled his flower-wine drinking experiences. Due to our inability to assimilate an adventure to the wholeness of life, according to Simmel,

¹⁰⁸ I study these different calendars and temporalities in greater depth elsewhere.

we localize the experience by imagining a dream in which it took place (Simmel 1971:188). And “what we designate as dreamlike,” Simmel explains, “is nothing but a *memory* bound to the...life-process by fewer threads than are ordinary experiences” (1971:188, *emphasis added*). So if the initial moment of the adventure is marked by separation, continuity is restored by reconnecting with some essence of the whole through recollections combining memory and imagination. We might say, therefore, that the distinctive spatiotemporal form of the adventure—“occur[ing] outside the normal continuity of life...yet somehow connected with the center” (1971:188)—recapitulates a dynamic of loss and recovery, a structure of desire configured by the temporal deferral in the gap between past and present.

To foreground better the spatiotemporal dynamics of this model, I combine Simmel’s adventure with Mikhail Bakhtin’s interactionist concept of the chronotope. The chronotope is a bounded materialization of time in space that merges an abstract psycho-dynamic of loss and recovery with a constructionist dialectic of signifying practices or “semiopraxis” (Sandywell 1998:204-207).¹⁰⁹ Semiopraxis is a process of both cultural inscription, where discourse and practice are materialized in “cities, streets, buildings, artworks, technology, social organization, and so on,” and sensory apprehension, “where the work of the seeing eye joins...with the most complex thought processes” (1998:206). Viewed in this light, the flower wine adventure closely resembles what Richard Terdiman calls a “memory model,” which recalls the semantic and social history carried not only by a culture’s language but also by cultural inscriptions and social practices (see also Connerton 1989; Terdiman 1993:45-46). These “inscriptive technologies” are central to the construction of temporal alterity, which for Bakhtin refers to the layers of past meanings embedded

¹⁰⁹ I follow Barry Sandywell in extending the concept of the chronotope from space-time categories in literary texts (which it was developed to analyze) to include practices and systems from the spectrum of social fields.

within everyday matrices of semiopraxis and is a necessary constitutive condition of individual and collective identity. The flower wine adventure, as we will see, is a semiopraxis of chronotopic othering, of disengagement and self-reflection, which triggers the reanimation of sedimented cultural codes.

For Simmel and Bakhtin, authenticating cultural codes are blocked or forgotten in modernity's "characteristic forms of mystification and amnesia" (Terdiman 1993:45), making the chronotopic adventure a redemptive form of othering pursued to overcome the corrosive effects of modernity, particularly alienation and the loss of community.¹¹⁰ However, in appealing to the "shock of the old" (Sandywell 1998) to restore "wholeness" or "authenticity," Simmel and Bakhtin succumb to an idealistic structural nostalgia. To be sure, nostalgic longings are a well-documented response to modernity found in many places throughout the world (Herzfeld 2005:147-182), and Taiwan is no exception. Popular, official, and academic discourses in Taiwan have been absorbed in a reflexive exploration of the explosive political, economic, and social changes that have transformed life in Taiwan since the lifting of martial law in 1987. One salient dimension of this introspection has focused on re-establishing continuity with a past feared lost, a project that has yielded sometimes shocking nostalgic reinterpretations and revivals of the past in the present. To mention but one salient example, "authentic" (*zhengzong*) artifacts from the "White Terror Era" (*baise kongbu shidai*, 1940s and 1950s) of heavy-handed KMT consolidation are now consumed as a quaint "native" pastiche in widely popular "retro bars" (*fugu jiuba*) (Xinjing 1996). As we will see, nostalgic longings also pervade the process of recollection integral to the flower-wine drinking adventure.

An important implication of nostalgia, however, does not present itself in the chronotopic adventure as Simmel and Bakhtin would have it, because neither of them

¹¹⁰ A threat which Marx ascribed to alienation, Weber to rationalization, and Durkheim to anomie.

considers a political-economy of space-time, or a mode of alterity conceived in relation to a society's dominant ideological chronotopes. As Susan Stewart reminds us, however, "the gap between past and present [is also] a structure of desire...in which authority [read the Law] seeks legitimation by recontextualizing its object and thereby recontextualizing itself" (cited in Ivy 1995:69). In the context of flower-wine drinking, Stewart's insight suggests an interpenetrating isomorphism between the structure of desire in the longing for authenticity and in the official legitimation of authority.

Could it be, therefore, that the authenticating cultural codes men reanimate through the signifying practices of the flower wine adventure amount to a misrecognized recuperation of official legitimating ideologies? Marilyn Ivy argues that the temporal deferral between past and present opens a space for fantasy and that it is within the difference between the moments of loss and recovery that the object of fantasy can be said to exist (1995:67-68). If it is but a small step from nostalgia to fantasy, could it be that the recuperation of national authenticity takes place within the temporal structure of men's flower wine fantasies? I aim to demonstrate that the answer to these questions is affirmative and that this is precisely the "scandal" of the flower wine adventure.

Scholars of nationalism have shown that legitimating ideologies of national authenticity root the essence of the nation within a sacred, timeless past. Prasenjit Duara, in a study of the "regime of authenticity" in modern China, argues that images of national authenticity are most often embodied in affective figures, in particular youth, women, and aborigines (Duara 1998). In the flower wine adventure, I discovered that ideological representations of national authenticity manifest in estranged, eroticized form in men's flower-wine fantasies as the beautiful young maiden (*meimei*), the authentic mainland sister (*dalumei*), and the undefiled aboriginal girl (*yuanzhumin xiaojie*). As if desiring to complete what Slavoj Žižek calls the

“short circuit between female ‘substance’ and the place of the Law,” men project these patriarchal fantasies of purity onto the bodies of hostesses, where they contrive to rediscover and repossess them in estranged form (Zizek 1999a:47). If the role of fantasy is to give the subject “substance” while hiding this estranged objectification, it is the “impossible gaze” of female alterity taken up in men’s flower wine fantasies that gives “substance” its sense of timelessness, purity, and authenticity (Zizek 1999:87-93).

The patriarchal artifice in this gendered modality of nationalist ideology is twofold: (1) Men recuperate these collective values in alienated form through private fantasies and therefore misrecognize how their erotic desires make them complicitous in reproducing a patriarchal socio-political order (Sangren 2000:69-95). (2) In being objectified as the embodiments of the timeless sentiments of authenticity and purity, women are also being defined as unchanging, innocent, and submissive, a “sacred” status whose preservation requires that they be denied access to the “profane” public realm. To ritually bestow upon women such atavistic attributes is a symbolic form of sacrifice, for it socially constructs an arbitrary (non-natural) boundary between women and men, who by contrast emerge as the agents of the forward-looking dimension of the modern nation as the subject of progress and change. Moreover, as we will see, women’s victimization in hostess clubs is not only symbolic but also often physical, since in order to fulfill their role as the agents of progress and change men aspire to mastery and control, which they seek to reaffirm “literally” through the physical violation and domination of hostesses.

In Taiwan, to be sure, drinking flower wine has been a primary ritual activity by which men bring these patriarchal aspects of their society into being. The flower-wine adventure emphasizes the important alienating role played by fantasy in the process of male domination. In making the hostess the object of their fantasies, men desire to “possess” her physically and symbolically. This is simultaneously a desire to

appropriate their fantasies of authenticity and purity in estranged form, making the hostess the objectified embodiment of the stable and enduring values in which men recognize themselves and ground their friendship bonds in the face of ever-changing historical circumstances. Thus conceived, the flower-wine drinking adventure is an eroticized act of symbolic and physical violence, a sacrificial ritual based upon a discourse of purity through which to overcome everyday contingency and transmit, by a process that integrates men and differentiates them from women, an identity deemed eternal and whole. And if prevailing representations of hostesses are anything but wholesome, this public erasure of purity merely fastens more firmly men's desire for authenticity to the realm of fantasy and adds fuel to the iterative structure of desire as the desire for desire. For Simmel, the paramount form of the adventure is what he calls "the erotic" (Simmel 1971:195). The flower-wine adventure, as I interpret it, situates the erotic within a ritual chronotope of sacrifice, highlighting a gender and sexual politics that articulates male fantasy and patriarchal ideologies of national authenticity (see Allison 2000:xvii).

Pre-Outing Protocols

My Nine Ball King buddies arrive daily at the pool hall directly from work mostly dressed in coat and tie, get-ahead attire appropriate to their white collar occupations, which include computer salesman, stockbroker, plant manager, cram-school instructor, and even "mafia."¹¹¹ I often wondered why these mainly married, middle-class men chose to invest so many hours idling away their afternoons and evenings in this ratty and roach-infested, dark and dusty *cloaca maxima*, exclusively in the company of other men. In Nine Ball King, thick cigarette smoke and piped-in

¹¹¹ "Mafia"—which my friends sometimes use to refer to Taiwan's gang culture—is the reply I would get when I asked how a few among our Nine Ball King gang make their living. On one occasion, when I pressed my closest friend very hard for a more concrete description of what one gang member, Little Pearl, does for a living, he told me that he mainly runs a large mahjong gambling parlor and lends money.

muzak punctuated by the steady sound of pool balls being cracked and mosquitoes zapped have a mesmerizing effect that seems to make time stand still. Blending with Nine Ball King's sedate ambience is the only "decorative" motif of the place, a decaying collection of old matchbooks from other places tacked to the lintel over the bar-cum-kitchen and covered by a yellow veneer of splattered grease. During the three-year period over which I visited Nine Ball King, I never noticed any new matchbooks, which appear to be significant not only as indexes of other places but also as icons of past times held in suspense. Certain other "nonsynchronous" objects found scattered about the pool hall, but that nevertheless register as fixtures, also reproduce this sense of Nine Ball King's chronotopic detachment from the real material and ideological conditions of the present (see Bloch 1977). In particular, there are the old-style pop-top bottles of Sprite and Fanta that my friends grip and slug in a way instantly evocative of youth, as well as the traditional Chinese teapots, for each of which there is a proprietary anecdote of usually serendipitous acquisition somewhere in mainland China.

Once I became integrated into my friends' Nine Ball King routine, I began to experience the loiterer lifestyle there as a kind of anchor amidst Taipei's otherwise sprawling and hyper-dynamic cosmopolitanism. I therefore also came to realize that Nine Ball King's dilapidated and antediluvian atmosphere is not incidental but rather indispensable, precisely because it signals a chronotopic separation from the workaday world. This recontextualization would seem to constitute Nine Ball King as a foundation for male friendship relations and identity that is altogether different from, indeed in contrast to, all that is whimsical and instrumental about the mainstream lifeworld. What initially struck me as peculiarly outmoded about Nine Ball King, then, I eventually came to experience as an aesthetic sense of attachment to something anterior and steadfast, and I believe this also goes far to explain why my friends keep going back there.

Dallying at Nine Ball King is also a ritual precondition of this group's flower-wine drinking excursions, and each of the many hostess club jaunts I made with this gang was launched from this shabby subterranean hang out. What struck me as noteworthy, if at times frustrating, is the fact that Silk, Little Clean, Thumbs, Big Brother Lou, and other friends from Nine Ball King never planned in advance a flower-wine drinking adventure; rather, each decision to go was spontaneous. On several occasions, as it grew late and I grew weary from idling, I asked either Silk or Little Clean straightforwardly if we were going to go drinking. Each of them had a way of parrying my question, either with an abrupt shoulder shrug or a brisk head snap, which communicated clearly that my asking was a violation of a taboo. Never was I tendered a direct verbal response, and I eventually realized that neither Silk nor Little Clean could say for certain at that point if the gang would be carousing or not. This is because the gang was still engaged in a form of intra-group prognostication that typifies one way in which Taiwanese friends tend often to "communicate" and that I interpret as their way of gauging the forces of fate, in this context as reflected in the collective mood of the group. Simmel explains that the element of fate is key to the adventure, for the adventurer thrives on a "mystic instinct" by which he [*sic*] believes he is certain of the unknown (Simmel 1971:195). Indeed, in any of a number of contexts, from gambling to spearfishing, my friends flaunted such a "mystic instinct" by contriving what Goffman calls "fateful situations" that afforded them the opportunity to divine some micro-outcome in which "deciding forces" were believed to be at work (Goffman 1967).

At Nine Ball King, my friends determined if the time is right for carousing by applying an habituated hermeneutic to an unspoken and improvisational cacophony of gestures and signals, typically displayed in the context of playing pool. On nights when we ended up carousing, for example, the gang at some random point would casually become collectively absorbed with one pool match between two players that

was really heating up. As all attention zeros in on the table, performance and commentary become increasingly flamboyant and the match begins to unfold as a series of mini-chances where the outcome of each shot is used to divine the collective mood of the group. Eventually, a tacit verdict about going drinking (or not) is somehow unanimously reached and mutually discerned. You know this is so because by this time the signals might become mercilessly unambiguous—recall Little Clean peacocking proudly his “signature gesture.” The dénouement of collectively loitering around pool tables—which are put to work by friends as a “decision machine” (Goffman 1967)—is a spontaneous determination either to go drinking or to go home that in each case is always a *fait accompli*. Interestingly, Rey Chow interprets “fate” as integral to a distinctive mode of nostalgia that hinges on a recursive “network of chance” and the “manipulation of temporality” rather than the simple linear projection of lack/loss into space (Chow 1993:61). Following this insight, I would say that my friends enlist fate or chance as a “truth-yielding” agent in the detached space-time of their flower wine adventure, in which nostalgia, as we will see, plays a key role mainly in a nonlinear register as a phantasmagoric “feeling” looking for an authenticating object in the imagined past. Significantly, because it highlights the chronotopic distinction between the adventure and the everyday, this modality of nostalgia contrasts with the typical teleological one in which a feeling is “triggered by an object lost in the past” (1993:61).

For practical reasons, we always took a cab to hostess clubs and, since each of my friends owns a car (and I rode a motorbike), we rarely took a cab for any other purpose. Consequently, hailing and riding a cab together with friends was a defining moment of our flower-wine drinking adventure. Triggered perhaps by the raveling sensation of moving swiftly through darkness as registered by city lights shooting by like meteors, or by the anticipation in being chauffeured from the seedy space-time of Nine Ball King to the glitzy chronotope of a KTV hostess club, these nocturnal cab

rides were a time when my friends liked to indulge in their flower-wine drinking memories and recount for me a story or two of the way things used to be. Little Clean delighted in harking back to his teenage years in Taizhong, when he and his buddies would frequent “*su-to-ri-pu*,” a Japanese transliteration for “strip,” referring to bygone Taiwanese strip clubs whose name immediately registers the infamous sex culture of the Japanese colonial era. Silk, who grew up in Taipei County, liked to reminisce about the booming 1980s, a period of rapid economic growth when most of my friends claimed to have made easy money and to have spent it even more freely. Being a period of high cash flow and consumption, it was also a time when hostess clubs flourished and when, according to my friends, you got a lot more for your money from them. Riding through the city, Silk would point out districts or exact spots where popular hostess clubs once stood and recall with nostalgic yearning the extraordinary flower-wine adventures he had with pals in those days. Even though most of this Nine Ball King cohort was not together in the times and places being recollected, I could see that these guys strongly identified with each other’s evocations of a hallowed past and that their friendship bond accrued temporal depth simply from sharing these auratic memories. To assuage the grief evident in these longings, Shark would invariably reassure us all that we could relive in spades the forlorn Taipei heyday of flower-wine drinking in the mainland China of today, where he boasted of experiencing hostess club heaven for half of every month. He always carried on about the outstanding beauty and youth of the mainland sisters, and especially about their tenderness and innocence compared to the sophistication and cunning of Taiwanese girls—splendors all the more accessible no doubt due to the power of the NT Dollar over the Chinese RMB. Silk would chime in with Shark’s assessment of the mainland hostess club scene, having been flower-wine drinking on several reconnaissance trips to Shanghai to explore the prospects of setting up a satellite office there. Shark and Silk’s high appraisal of mainland sisters seemed entirely untempered by the harsh

censuring of the latter in the Taiwanese media as opportunistic and rapacious “gold diggers” (*lao jin*) (see below). Indeed, Little Clean too expressed his fidelity to this idealistic mainland sister discourse by making Silk promise to hire him as his Shanghai liaison.

When our taxi would finally arrive at our destination, a valet would open the cab door and briskly usher us inside the building. Once inside, a polite and exquisitely dressed young girl would take over as our escort. At one club that was our favorite for a while, Hong Chang, we were guided down a long and winding polished marble stairwell with gilded handrails and mirrored walls. And each time we finally passed through the imposing set of heavy steel doors and into the club’s anteroom, the flickering strobe lights and powerfully pulsating music not only assailed my eyes and ears but also delivered a sudden but dissipating blow to my body. At this point, if the sensation of being literally and figuratively underground did not effect a rupture with the outside world, then being instantly transformed into a pampered personage by doting young girls did.

With Crooner, Baby Face, Sleeping Bear, and sometimes another friend or two, our flower-wine adventure began with lunch, usually at our favorite fish-ball noodle shop, *jiaxing yuwandian*, nestled in a small alley off Yanping North Road in the Taipei Bridge section of old Dadaocheng. We convened at Crooner’s office, where we would sit around, brew tea, and chat for a while before catching a cab. The ride could take forty-five minutes or longer in heavy traffic, which augmented the sense of traveling into a time warp that going to Dadaocheng always filled me with. Crooner ritually insisted that we disembark well before the fish-ball noodle shop and walk several bustling blocks, allowing just enough time to acculturate to the distinctive sights and sounds of this culturally vibrant section of town. The visible vestiges of Dadaocheng’s different historical chronotopes are everywhere palpably present. There is a diverse and disorderly jumble of mainly poorly preserved architecture,

including traditional Chinese-style homes with weathered wooden walls and clay tile roofs, austere Japanese colonial-era mansions, and European-style commercial buildings with Chinese-character names carved in stone evocative of colonial Shanghai. Walking past Guisui Road instantly evokes the geisha culture now practically equated with Jiangshanlou, the infamous hostess club that once stood imposingly tall at the corner of this street and, though the structure has been razed, is still alive in the collective memory as an icon of the locale. In the popular ditty, “If you’ve never seen a geisha, you’ve never been to Dadaocheng,” Jiangshanlou and Guisui Road are the specific sites that immediately come to people’s minds. Especially in this district, which reeks of Taiwan’s turbulent past, walking along streets named after places in China evokes the traumatic arrival of the heavy-handed mainland regime after the collapse of the colonial era. But amidst the embedded layers of meanings variously inscribed in Dadaocheng’s spatial topography, these mainland place names merely reveal in memory what they were intended to conceal—the Japanese-era “*machi*” or “*ding*,” which persist in signifying for many the colonial inroads of modernity in Taiwan. At the same time, the “traditional merchandise” (*nan-bei huo*) piled high in shop after shop along Dihua Road superscribes an aura of timeless tradition on the complex modern history of Dadaocheng. Even a casual stroll along this thronging market thoroughfare, however, makes plain the tense ambiguity over how exactly to define this timeless tradition. Should we imagine its origin by focusing on the many prominent and pricey displays of genuine Chinese Pu’er tea from Yunnan Province, with vintages dating back to the early twentieth century? Or should we instead train our historical imagination on the smoky food tent where colorfully clad aborigines are searing fatty slices of “authentic aboriginal stone-barbecued wild-mountain boar”?

I felt that my friends ingested metonymically some admixture of these deep cultural currents at the fish-ball noodle shop. The shop is open-front, tiny, and always

cramped. Everything in the shop is sticky and the floor always wet. The four ladies who run the place shuffle around in knee-high rubber boots. Bowls are cursorily rinsed in a plastic pail of stagnant water. There is no clear demarcation between the cooking area and the four or five scattered folding dining tables. We sometimes slurped our noodles right alongside the heaping mound of fish-and-pork filling that always occupies a spot at one table, in front of which one lady rolls fish balls with impressive speed. Upon entering the shop, conversation between us for some reason always ceased and we attended to our fish-ball noodle soup business in quiet concentration. For each of us I am sure, this lowly feeding ritual constituted a key liminal moment in our passage into the slow and seedy space-time of Dadaocheng's *a-gong* teahouses. To embrace wholly the distinctive local essence of this native teahouse culture, as Little Clean so often loved to remind me, you have to “*xia-liu*,” which means “low” or “crude,” but in this idiosyncratic usage carried a more literal connotation, to wit, stepping out of the mainstream and letting yourself go into an unfettered flow.¹¹² Indeed, I knew Crooner in a variety of contexts, but he was never so at ease and content than in this flower-wine world, so much so that I grew fond of observing the dreamy state that instantly overcame him each time he swaggered through the front door of an *a-gong* teahouse and into the welcoming arms of its mistress. As we will see, a great deal concerning one's identity as a Taiwanese male is taken up and placed at stake in this passage into one's personal flower-wine dreamtime, and the aesthetic spatiotemporal experience of strolling through historically saturated Dadaocheng was a requisite ritual for reactivating the layers of meanings of which this dreamtime is comprised.

I do not recall there being clocks inside the private rooms of hostess clubs, so if they were there at all there was no need to look at them. Neither do I recollect

¹¹² Little Clean would add the verb “must” (*yao*), which turns the adjective “*xialiu*” (low, crude) into a verb-object construction (*yao xia-liu*), literally “you must step down into the flow [and get low].”

keeping track of time by checking my wristwatch. Time is reckoned in hostess clubs by sensations and procedures that mark the stages of a flower-wine adventure, of which I would identify three. First there is the “boundary flirting” stage, which involves heavy alcohol consumption combined with introductory conversation that carries tensely with boundaries drawn by women between the personal or intimate and the professional. Next is what I call the corporeal stage, where men contrive strategies to pet or peak at hostess’ bodies in order simultaneously to make hostesses the objects of male mastery and to possess in estranged form the authentic essence in which they recognize themselves and ground their friendship bonds. Finally there is the karaoke stage, a sappy winding down where men mimetically wallow in a rare moment of sentimental sincerity.

The Boundary Flirting Stage

In the fancier KTV hostess clubs, where the girls are uniformly very young, conversation tends to be simple and sparse, partly because middle-aged men and teenaged girls have little to share and partly because the oppressively loud music videos make casual conversation inconvenient, you either have to shout or press your lips into your interlocutor’s ear. A more significant consideration, however, is the inexperience of young hostesses, for drinking flower wine, even when boisterously festive, is rife with tensions that derive most evidently from the fact that men are paying big money for some never completely specified service to be provided by hostesses. In a series of conversations with female “sex workers” of various sorts, Josephine Chuen-Juei Ho found that these women approach their work as a “profession,” which means that for self-integrity and self-defense they empower themselves by strategically managing their profession through innovative practices

and discourses (Ho 2000:283-84).¹¹³ One such strategy is “boundary setting,” diverse practices that sex workers employ to undermine being unilaterally controlled by men. In hostess clubs, the most able and experienced hostesses know how to control dialogue and actively engage their clients, often in a sexual or seductive register, while steering clear of more personal subject matter or insinuations that might be perceived as intimate or lead men on. In other words, being a skilled conversationalist is the hostess’ first and most effective line of defense against the advances of an aggressive man.¹¹⁴

Young hostesses no doubt know the importance of boundary-setting conversation; however, they are short on experience and therefore seem to choose relative reticence rather than risk initiating conversation that could disadvantage or even endanger them. Consequently, among quiet teenaged hostesses, my friends typically take charge by regaling them with self-flattering stories. I have overheard Silk, for example, boasting about winning new interior design bids and orchestrating an important ground-breaking ceremony at the site of a several million NT dollar project. Shark invariably endeavors to impress young hostesses by flaunting details of his freewheeling lifestyle in south China, where he works for half of every month as a factory manager. Usually sitting next to Little Clean, I more easily eavesdrop on him and recall him regularly recounting spearfishing heroics, which featured for a while one episode where he bagged two amberjack on one spear: “I zeroed in on two giants as the swirling school descended upon me and waited as long as I could until they overlapped...at just the right moment I fired and was flying two kites.”

¹¹³ To define hostesses as “sex workers” is to reproduce popular media representations as well as legal constructions of them. However, Ho uses “sex worker” as a more professionally dignified rubric than “prostitute.” In my view, both terms necessarily associate hostesses with sex in a way that obscures more fundamental aspects of their work. It is ironic that popular and scholarly discourses almost unanimously link men’s participation in flower wine culture with masculinity, which is a gender construct, while women’s participation is automatically and only about sex.

¹¹⁴ Hostesses negotiate their personal and professional flower-wine lives in different ways, but I believe that most desire to maintain a clear boundary between the two, in which case a hostess will be very careful to avoid leading a man on; see (O’Brien 2002).

The hostesses listen to these expressive tales attentively, if dispassionately, but their outstanding youth, beauty, and sexuality, brandished by their revealing bunny uniforms, sets high story-telling stakes for these middle-aged men, who desire these young maidens to desire them with more than dollar-biased eyes. It is the exception rather than the rule when a guy and one of these young hostesses really hit it off well in conversation. Indeed, one reason alcohol consumption is pursued intensively at this early stage is as an antidote to these awkward boundary-flirting moments. Herein also lies part of the explanation as to why my friends became so obsessed with Wei Wei, the tall and slender mainland sister from Fujian Province, and Xuan Xuan, the quiet beauty who hails from Keelung, the pristine littoral chronotope that is my friends' sacred spearfishing Mecca. While the story-telling stakes remain high with these girls, my friends fantasized about them as embodiments of authentic values, and therefore also as being less materialistic and more genuinely amenable consumers of the male identities they improvised and performed during this stage of the flower-wine adventure. Indeed, Hong Chang became my friends' favorite club precisely because of these two girls, unexceptional but for the images of authenticity and purity that their mythologized origins somehow invoked. Katherine Frank, in her study of strip clubs and male desire in the U.S., discovered a similar framework where men's "perceptions of authenticity" were often based on fantasies and where, for example, beliefs of "working-class women as less professional and insincere than middle-class women (or vice versa) sometimes influenced the kinds of clubs that men chose to visit" (Frank 2002:34).

Unlike the youthful and inexperienced hostesses of KTV clubs, *a-gong* teahouse hostesses are typically (though not always) seasoned flower-wine veterans, some of whom have been "graduated" by their age from the upscale KTV clubs. As survivors, they can be confident and capable conversationalists. I have encountered teahouse hostesses who are quick witted and flourish unmercifully razor-sharp tongues,

and even ones who communicate flawlessly through a seductive repertoire of bodily gestures. Even when proffering flattering flower-wine platitudes, a perfectly executed wink or grin lets you know that these hostesses know what they are doing and are in control. But most impressive is their capacity quickly to assess each man's personality type and improvise ways to interest and engage him. I have been carousing with some stubbornly awkward friends unable to relax and let go in the company of unfamiliar hostesses, and a hostess or the mistress might respond by calling in a girl we had not "ordered" whose special congeniality she knew could break the ice. Consequently, even though the seasoned teahouse hostess, like all hostesses, is (nearly) always obliging and posturing to please, it is not easy for a man to gain the upper hand on her through conversation because she maintains a formidable boundary between her professional persona and her personal self. Perhaps for this reason, Crooner and company were forever following leads from friends and checking out new *a-gong* teahouses discovered to have younger, mainland sister, or aboriginal hostesses, all of whom my friends perceive to be inherently less indomitable and more readily accessible. On one occasion, Crooner even received a flower-wine phone call from a "mature" hostess whom we both knew well urging him to visit her teahouse soon because a young mainland sister had recently begun hostessing there.

The formidable boundary flirting challenge posed by the teahouse hostess also explains why "Na Na's Place" was Crooner and company's favorite teahouse and, almost without exception, was our first stop on every hostess-club hopping spree (and rarely does an outing with this gang consist of less than two rounds at two different teahouses). Na Na is an Ami aborigine from Taidong and one of the most popular hostesses I encountered at any club. She affects a soft voice and shy and reserved manner; indeed, I never once recall her partaking of the often crudely flirtatious flower-wine banter typical of hostesses. Moreover, she never failed to recall specific

aspects of our workaday lives and ask detailed but polite questions about what we had been up to since our last visit. She also faithfully rang Crooner and me at least once a week on our cell phones to say hello and to remind us to come visit her soon.¹¹⁵

Although aware of the hostess' business motives, men garner symbolic capital from these calls by boasting about receiving them and especially when taking one in the presence of buddies, and I too learned how to capitalize on them in this way.¹¹⁶

During the three-year period in which I visited tearooms with Crooner and company, Na Na changed the club where she worked twice.¹¹⁷ Each new club she worked at became our new compulsory first-stop and assumed the name "Na Na's Place."

Drinking is a priority during this early stage and nothing compromises more the hostess' ability to maintain her professional boundary than drunkenness. And if tolerance to alcohol (*jiu liang*) might be one deciding factor in the struggle for mastery and control, hostesses tend to be at a distinct disadvantage. Contrary to the style of competitive drinking between men that Boretz found at hostess clubs among his carousing buddies, I never once witnessed my friends challenge each other at a drinking game (Boretz 1996). The only competitive drinking that I observed was between male guests and hostesses, and most often the man would challenge the hostess to one type of finger-guessing duel or another (however, it is not uncommon for a hostess to challenge a man as well). No matter how skilled a hand a hostess might be, her ability—or luck—is never enough to overcome the fact that she works between six and ten hours each day, often beginning in the early afternoon, pounding shots of beer, sake, or whiskey from the first hour to the last.

¹¹⁵ This is a common customer relations strategy practiced by many hostesses, though, unless desperate for business, a hostess will call only those customers that she finds agreeable.

¹¹⁶ These calls can come in at inconvenient times too (at work or home), but men use their cell phones skillfully to screen calls.

¹¹⁷ In the first instance, most of the hostesses from Na Na's original club, including the owner-manager, moved together to a new venue, while in the second change, Na Na and a few other hostesses switched to a larger club run by a different owner-manager. Each of the three clubs at which Na Na worked was located in the Taipei Bridge area of the Dadaocheng District.

Most hostesses habitually go to lengths to avoid or minimize their intake of alcohol, from surreptitiously under-filling their own (and each other's) glass and watering down their sake to not finishing off the glass on a "bottom's up." I have even noticed hostesses on more than one occasion contriving to escape requisite drinking by refocusing attention and conversation onto their bodies or even by offering a peak at or feel of their breasts. One afternoon while carousing with Crooner and company, we encountered an extreme example of this diversionary tactic being practiced by an especially young teahouse hostess with tremendously large breasts. Her "flower name" (*hua ming*) was memorably apropos: "Wet Nurse" (*Nai Ma*). Wet Nurse made certain that a shot glass never touched her lips by ceaselessly drawing attention to her breasts, either by shaking them, lifting them onto the table, rubbing them, or brushing them up against our bodies. At one point, when Crooner's fascination with these genuinely giant glands subsided and he realized that Wet Nurse was not drinking, he interrupted all activity around the table by hollering Wet Nurse's name three times with his hands raised up in front of him like a priest reading a sermon. Once he had everyone's attention, he authoritatively reprimanded Wet Nurse in a terse Chinese whose economy of characters enlarged the message's poignancy: "Wet Nurse! Just because you have giant breasts doesn't mean you don't have to drink!" (*Nai Ma! Ni bukeyi yinwei nai da er bu he jiu!*) Crooner repeated this pronouncement throughout the round whenever Wet Nurse's lips had remained dry for too long. I also recall Crooner as well as other friends at more upscale clubs regularly reproaching hostesses reluctant to drink by threatening to call the manager or madam and have them replaced.

Too be sure, some men, especially those who visit teahouses, are very serious about drinking, and hostesses are invariably unable to avoid regularly drinking themselves into acute stages of inebriation. I have watched hostesses literally stagger between rooms, bouncing from wall to wall. I have also witnessed intoxicated

hostesses break down and cry, fly into a rage, and even fall flat on the floor and pass out. Perhaps most pitiable is listening to them wishfully, if also wistfully, obsess over novel techniques and antidotes rumored effective at mitigating the harmful effects of alcohol on their bodies. Invariably, however, what alcohol does is loosen everyone up, at which point men's showy oratory flourishes tend to slide into more quiet one-on-one flower-wine dialogics, which I could neither overhear nor imitate but only improvise in consort with my hostess. What is clear, however, is that such dialogics segued to stage two, the corporeal stage.

The Corporeal Stage

Men's descent into drunkenness is accompanied by gradual self-abandonment, which emboldens them to give physical play to their fantasies. It is through the eroticized "touch and feel" corporeality of the flower wine adventure that men seek to possess the hostess as the embodied object of their fantasies. Men contrive a variety of strategies to peek at, poke, grope, and feel hostesses' bodies, which are by no means automatically available to them. Indeed, that hostesses are technically under no obligation to permit men to violate them physically is crucial to creating the seductive challenge of the flower wine adventure. Aggressive or boorish behavior by a man might illicit the visible displeasure of a hostess, destroying the semblance of "good fun" into which the tensions of the flower wine problematic under negotiation need always to be reassimilated.

In the fancier clubs, where young hostesses are outfitted in revealing uniforms and often seat themselves on a man's lap (*zhifu dian*), the form of symbolic violence that Bourdieu refers to as the female desire for eroticized subordination is formally

structured into the flower wine adventure (Bourdieu 2001).¹¹⁸ In these clubs, the challenge facing each man is to break down this staged structure of eroticized subordination by finding a way genuinely to please a hostess. There is no formula for accomplishing this; rather, success hinges on the mutual spontaneity of responses between a man and his hostess. In *a-gong* teahouses, where seasoned hostesses are fully dressed and “private” rooms much less private, more creativity and initiative—my friends playfully call it “*shou wan*” (tricks or tactics)—are required of men in order corporeally to possess hostesses. Crooner was always prepared to catalyze an inhibited buddy with a highly animated entreaty that became his “pet phrase” (*koutouchan*): “Give her a hug, will you!” (*baoyixia*). Sleeping Bear was a confident competitor in the Taiwanese finger-guessing game and liked to challenge hostesses to the strip version in which the loser of each round removed one article of clothing. The final piece of clothing remaining on either Sleeping Bear or the hostess was the brief or panty, respectively, and the loser of the final round had to offer a peek inside.

Never want for initiative, Crooner had an unusually direct style of asking at least one hostess per club for a peek at, and sometimes also a feel of, her breasts. He took this voyeuristic ritual very seriously, never making light of the act or failing to follow up by earnestly uttering the following while looking straight into the hostess’ eyes: “Thank you. Thank you very much. We’re friends, okay, good friends.” Crooner’s ingenuous interpolation of the hostess as “friend” betrays the sublimated homoerotic desire tensely mediated by the heterosexual fantasies of authenticity “rediscovered” through hostesses’ bodies (see Sedgwick 1985). Moreover, raw corporeal violations such as Crooner’s enable men to disavow the homogenizing effect of the commodity form as an abstract exchange value, a threat that inheres in the cash

¹¹⁸ There is another category of exclusive hostess clubs referred to as “plain-clothes clubs” (*bianfu dian*), where the hostesses are also young but wear their own clothes rather than playboy bunny uniforms. The hostesses at these clubs are said to be of high caliber, often professionals or college students. While I had a couple of friends who frequented these clubs, most of my friends preferred the uniformed clubs (*zhifu dian*), where the girls were believed to be simpler, purer, and more fun.

nexus simmering below the surface of the flower wine adventure. Through the disavowal availed by the materiality of physical violations, men contrive to extract from hostesses' bodies a more authentic gratification that Marx called "sensuously varied objectivity," which is realized only through the use-value form of consumption (Bennett 2001:116-117). Still vivid in my memory are the painful expressions of violation and humiliation that momentarily flashed across the face of some hostesses in the immediate aftermath of Crooner's awkward optical and verbal expropriation of their embodied essence, rendered all the more depleting and degrading because willfully tendered upon his straightforward request. It is precisely to preclude this powerful corporeal expropriation that explains why many hostesses might adopt the defensive strategy of taking the initiative to violate men first. In her conversations with female sex workers in Taiwan, Josephine Chuen-juei Ho discovered this defensive strategy to be a motto of betel-nut beauties: "I would rather go ahead and touch the customer than to have him touch me" (Ho 2000:291).

The Karaoke Stage

The final stage of each round of carousing is marked by singing. It was always striking to witness the schizophrenic reversal in which manly men now embraced a karaoke microphone and, with disconcerting sentimentality and sincerity, melted their heart and soul into sappy love songs. It was requisite for each man to sing at least one song, and hostesses ensured that no one was overlooked. While hostesses snuggled up to men as they sang, appearing to proffer moral support, men did not direct their performances to their hostesses. They instead seemed to enter a dreamy state of rapture, now glancing at the lyrics slowly unfurling across the TV screen, now looking upward at nothing and losing themselves into the melody of the song. In the upscale KTV clubs, loud and lively teen-pop music videos, featuring sexy young mirror

images of the hostesses themselves, played one after another until the karaoke stage, when men selected their own songs to sing from a thick menu book passed around by the hostesses. Invariably, my friends selected hokey love songs, either in mandarin or Taiwanese, which sharply shifted the mood of the adventure from sexy to sentimental. In the *a-gong* teahouses, men most often selected Japanese-style *enka* (*yange*), melancholy lyrical ballads popular in Taiwan since the Japanese colonial era. To this day, whenever and wherever I hear *enka*, I experience a rush of flower wine sensations that wistfully returns me to *a-gong* teahouses—and I invariably see and hear Crooner. Crooner was the paragon of *enka* karaoke, and delighted in gushing out these quivering tunes while slow dancing with the microphone in one hand and a hostess in the other. The rest of us, including the hostesses, experienced vicarious pleasure from watching Crooner, who became so thoroughly enraptured in his performance that you could not help but admire him.

Karaoke was without question the most difficult dimension of the flower wine adventure for me to assimilate and understand. If my singing voice shined only in the shower, why must I make a silly spectacle of myself by bearing it publicly? Based on my musical ear, the very same question was also apropos to most of my friends. After a painfully slow break in period, however, I began to “feel” a certain powerful sense of closure to the flower wine adventure each time I let myself go into a karaoke solo, and this made the ritual easier for me to perform, but no less puzzling. It was only upon encountering a feminist reading of Niccolo Machiavelli’s distinctive twist to the classic relationship between *virtù* and *fortuna* as “indebted and mimetic” rather than oppositional that I was able to render sensible this rare male effusion of ear-piercing sentimentality (Brown 1988:118; Honig 1993:16).

As I explained in Chapter 2, Machiavelli’s man of *virtù* realizes “true” manliness only through his capacity ultimately “to wield the accoutrements of the truest woman,” to cross the uncrossable lines between male and female—in short, “to

outwoman *fortuna*” and “be a better woman than she is” (Honig 1993:16). In the flower wine adventure, men are “indebted” to women for embodying in estranged form the authenticating essence of their patriarchal fantasies, which achieve sacred and timeless status only through female alterity. Through the “touch and feel” corporeality of the flower wine adventure, men expropriate this essence of authenticity and purity and accrue the transcendent power of its sacred status. Manly *virtù* is ultimately affirmed, however, only by mimetically demonstrating embodied mastery of this authentic female force, which manifests in flower wine karaoke as sincerity.¹¹⁹

For men, virtuosity at karaoke does not adhere in the quality of one’s singing voice, a fact all too apparent to any karaoke audience. In fact, men’s singing is generally not a topic open for discussion, and even a voice with traces of talent might draw no more than a passing acknowledgement from hostesses. Ritual protocol requires only that all hostesses enthusiastically respond to each man’s performance with a resounding round of applause. In the last instance, karaoke virtuosity resides in men one-upping women by performing genuine sincerity to an extent greater than that befitting even of women, or, put differently, by transcending “performance” altogether through the authenticity of one’s sincerity. If women are constructed as ideal embodiments of purity, karaoke thus consummates the authenticating function of the flower wine adventure by establishing men as better at being womanly than women. In this respect, karaoke therefore also consummates the ritual sacrifice of women: as the approving karaoke audience of men’s mimetic wallowing in the very purity extracted from their female bodies, hostesses redouble their complicity in the affirmation of men as complete subject-objects.

¹¹⁹ In an article about pornography and state power in Taiwan, Antonia Chao also emphasizes the centrality of the female body as an object of integrity or authenticity. Moreover, she notes how male pornography actors can “authenticate their integrity” to the public “only by imitating a woman’s voice.” In doing so, Chao argues, these actors ironically reconnect their bodies to the (patriarchal) nationalist boundary (Chao 2000:242).

At some point during the karaoke stage, the madam quietly appears and seats herself beside the “big brother”—the man footing the bill—and all are reminded that the round must draw to a close. However, it is always appropriate to request a few more drinks, and the madam herself might deem it necessary to do so, if the karaoke mood appears too intense and a bit more time is needed to unwind. Indeed, you never have to worry about a flower wine round abruptly ending because real time is up.¹²⁰ The flower wine adventure is a detached universe with own internal “core,” and therefore also with its own temporality that unfolds from the inside out. It is through the semiopraxis just described that men materialize their flower wine fantasies, the substance of which I discovered only beyond the borders of the hostess club in a recurring aspect of my friends’ flower wine discourse.

The Story-Telling Stage

No less important than a man’s performance at the hostess club is the skill with which he engages friends by narrating highlights of the adventure outside the hostess club context, most often over tea or a meal. Invariably, my friends’ flower wine discourse repeatedly invoked three idealized female figures: the mainland sister, the aboriginal girl, and the young maiden. One group of friends with whom I regularly spearfished became keen on a KTV hostess club in Zhongli, a town in Taipei County. One friend who runs a small business had heard from a customer that the hostesses at this club were all young and beautiful and, moreover, that there were lots of mainland sisters there. My friends became obsessed with talking about these mainland sisters, idealizing them as not only young and beautiful but also tenderer, more quiescent, and less cunning than Taiwanese girls. The first time Crooner took me to meet Na Na, he expounded at length on the distinctive characteristics of an aboriginal girl; in short,

¹²⁰ The rough time frame for a round is three hours.

she is trustworthy, sincere, and straightforward, even if, he gratuitously added, some of her physical features might not always to be so exceptional. And when the Nine Ball King gang hit the hostess clubs, the main object of their desire was the virginal young maiden, and her allure was all the more enhanced if she might also be a mainland sister or aboriginal girl. These men would frequently express this fantasy by speculating amongst themselves on the actual age of hostesses, especially whether or not a very adolescent looking one was actually eighteen years old, the legal age of adulthood and the youngest age to which any hostess would admit when queried. The manager, in fact, would often fuel my friends' virginal fantasy when introducing a hostess we had not met before by adding, "She's new...she's just starting out at this work."

A memorable moment when these fantasies of authenticity, purity, and innocence were made resolutely manifest was the first time my spearfishing buddies introduced me to A Feng, who owns and manages a small but popular seafood restaurant on Peace Island in Keelung and who is also himself a spear fisherman. After a morning of hunting at White Lighthouse, the eight of us took our catch over to A Feng's place for an afternoon banquet before heading back to Taipei. Knowing that A Feng is a regular visitor to Keelung's hostess clubs, my friends thought to mention when introducing me to him that I knew something about *a-gong* teahouses in Taipei. A Feng became instantly excited and assured me, while pointing across the Peace Island channel to the hills of Keelung, that the teahouses up there were the best in all of Taiwan and that he visits them at least once a week. I asked him what was so special about the teahouses in Keelung and he responded with a brief monologue: "You call the mistress and tell her when you're showing up and she sees to it that everything is perfectly prepared for you when you arrive. You tell her how many girls you want and she 'hand picks' them for you. It's true. The girls are all local aborigines recruited from surrounding villages. And they're eighteen years old tops!

You show up and they're waiting right there for you. It's fantastic (*hen bang*)! And there are mainland sisters there too!" After pausing momentarily to draw attention to his finale, he erected a big "thumbs up" in front of his chest, flipped his eyebrows a few times, and added another, "It's truly fantastic!"

As if to verify A Feng's report, one of my friends followed up: "See those hills over there. Drive up there any day from lunchtime onwards and both sides of the road are lined with taxis waiting for customers to come out of the teahouses. I'm not kidding you. You can hardly get through. It's a famous place." Another friend then inserted, "And look inside those taxis...most of them are empty." We all laughed at his joke, including A Feng, who then promised to take me along on one of his visits, which he said was every Tuesday or Wednesday.

If mainland and aboriginal hostesses were relatively few, and the youngest ones generally limited to the pricier clubs,¹²¹ I nonetheless found that the idealistic imagery of authentic, pure, and innocent embodied by these hostesses constituted the core trope of my friends' flower-wine drinking fantasies. To be sure, my friends would not hesitate to admit that hostess clubs are the last place to look for "truly" authentic, undefiled, or virginal girls. Hostesses therefore seemed to represent objects of a desire that transcended the female figures themselves. In my view, which is corroborated by studies of nationalism, these idealistic fantasies were fueled by the fact that official ideologies have constructed women, aborigines, and youth as ideal embodiments of national authenticity and purity that is rooted, ultimately, in representations of a timeless past.

¹²¹ One exception would be small town hostess clubs, where younger girls can be found at more inexpensive clubs.

Nationalist Ideology, Authenticity, and Timelessness

In its postwar politics of consolidation on Taiwan, the KMT mobilized the trope of mainland China to legitimize itself and to repress Taiwan's diverse ethnic reality. In the official discourse, mainland China was "the land of the utopian past, childhood, and nostalgia, to be 'recovered' ...from the Communists" (Shih Shu-mei 1995:153). During the first twenty years of "cultural restoration" (*guangfu*), the KMT's propaganda machine worked concertedly to cultivate nostalgia for China and to wed this yearning for the mainland to the preservation of tradition and the expectation of unification. But these two objectives grew increasingly abstract and had the effect of shrouding imaginings of "mainland China" in what Allen Chun calls the "sacred aura of Chinese culture" (Chun 1996).

Chiang Ching-kuo's 1977 policy of "cultural reconstruction" (*wenhua jianshe*) began to domesticate national culture by institutionally diffusing its hegemony onto the local level, for example through the establishment of "cultural centers" (1996). Cultural reconstruction coincided with urbanization and commercialization, which increasingly secularized the hallowed symbols of national culture by collapsing them into diverse elements of popular culture, such as tourism, mass media, public festivals, and popular arts (1996). Rather than demystify the sacred aura of Chinese culture, this secularization process embedded it more firmly into the mass-mediated forms of everyday life. A currently popular travelogue on a major state-controlled TV network, China TV, titled "Searching for the Strange on the Mainland" (*Dalu xunqi*), illustrates well the enduring potency of the trope of mainland China. It presents utopianized images of pristine people, places, and customs, as "bearers of Taiwan's nostalgia for the old China." These "predeveloped, timeless, and pastoral" representations of cultural China still appeal to the KMT's forlorn ideology of national authenticity and continue to replicate its version of Chinese history, namely, that since 1949 "China has resisted Communist change and is still the way it was" (Shih Shu-mei 1995:162).

I encountered vestiges of this enduring “cultural fiction” repeatedly during fieldwork. When I inquired about an existing ritual or custom my friends frequently attached to their explanation a caveat to the effect that the Taiwanese practice had been corrupted by modernity and that only in mainland China could I still find the authentic version.¹²²

Since the mid-1980s, however, with the formation of a multiparty political system and the lifting of martial law, the sanctity of the trope of mainland China has been challenged, but not effaced, by the open expression of Taiwanese ethnic nationalism. This newly opened window for nativist imaginings of mainland China is found in two other popular travelogues: “Eight-Thousand *Li* of Roads, Cloud, and Moon” and “Rivers and Mountains, Ten-Thousand *Li* of Love” (1995:167-170). These nativist travelogues, according to literature scholar Shih Shu-mei, dispense with the austerity of “Searching for the Strange on the Mainland” and adopt a “carnavalesque” format that celebrates the “special Taiwanese brand of sentimentalism in popular culture” by making light, humorous, and readily consumable entertainment of the sanctified aura of mainland China (1995:167). In order now to sell China, Shih argues, these shows manipulate the signs and symbols of cultural China by connecting them to popular culture and commercial values, in effect releasing the trope of mainland China from its status as “the cultural hegemonic agent in official discourse” (1995:167).

Another example of the distinctive native Taiwanese brand of popular culture is Taiwan TV’s hugely successful prime-time serial drama, “Jiangshanlou,” the famous colonial-era hostess club I talked about earlier. The drama is set against the background of 1935 Dadaocheng and revolves around the lifestyle and intrigues of Jiangshanlou’s high-class hostesses. Beyond romance, the program is promoted as a

¹²² The paradox here is that most of these rituals or customs had been systematically eliminated on the mainland during the Mao era (1949-1976), and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969).

sensorial celebration of the unusual pastiche of local Taiwanese culture, which is crystallized in the playfully counter-intuitive byline: “the power of food, the taste of sex” (*liaoli de quanwei, qingse de ziwei*). The nativist sentiments of “Jiangshanlou” completely subsume what Taiwan historian Xu Yaxiang describes as the Japanese and Chinese (especially Shanghainese) pedigree of Taiwan’s flower wine culture (Ji Huiling 2001).

The emergence of this popular nativist challenge to the cultural hegemony of mainland China is particularly well revealed in the changing status of the mainland sister from symbol of lost essence to “gold digger” (*lao jin*) hungry for economic gain and a threat to Taiwan’s national security, an increasingly acute concern as Taiwan grows ever more dependent on Chinese labor and the mainland market. That the mainland sister is at once desired and feared affirms her enduring potency as the embodiment of the KMT’s legitimizing postwar trope of mainland China (Shih Shumei 1999:278-307).

The celebration of Taiwanese popular culture has coincided with the rise of a strident ethnic nationalism, which took root under former President Lee Teng-hui and blossomed with the victory of the DPP in the 2000 presidential elections. Entailed in the rise of Taiwanese ethnic nationalism has been the construction of a new national core around the figure of the aborigine. After around the mid-1980s, the forgotten past of Taiwan’s Han-assimilated “plains aborigines” was rediscovered, and their history and culture became a popular topic among professional and amateur historians, folklorists, and anthropologists (Hsiao A-Chin 2000:170-171).¹²³ In April 1994, then President Lee Teng-hui made the first use of the term “*yuanzhumin*” (aborigine) in an official government speech, giving impetus to the theory that Taiwan has its own

¹²³ “Plains aborigines” (*pingpu zu*) refers to people of Malayo-Polynesian origin (like the “mountain aborigines”) who settled very early in the west and northeast plain areas of the island. Due to contact and intermarriage with Han over the centuries, they have become assimilated to Han culture. The interest in recovering the “uniqueness” of their ethnic identity has only re-emerged as a topic since the mid-1980s (see, for example, Brown 2004).

origin with only remote links to China.¹²⁴ The search for an aboriginal essence has become part of Taiwan's new ideological regime of authenticity, a shift evidenced by the emergence of prominent aboriginal figures in all aspects of Taiwanese life, from politics to popular culture. Indeed, some of Taiwan's hottest pop-culture icons are aboriginal entertainers. A promotional pamphlet for the newest CD (*Fashao*) by Zhang Huimei, Taiwan's most celebrated aborigine and commonly referred to as the "daughter of Taiwan" (*Taiwan zhi nü*), distributed at the island's ubiquitous 7-11 convenience stores offers a list of her special qualities, emphasizing her "aboriginal warmth [*yuanzhumin de reqing*]" as well as her "passion, purity, and tenderness [*shenqing, chunzhen, wenrou*]."

The growing nativist sentiments in Taiwan are often reflected among my informant friends in their fascination with the "aboriginal girl." Upon meeting a new hostess, my friends might react to some combination of her features and demeanor by asking, "Are you an aborigine?" and also by commenting on the supposedly aboriginal qualities of sincerity and innocence.

The Cash Nexus and Counter-Conducts

In a study of what he calls the "regime of authenticity" in modern China, Prasenjit Duara argues that "all nations and societies that see themselves as subjects progressing or evolving through linear time need to constitute an 'unchanging core' in order to recognize themselves in their ever-changing circumstances" (Duara 1998:291). The state's ideological regime of authenticity constructs the timeless essence of the nation by deploying unchanging symbols of "authenticity, purity, and sacrality" (1998:287). Embodiments of these symbols, Duara explains, must invoke deep affect and be denied agency in the public realm (1998:295-97). Women, youth, and

¹²⁴ Prior to this time, "aborigines" were typically referred to by the derogatory term, "*shandiren*," or mountain people, and were sharply discriminated against.

aborigines, as denizens of the domicile and nature, invoke images of virginity, innocence, and purity and serve as ideal embodiments of national authenticity (1998). In my friends' flower wine adventure, the idealized figures of the mainland sister and aboriginal girl are the key embodied links to images of national authenticity and purity, while the innocent figure of the virginal young maiden, as an "empty sign easily scriptable" (Treat 1993:367), enables these fantasized ideals to be generalized to the hostess club experience as a whole.

If the regime of authenticity is an "artifice" that enables the nation to evolve while masquerading as the living essence of the past, then drinking flower wine, in its synecdochic capacity as an adventure, is a culturally intimate strategy by which men strive to do the same. The contested discourses of national authenticity suggest, however, that my friends are anything but automatic inheritors of patriarchal power; on the contrary, they must navigate a shifting and multi-layered ideological terrain. But if men's self-production hinges on this artifice, hostesses are paradoxically empowered to manipulate their status as eroticized symbols of timeless authenticity to subversive effect. Towards this end, they invariably employ a variety of strategies to seduce male guests into spending additional money. For example, either the madam or hostesses will urge the "big brother" (the man paying the bill) to purchase certain additional services as a treat for his buddies—indeed, taking a hostess out for sex might be one of the services available. Far more common, however, is a strip show, and I have been present for a few of these. The busboys clear the tea table and one or two hostesses enter and perform a slow striptease to loud music. Once naked, each stripper might then pay a brief visit to each man's lap, where she will wiggle to the music until the show is over. The few stripteases that I experienced created an awkward atmosphere among my friends, largely, I believe, because the act so explicitly defines the adventure as sexual, transfers control to the strippers, and transforms the male guests into passive voyeurs.

Hostess clubs also offer a bonus to hostesses for showing guests a good time in special ways throughout the adventure. Here, financial incentive calls upon hostesses to assert agency so that what manifests as their “licentious behavior” is, once again, an “activist strategy” that places them in control of the interaction with male guests (Ho 2000:291). I described one such strategy above, when the hostesses colluded to defrock shark. It is assumed that a guest is being pleased if a gang of attractive young hostesses tears off his briefs. Thus satisfied, he will more frequently return to the club. Similarly, on another occasion, Little Clean succumbed to his hostess’ persistent entreaties and allowed her to masturbate him and to catch his semen in a glass. The hostess had claimed that semen was healthy for her skin and that she desired to take his semen home with her and apply it as a facial cream. Immediately after finishing off Little Clean, she rushed from the room with the semen-filled glass raised high in her hand; no doubt she was darting straight to the front desk to claim her bonus. After this event, Little Clean was extremely embarrassed and implored us not to divulge to anyone that he had succumbed to the hostess’ ploy; indeed, he went so far as to blackmail Silk and me to secrecy by reminding us of certain skeletons in our own closets. It goes without saying that we never returned to this hostess club, and I recall Little Clean reporting on a number of occasions that his hostess there had called him to solicit a return visit. *A-gong* teahouse hostesses employ many more of these assertive strategies, but there is no need to detail them here. The key point is that the patently instrumental nature of these sexual strategies, in which hostesses assert agency and initiative, foregrounds the crass compulsions of the cash nexus at the core of hostess clubs, exploding men’s fantasies of authenticity and redefining men’s adventure and mastery as a purchased commodity—and therefore also exposing the patriarchal artifice at the core of official ideologies of national authenticity and purity.

Chapter 5

Fate in Individual and National History

Introduction

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of fate (*mingyun*) in Taiwanese society. Taiwanese of all classes tend to think of fate in the face of everyday matters that entail a problematic (unknown outcome) or contingency, from traffic lights to the weather. The most telling gauge of fate, however, is fiscal fortune, which encompasses most everyday problematics and contingencies and is ultimately what renders them fatefully meaningful. Perhaps because it is a “pure” problematic and directly involves money, gambling goes hand-in-hand with fate and is an inescapable part of Taiwan’s quotidian fabric, intricately woven into myriad aspects of social life. In this and the next chapter, I analyze the interconnections between gambling, fate, and the nation-state in postwar Taiwan. In this chapter, I discuss the more visible dimensions of gambling and fate in public culture, emphasizing how the state co-opts fate in order to establish the nation as a “predetermined will.” In Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, I focus on high-stakes mahjong played among male friends, developing a dialectical ritual framework that suggests how fate interpenetrates and mediates a key shadow zone and the on-display realm of political public culture in Taiwan.

Mahjong and the Politics of the Ban

In Taiwan, mahjong is synonymous with gambling. The immediate association is reinforced by the media, whose preferred nomenclature for the people’s favorite pastime is “national gambling [game]” (*guodu*), a sardonic poke at mahjong’s popularly heralded designation as “national essence” (*guocui*). The police take for

granted the equivalence of mahjong and wagering. This association has closeted the game, driving it underground and removing it from public spaces toward which Taiwanese cultural life otherwise gravitates with flamboyant intensity. Nonetheless, a simmering impulse to bring the game out occasionally reaches a boil. On October 12, 1999, for example, a Taizhong entrepreneur gambled on a legal loophole by raising the curtain on a business venture he brazenly branded, “Taiwan’s First Mahjong Parlor” (Zhou Tingqing 1999).¹²⁵ What the name implies is the first above board, legal mahjong parlor, like those that dot the cityscapes of Hong Kong and Japan, for it is a secret to no one that Taiwan’s urban penumbra is rife with recession-proof mahjong dens, which illicitly line the pockets of gangs, hoodlums, as well as the police (see Staff Writer 2002). According to my friends, many of the dozens of classifieds for bridge partners posted daily in all major newspapers are veiled advertisements for underground mahjong parlors. For a short time, I played in one such clandestine apartment alcove, where a divorced construction worker, with the help of his adolescent son, ran a twenty-four-hour moderate-stakes table catering to blue-collar workers. I had friends involved in running steep-stakes mahjong dens, but as tensions ran high there, spectators—not to mention foreign ones—were not welcome. A close friend of mine had passed a year as a full-time player, and he boasted often of how he “relied on mahjong for survival” and regaled buddies with spirited tales of his adventures battling fate and luck at the forbidden margins of society. The authorities’ commitment to keeping this ineradicable underworld out of the mainstream was revealed at the grand opening of the mahjong parlor in Taizhong,

¹²⁵ Such a business would typically be licensed as an “urban entertainment or leisure plaza” (*xiuxian guangchang*); however, mahjong is not listed as a permissible activity for such venues. Since the early “cultural reconstruction” era, when the KMT was promoting Chinese culture as national essence, mahjong has been legally approved for inclusion in “arts and folkways associations” (*minsu boyi xiehui*), and this Taizhong entrepreneur had prepared for the police by procuring both licenses.

where more police showed up than patrons, and all patrons found on the premises were whisked off along with the proprietor to the police station for interrogation.¹²⁶

Mahjong also retains the dubious distinction as Taiwan's number one targeted gambling scourge. A recent two-part police study of mahjong, apparently intended to apprise police of the game's every intricacy and which blurs an ethnographic boundary between impressively detailed and pathologically meticulous, labels the game Taiwan's "mother of all gambling [games]" (*mudu*) (Sun Yixiong 1997; Sun Yixiong 1997a). This is curious given that gaming of all sorts is so tightly woven into the island's social fabric. Gambling is technically illegal in Taiwan. Article 21 of Taiwan's Criminal Code prohibits public gambling and providing a place for gamblers to assemble for profit, with penalties of fines from NT\$1000 to NT\$9000 and three years in prison. A "temporary amusement" clause allows families to pass the Chinese New Year playing mahjong or to earn a pot playing cards in the home (Quarty 2003). However, in public venues, people must play for "toothpicks," and even a private home will be deemed public if the action is big enough, either in dollars or gamblers, which in mahjong means two or more tables.¹²⁷ In practice, therefore, you will almost never find people playing mahjong other than carefully tucked away behind closed doors, if not in the home then in a secluded back room of a pool hall, teahouse

¹²⁶ The internet poses a unique challenge to authorities. Although online mahjong has long been popular, increasing competition among companies has recently led to some interesting developments. To attract customers to its computerized online mahjong web site, a local company launched a high-profile tournament, with the top prize consisting of a solid-gold crown, scepter, and mahjong set worth NT\$1 million and second and third place prizes of NT\$100,000 and \$50,000 respectively (Chen 2002). At a 13 November 2002 press conference to promote the contest, the company hired a truck that converts to a stage upon which three pole-dancing beauties and the nude model Lily Tien performed. This troupe of "pole-dance spicy girls" was scheduled to appear at major night markets over the weekend, and also to be driven around town over a two-week period to play mahjong with anyone interested. The champion of the group competition, in order to be crowned king and take home the golden prizes, would play a final game against nude model Lily Tien on Christmas Eve. The company already had 500,000 online members and expected to add another 300,000 through the promotional tournament. It also reported that 1 million rounds of mahjong are played on its web site daily. I have not seen any reports on official or police reactions to the tournament.

¹²⁷ The unwritten rule of a one table limit is common knowledge among Taiwanese. It is even mentioned in a police study of the game, see (Sun Yixiong 1997; Sun Yixiong 1997a).

(*chashi*), temple, restaurant, bar, or office.¹²⁸ And yet, so many people, my friends included, gamble openly at poker or Chinese chess (*xiangqi*) in all kinds of public venues. Informal lotteries are also visibly widespread in Taiwan, and people spend hours daily pouring through unofficially published booklets that handicap number combinations like race horses. From big action on homing pigeons (Shi Ye 1999) and baseball to unfettered speculation in the stock market, Taiwan's list of open gambling practices is impressively vast.¹²⁹ Taking public wagering to an extreme is late night "TV Mahjong," which is not mahjong at all but a dizzying jumble of numbers games that you pay per minute to play for cash and commodity prizes.¹³⁰ Even more virtual is Taiwan's booming online betting industry, which includes more than 2,000 web sites promoting online casinos, lotteries, video games, and keno (Quarty 2003). Law enforcement generally turns a blind eye on this action, while mahjong dragnets are ongoing and dramatic raids on mahjong gambling rings with police kicking down doors and brandishing rifles are captured live by the media—in what my friends insist are staged performances--and featured on the evening news.

It is tempting to conclude that mahjong is the main focus of official censorship on gambling in order to preserve the sanctity of its iconic status as "national essence." After all, mahjong has a long and venerable history in Chinese culture, evolving from games traceable back to ancient times (Guo Shuanglin and Xiao Meihua 1995; Li Jiafu 1971; Mo Wenjin 1976; Zhuang Lian 1977), and remains a mainstay for all classes of

¹²⁸ The only exception I have encountered is a report of mahjong being played openly in the Wanshantong ghost temple (*yin miao*) in Sanchong, Taipei County (Yu Sen-lun 2002). Since many people will tell you that "ghosts lurk inside mahjong" (*majiang limian you gui*), I was not surprised to read that a game was being played openly in a ghost temple. And given that mahjong and ghosts are both "inclusive exclusions" (see below), it would seem that mahjong is right at home inside a ghost temple.

¹²⁹ See (Shi Ye 1999). Most of my friends were involved in stock market speculation; one friend was a broker, another made his living as a day trader, and a group of six to ten spent mornings in a VIP trading room at a broker's office (the Taiwan stock market closed at noon during the early part of my fieldwork and eventually extended its closing to 1:00 p.m.). One friend lost hundreds of thousands in the market and, because he became steeply indebted to so many friends, practically disappeared during the final months of my fieldwork.

¹³⁰ Mahjong tiles might be used in some of these numbers games, though.

Taiwanese, from prostitutes to politicians. Esteemed early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals like Liang Qichao, Gu Hongming, Hu Shi, and Liang Shiqiu were devoted to the game (Gu Yue 1998), and some have written treatises expounding mahjong's political, cultural, artistic, and hygienic virtues (Gao Boyuan 1997; Ma Wu 1964). In contemporary Taiwan, at least one play (Ji Weiran 1997) and one movie¹³¹ have been named after the game, and there exists a thriving publishing industry of mahjong manuals along with reflections on aspects of Taiwanese life through the prism of mahjong (e.g., Wang Shihong 1997). Most recently, cell-phone mahjong has become the most popular diversion for commuters on trains as well as Taipei's new rapid transit system (*jieryun* or MRT) (Feng Jingqing 2003). The state, moreover, formally affirms the cultural status of mahjong as "national essence" by including the game on its exclusive list of approved activities for "Art and Folkway Associations" (*minsu boyi xiehui*) (Wang Wenling, et al. 1999; Zhou Tingqing 1999).

While compelling, the "national essence" explanation leaves open the question of why so many other gambling practices go more or less untargeted. It is as though the delimitation of official censorship to mahjong is the most potent way to enforce a "ban" that constructs all gambling as an "inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 1998), at once included and marginalized (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:8).¹³² Enforcement of the ban is a concrete manifestation of the government's informal policy toward gambling, which an insider at the Ministry of the Interior labeled "effective management" (Quarty 2003). In effect, it is a carefully orchestrated assertion of state power defining the parameters of a pact paradoxically extending gambling a green light, or at least a light that toggles between yellow and green. Consequently, when

¹³¹ The 1996 film by Yang Dechang is called "Mahjong." Several reviews have appeared in the journal, *Imagekeeper Monthly* (*Yingxiang dianying zazhi*), for example see, (Li Youxin 1996). All reviewers offer interesting observations on mahjong culture in speculating on the title, since the game itself neither appears nor is ever mentioned in the film.

¹³² Here I draw somewhat idiosyncratically on terms and ideas from Giorgio Agamben that will be elaborated on below; see (Agamben 1998).

you gamble in Taiwan you do not feel like you are violating criminal law, even though in most cases you are. Instead, as I will demonstrate in the context of mahjong, what you experience is an unmistakable sense that the norms of the quotidian have been suspended and that you have entered a “zone of indistinction” or “state of exception” (Agamben 1998). The police study of mahjong muses over this state of exception, providing an apropos prosaic definition of its inherent paradox: “[Mahjong] seems to be a universally popular illegal activity, unassimilable as a social norm but whose pervasive spirit and practice nonetheless impact the normal functioning of society” (Sun Yixiong 1997:142). Within the zone of indistinction sustained by the ban on mahjong, gambling enjoys de facto legal immunity, within certain limits, while being superscribed as a political activity.

It is the spatiotemporal dislocation of the state of exception that injects gambling with the special consequentiality of a pitched battle, hardly hyperbole for mahjong, whose nickname is “the war of the square table” (*fangcheng zhi zhan*) and whose idiom is distinctive for being rife with martial metaphors.¹³³ Money, as we will see, raises the stakes of the battle, and serves an important dual function as measure and medium of value. However, also centrally at stake in mahjong—and to some degree in all gambling action—are the politics and poetics of reinscribing this set-apart chronotope with meaning. Each form of gambling involves distinctive protocols that punters ritually draw or improvise upon, individually or collectively, in order to recontextualize the activity and, in turn, reinvent themselves in some idealized way (Caillois 2001:19; Goffman 1967). But they never remake themselves out of whole cloth, not least because the state vies for a piece of this action, looking to assume the unbeatable role of “house” in all gambling activities. Toward this end, it plays the ban card as a totalizing technique, enforcing a pact which perforce superscribes gambling

¹³³ The martial element of mahjong is the focus of chapter 6.

as an official dispensation, one that it nonetheless retains the power and authority to control, revoke, or incarcerate you for at any time. The police underscore the terms of this pact most poignantly through a wave of island-wide busts around the Chinese New Year, when Taiwanese are preparing for their perennial mahjong marathons. In February 2002, for example, a spate of raids made the headlines of the *China Times* as follows: “The Law Has No Holiday, Police Cast Wide Net on Eve before New Year’s Eve, *Tianjiu* Gambling Dens Busted from North to South, 63 People Arrested” (Bao Wuben, et al. 2002). *Tianjiu* is a Chinese card game almost exclusively dedicated to gambling, with a version even offered in U.S. casinos, but has neither the pervasive appeal nor the cultural prestige of mahjong.¹³⁴ These rare busts on *Tianjiu* dens warned people that the police spotlight had *not* been turned off for the Spring Festival, but that it had been temporarily lifted from mahjong and that this grace period was a gesture of official largesse not to be taken for granted.

But the potency of the ban derives not simply from a brandishing of official force. More significant, especially for my analysis, is the way the ban strives to insinuate the nation within a key objectification or reification immanent to gambling, namely chance or personal fate. Gambling for Taiwanese entails divining the external agency of fate (Basu 1991), just as it does for people elsewhere (see Goffman 1967; Huizinga 1955; Lears 2003). To open a wager to the estranged forces of fate is, especially in circumscribed settings such as mahjong, to introduce the ritual conditions of “anti-structure,” for fate clears the meaningful ground of the battlefield and draws contenders into action by creating a vacuum of signification; as Horkheimer and Adorno’s aptly put it, “all objectification is a forgetting” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993:230). Each and every wager, therefore, is not only a problematic contest for cash but also a minefield where meanings, imaginings, and memories might burst forth to

¹³⁴ My friends have recalled for me how, as teenagers, they used to gamble at *tianjiu* on the side of the road during the Chinese New Year.

fill this void and define reality anew. The cunning of the ban resides in the ways it subtly but surely facilitates the ideological expropriation of the spiritual forces at play in the Chinese culture of chance as the “mystical foundations” (Taussig 1993a) for reimagining the nation. In Taiwan, to gamble is to merge in your imagination the personal and the national. This convergence is by no means a transhistorical necessity, nor is it a fall of the dice; rather, as I explain below, it has been historically cultivated under specific social circumstances.

A crucial mediation in this convergence has been the gender system in Taiwan, and no form of divination surpasses mahjong in the production of masculine values. Men and women as national subjects are socialized to assume different roles as citizens of the modern nation-state. These different roles are echoed and reinforced through dissimilar modes of divining personal fate. Whereas conventional forms of divination, like casting blocks and drawing fortune slips (see Feuchtwang 1992; Hatfield 2002; Jordan 1982; Sangren 1991), are predominantly pursued by women, high-stakes gambling at mahjong is the archetypal medium by which men prefer to tarry with the forces fate.¹³⁵ Key characteristics of these divergent styles of conjuring mana, especially as pertains to agency, simultaneously reproduce the contours of Taiwan’s modern patriarchy—a classic irony of cultural intimacy given the modern state’s Janus-faced preoccupation with branding the gambler’s infatuations with fate as unscientific, superstitious, and immoral. Writing about the culture of global capitalism at the millennium, the Comaroffs speak of a “change in the moral valence

¹³⁵ Scholars of Chinese popular religion almost invariably remark that daily worshippers at temples, where divination blocks are cast, are mainly women (Feuchtwang 1992; Sangren 2000). It goes without saying that men too can be found worshipping and casting divination blocks at temples, but they are more likely to become active in casting blocks on days of communal ritual significance rather than on a daily basis. As I explain further below, casting blocks for men generally amounts to an unmanly suspension of agency that they ideally prefer to avoid. While mahjong has not received much scholarly attention, one exception is Ellen Oxfeld Basu, who focuses on mahjong in a study of fate and gambling among overseas Chinese in India (Basu 1991; Oxfeld 1993). Basu notes explicitly that gambling where the stakes and risks are highest is most prominent among men. In both domains—popular religion and gambling—the gender implications have gone under-analyzed, with Sangren’s work on gender and religion/myth being one important exception (Sangren 1983; Sangren 1993; Sangren 2000).

of gambling” from a “dangerous sign of moral turpitude” to a “patriotic duty” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:6-7). If something traveling on the wings of millennial capitalism might explain this, it would have had to alight in China as far back as a century ago, when patriarchy lost its sacred Mandate of Heaven and assumed the profane guise of patriotism. I would submit that this shift from a sacred to a seemingly secular mode of official patrimony marks the moment when the state began to wager its legitimacy on a different, more democratic, but no less divine metalectic priority of structure over event, to wit, the forces of fate as divined through gambling. To situate my culturally intimate analysis of fate and mahjong (Chapter 6) within the relevant public culture context, I examine the deep roots of this tense imbrication of official culture and the Chinese culture of chance, which is revealed most plainly by the modern history of the lottery in Taiwan and its impact on aspects of popular religion and culture.

Patriotic Lotteries, Underground Lotteries, and the Modern Mobilization of Fate

In 1950, at the outset of “glorious restoration” (*guangfu*) when times were tough and state coffers were dry, the KMT launched a “Patriotic Lottery” (*Aiguo jiangquan*) to generate funds for infrastructural development and social welfare (He Aizhu 2003). The Patriotic Lottery worked like a raffle, which meant that you did not choose your number but rather that it was pre-selected for you—either by fate or the state, and the confusion is significant because it allowed for slippage or conflation between the two.¹³⁶ The lottery tickets, which resembled paper currency, were elaborately designed by well-known artists and related to the people the unfolding story of their own history, from commemorating mundane holidays to marking larger political currents. The tickets celebrated prevailing slogans like “take back the

¹³⁶ Drawings were monthly prior to 1982 and twice a month thereafter.

mainland” (*fangong dalu*); “resist Communist China, oppose the Soviet Union” (*fangong kang’e*); “reclaim our country [China]” (*guangfu heshan*); “revitalize the Chinese nation” (*fixing Zhonghua*); and “protect [national] secrets, prevent [PRC] spies—each and all are responsible” (*baomi fangdie renren youze*) (2003). Originally commissioned drawings of cultural relics in China were featured on the tickets, as were sites of scenic beauty in Taiwan.¹³⁷ They also promoted themes from timely political and economic projects, such as those associated with the New Culture Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong*) and the Ten Large Public Works (*shi da jianshe*).¹³⁸ For twenty-four successive issues beginning with number 282, the tickets featured a drawing by the artist Liang Youming picturing a dramatic scene from the tales of the twenty-four filial exemplars¹³⁹; these legends extolling traditional values buttressed the state’s “glorious restoration,” which was intended to legitimize the Republic of China as the standard bearer of Chinese tradition (see Chun 1996).

The Patriotic Lottery was therefore much more than a financial instrument offering people a personal gamble; it was an investment in national hope. Practically from the outset, people purchased the tickets enthusiastically.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, since each ticket was unique in design and loaded with political and cultural meaning, many people procured them as collectibles, right from the very first issue (He Aizhu 2003). Taken sequentially as a syntagmatic series, the tickets were an unfolding national narrative of Taiwan’s modern history—as one Taiwanese scholar recently put it, “to flip through the decades of Patriotic Lottery tickets is like reading the pages of Taiwan’s modern history” (2003). In this respect, the tickets reflected the nation as a

¹³⁷ The artistry of the tickets became considerably more elaborate beginning with issue 28 in 1951 (He Aizhu 2003).

¹³⁸ For a brief discussion of the Ten Large Public Works (Ten Major Projects), see (Rubinstein 1999:373).

¹³⁹ Beginning with issue 282, the ticket format was changed from vertical to horizontal to accommodate a more panoramic effect for the drawings.

¹⁴⁰ Sales of the initial round were actually a bit flat and this was deemed to be due to the ticket price of 15 *yuan*, a somewhat steep sum at that time. For the second round, the ticket price was lowered to 10 *yuan* and sales instantly became very brisk; see (He Aizhu 2003).

subject of history progressing through linear time. But each ticket by itself was also a national synecdoche of a sort, reflecting essential cultural qualities rooted in a sacralized past that also posited the Nationalist government as a “continuous subject” (Duara 1998:287). In other words, through their combined syntagmatic and synecdochic aspects, the tickets embodied what many have observed as the dual temporal structure of the modern nation (Anagnost 1997; Duara 1995; Duara 1998). According to Prasenjit Duara, this dual temporal structure seeks to redress a fundamental aporia of capitalism—continuous and accelerating change that cannot be framed by any ultimate source of meaning (such as God) (1998). For at least the first two decades of KMT rule on Taiwan, however, the tensions from this ambivalent temporal structure were likely animated more by politics than economics. Given the “hysteria” (Chun 1996) of imminent war with the PRC, the rift inherent in the nation’s dual temporal structure was especially acute for the KMT, which staked its legitimacy as a separate modern nation on its claim to be the standard bearer of a timeless “traditional Chinese culture,” in contrast to the “forward-looking radicalism” of the PRC’s communist worldview (Chun 1996). Duara explains that a continuous subject of national history is recognized only by the “spiritual qualities of authenticity, purity, and sacrality” (Duara 1998:287). For the KMT, the forces of fate attached to national hope constituted a key medium for conjuring up sacred qualities of cultural authenticity, and the Patriotic Lottery at once released these forces and gathered them in the unified figure of the nation.

Since the 1980s, when mainland China was being resigned to memory and Taiwan reconstructed as a new and rapidly developing political and cultural reality, the hope embodied in the Patriotic Lottery was re-embraced as nostalgia, becoming more opaque in content, but even more pristine in meaning. A man recently interviewed revealed fond memories from tough times accessed through recollections of the Patriotic Lottery. He explained that when he was young and poor all he

dreamed about was hitting the number and becoming rich: “I spent NT\$50 and purchased a Patriotic Lottery ticket every round; as long as I bought a ticket I felt hope” (He Aizhu 2003). Of his several hits for NT\$100, and his one “big” win of NT\$1000, he registered elation. However, his unflagging dream for a transformed economic fate was also hitched to nationalistic values, a parlaying of his modest financial gains into a positive sense of national identity. He shrouded with an aura of nostalgia his anticipation for each Patriotic Lottery drawing, which was a publicly televised event held at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, and linked this sense of hope to the native authenticity of the production: “Today’s machines are imported; they’re finely crafted and exquisite. In the days of the Patriotic Lottery, however, the contraption was big, bulky, and painted jet black. A lady sat below each machine and manually cranked the drum, raising a card to announce the winning digit spun forth. It was technologically primitive, but it was an indigenous Taiwanese product all the same” (2003).

That the Patriotic Lottery delivered high spirits to otherwise austere times was also evident in the new colloquialisms it inspired. For example, to announce any financial windfall, people would declare, “I hit the Patriotic Lottery!” (*Wo zhongle aiguo jiangquan!*) (Zeng Qianyi 2003); and to express exhilaration, they might say, “S/he is as excited as when hitting the Patriotic Lottery!” (*Xiang zhongle aiguo jiangquan name xingfen!*) (He Aizhu 2003). Indeed, these expressions are still commonly heard today. Against the severe strictures of martial law, the Patriotic Lottery was a palimpsest of personal and national possibilities, setting an alternative but nonetheless local life rhythm optimistically open to uncertainty, opportunity, and change. Moreover, it represented an integral point of articulation between state and

society, one where the cultures of national politics and personal fate converged and gradually melded during the formative years of Taiwan's post-war development.¹⁴¹

Coexisting alongside the Patriotic Lottery, and still a staple of consumer culture today, was an incentive system driving consumption where every sales receipt was also a raffle ticket (*tongyi fapiao choujiang xitong*). Since the 1950s, Taiwanese have fastidiously saved sales receipts hoping for a match with a set of numbers officially drawn once every two months. Until very recently, six sets of numbers were drawn with a winning percentage of 6/1000, and two months of receipts could be expected often to yield a winner.¹⁴² I habitually discarded my receipts until my Taiwanese landlord insisted that I save them in a drawer that he designated especially for them. He assiduously checked my thick stack every other month, one ticket by one, a ritual he took pleasure in as much as winning, and paid me if I had a match.¹⁴³ In July 1998, the Ministry of Finance announced that the over 40 year-old raffle system would be gradually phased out, since the explosion of specialty shops along with vigorous consumption had generated a proliferation of tiny sales receipts—a total of 3.6 billion in 1997—resulting in payouts worth 6 billion NT dollars, more than state coffers could bear (Xie Jinfang 1998). Signaling tentative uncertainty at what effect rattling this raffle system might have on the economy, a Ministry spokesman praised the people for consuming so enthusiastically over the years and implored them to continue. Acknowledging what any Taiwanese would affirm: “no people love lotteries as much as the Chinese do” (1998), he promised as a consolation that tax benefits would gradually be phased in, stating that “redistribution of 5 or 6 billion in the form of tax reductions would be tantamount to everyone hitting the number” (1998).

¹⁴¹ The Patriotic lottery was abolished in 1987; see below.

¹⁴² At the time of my fieldwork there were seven ways to win, with the most probabilistically difficult being to match all eight of the “special” numbers (paying NT\$2,000,000) and the easiest being to match the last three digits of one of the four other numbers (paying NT\$200).

¹⁴³ Whenever I won, I used the money to treat my landlord to dinner.

This history of official cultivation of a gambling proclivity to stimulate market activity complicates interpretations of a “gambling economy” in Taiwan as derivative of a millennial capitalist social formation, whose “planetary” propensity is said to eclipse state power and augur the end of the nation-state (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Weller 2001).¹⁴⁴ The raffle system, which at the time of writing was still going strong, is a component of what I call Taiwan’s “fortunational capitalism,” which, under official auspices, re-enchants an otherwise disenchanting capitalist world by wedding fate and luck to consumption. This infusion of market transactions with “superstitions” and “fetishes” and the dashing of cognitive dissonance through the recursive cycling of hope amounts to a hedonistic union of fate and capitalism that might invoke Weber’s unshakable iron cage, but only for the most cynical observer. In the way that it attaches uncommon qualities to everyday exchanges, Taiwan’s fortunational capitalism is productive of charisma, an extraordinary value which people accrue for themselves but circulate among others to build local communities in a context of rapid change and dislocation (see Fajans 1993).¹⁴⁵ The public prestige of this charisma, as we will see, derives in no small measure from the fact that the structure of externalization inherent to the production of fate is a hotly pursued node of power relations, defining of a distinctively Taiwanese mode of what Foucault calls “governmentality” (Foucault 1997:223-51), which is where technologies of the self and political techniques clash and contend in the process of converging.

In the context of the lottery, fate has also been the figure that mediates the mutually reinforcing domains of the rational and relational, of public culture and zones

¹⁴⁴ Weller is careful to point out that essential features of a gambler’s economy have long been in place in Chinese culture; however, the thrust of his argument seems to be that there is something distinctively (if playfully) chaotic about the impact of global capitalism in Taiwan, especially in the context of its “fragmented identities as a postmodern nonnation-nonstate”; see (Weller 2001).

¹⁴⁵ See below for a translation of an anecdote that represents a popular version of the hygienic discourse on the new Lotto. The story illustrates how one guy has accrued a certain charisma for his luck at winning the Lotto, and also how he treats a friend to dinner each time he wins.

of intimacy in Taiwan.¹⁴⁶ If the official lotteries formally fanned the flames of fate to stimulate the national economy and fill state coffers, they also charged a corresponding but technically covert explosion of fate within Taiwan's informal economy of social relations. Almost from the inception of the official lotteries there thrived along with them a mirror industry of underground lotteries, most famously "Everybody's Happy" (*dajia le*) and "Six Harmonies" (*liu-he cai*).¹⁴⁷ As Taiwan's economy expanded, the price of a Patriotic Lottery ticket rose from NT\$5 in 1950 to NT\$100 in 1982, with the maximum payout outpacing the escalating ticket price, growing from NT\$200,000 to NT\$10,000,000 over the same period. According to one Taiwanese scholar, it was the jump in jackpots that triggered a lottery "fever" (*rechao*) where people began frantically "swarming" beyond reasonable proportions to buy tickets (He Aizhu 2003). In the mid-1980s, the frenzy for the Patriotic Lottery reached a peak, and it was at this time that Everybody's Happy also boomed, catching people's overflow of gambling lust by offering even larger payouts and higher winning rates.¹⁴⁸ As Everybody's Happy surged through informal social networks, it nonetheless remained throughout tied to the national rhythms of the Patriotic Lottery, for it paid out on the last two digits of the latter. According to anthropologist Robert Weller, the Everybody's Happy efflorescence was due in part to the illegal lottery's ease of organization, but mainly to a general economic trend where the underground lottery was one of the few, if feckless, investment alternatives to Taiwan's trademark small, labor-intensive enterprises, which rising labor costs were rendering increasingly

¹⁴⁶ For a superb analysis of the informal economy in Taiwan and its relationship to the state, see (Winn 1994).

¹⁴⁷ I am borrowing Robert Weller's translation of *dajiale* (Weller 1994). I have never seen an English translation for *liuhecai*, so "Six Harmonies" is my own. My friends have mentioned to me underground lotteries that go by different names, such as "Mother's Happy" (*mama le*), but they all tend to operate in a similar fashion.

¹⁴⁸ A typical seventh-prize payout in the Patriotic Lottery was \$100, while in Everybody's Happy a basic payout was on average \$1000 (He Aizhu 2003). According to Weller, while the odds of winning a prize in the Patriotic Lottery were "astronomical," the odds of winning a single Everybody's Happy bet could be as high as three in one hundred (Weller 1994:140).

unprofitable (Weller 1994:149).¹⁴⁹ The salient economic trend cited by Weller also, I believe, sheds light on the state's decision to enlarge jackpots and allow the Patriotic Lottery, and in turn the underground lotteries, to build momentum and thereby more assertively--indeed more fatefully--mediate the local impact of impinging global economic forces.

Being underground and illegal, it is tempting to view the informal lotteries as chaotic, amoral (self-serving versus community oriented), and subversive, and this is the upshot of Weller's argument (Weller 1994). But state sponsorship of an official lottery brought the "illegal" lottery within the purview of the politics of the ban, which tacitly condoned the informal lotteries while rendering them political. This pact constructs the underground lotteries as an inclusive exclusion, explaining the paradox in their exceptional status as widely popular yet illegal. But the politics of the ban is also a form of symbolic superscription, because it allows official ideologies and national imaginings to insinuate themselves within the structure of externalization inherent in the conjuring of fate. This dynamic therefore endows the charisma accrued to those who successfully cultivate fate underground with the same public prestige that accompanies hitting the number in the official lotteries, constituting the underground lottery as a culturally intimate context for legitimating official authority.

If Everybody's Happy had reflected a true challenge to state authority, we might have expected the heavy-handed authoritarian state, which at that time still maintained its tight grip through martial law, to launch a forceful campaign against the underground lottery, if not to eradicate it, for that would have been very difficult, then at least to instill fear or hesitation in participants.¹⁵⁰ But the response of one Everybody's Happy pool organizer (*zutou*) from the early 1980s, when recently asked

¹⁴⁹ Labor costs in Taiwan rose as global capitalism pushed the cheap labor frontier westward, into China and Southeast Asia.

¹⁵⁰ I have been unable to find evidence of any such concerted campaign.

if she had feared being arrested, suggests that this was not the case: “Nobody was afraid! If anyone was apprehended at all, it would have been the ‘front man’ (*rentou*) hired by the organizer. And all the organizer would have to do is pass the police a few bucks and the front man would be back on the street in a couple of days. There was absolutely nothing to worry about” (He Aizhu 2003). If the police appear to have been more interested in cashing in on the action rather than quelling it, the state was nonetheless concerned to keep Everybody’s Happy from running altogether rampant, especially by 1987, on the eve of its momentous decision to lift the forty-year-old reign of martial law.

Consequently, in 1987, in order to stem a possible runaway lottery tide, rather than crack down directly on Everybody’s Happy, the state abolished the Patriotic Lottery, after thirty-seven years and 1,171 issues. The state’s canceling of the Patriotic Lottery did effectively curb the informal lottery craze. According to Roger Caillois in his analysis of games of chance, such an outcome is hardly surprising, for “when deprived of their official character and state support, [all lotteries] seem to diminish rapidly in importance” (Caillois 2001:116). Even though successfully checked, however, the informal lottery was by no means eradicated, since “organizers simply switched over to Six Harmonies” (He Aizhu 2003), which was pegged to the lottery in Hong Kong and had already been around for some time. Precisely because Six Harmonies had long coexisted alongside Everybody’s Happy, authorities likely anticipated that canceling the Patriotic Lottery might stem the informal lottery craze not merely by removing a set of numbers on which only one of them was based, but by sending a new message: the state would no longer tacitly condone the informal lottery. Indeed, it would appear that the state recognized the extent to which the fateful universes of the official and informal lotteries had become intimately intertwined.

Popular Religion, Millennial Ghosts, and the State of Exception

As many have observed, Everybody's Happy and Six Harmonies had a remarkable, if disreputable, impact on Taiwanese popular religion and culture. Big jackpots were out there, but the urgent predicament was to have one pay out to you, so people began tapping with unusual intensity Chinese culture's font of cosmic forces dedicated to finagling fiscal fate. First and foremost, this meant striking deals with ghosts, who wander hungry and therefore will hear greedy requests for gambling favors, but exclusively on a quid pro quo basis. Ghost temples thrive on worshippers' recompense, of which an efficacious temple could count on a steady stream, for to neglect paying back a ghost is to court disaster. One might also bribe a ghost with an advance, and if a purportedly powerful ghost failed to come through for you, it could always have been because you didn't front enough cash. Consequently, ghost temples realized unusual prosperity during this period of lottery fever. According to one scholar, the number of ghost images even doubled, since lottery winners would often commission sculptors to carve new, grander images as an expression of gratitude.¹⁵¹

It might also pay off to flatter ghosts by entertaining them, and toward this end staging a theatrical performance at a temple for their pleasure is highly appropriate. In an essay titled, "Everybody's Happy and Puppet Theater," traditional Taiwanese theater scholar Jiang Wuchang credits Everybody's Happy with the flourishing of puppet shows beginning in the early 1980s, when the number of puppet troupes nationwide doubled in a five-year period (Jiang Wuchang 2000). Being the least expensive performance to stage, puppet shows became a popular choice for lottery punters looking to supplicate or display gratitude toward ghosts. Paradoxically, however, whereas the puppet industry sharply expanded in size, artistic and production quality apparently plummeted and audiences practically disappeared. According to

¹⁵¹ There were also incidences of disgruntled lottery losers who beheaded ghost images with a knife; see (Jiang Wuchang 2000).

Jiang, a group of temples might stage up to two hundred performances on a given day, but there were often no spectators, except presumably for the ghosts.

Weller has analyzed the unprecedented rise in popularity during the 1980s of Taiwan's most notoriously efficacious ghosts, the Eighteen Lords (*Shiba wang gong*) (Weller 1994; Weller 2001), whose place of worship was transformed from a tiny littoral altar, something of the norm for ghosts, into an "overblown" temple more befitting of gods. In key respects, worship at the Eighteen Lords temple inverted orthodoxy, even for ghosts. People burned cigarettes instead of joss sticks and the temple teemed with nocturnal worshippers in a touristy, commercialized, carnivalesque scene more akin to a night market. What this signifies for Weller is something like what we mean by the expression, "all hell broke loose," and since ghosts inhabit the underworld the connotation here is both literal and figurative. Weller notes the connection between the fervor for the Eighteen Lords and lottery fever, describing how people looked for number hints in rising clouds of smoke and candle drips, or in more direct communication through spirit possession. Ultimately, for Weller, the Eighteen Lords' popularity indexed a wider trend in which people indulged a millennially induced desire for quick and unearned wealth and therefore also a postmodern proclivity for heterodox culture. The exceptional enthusiasm for the Eighteen Lords, he explains, was a combined function of its legend and, more significantly, the particular circumstances of its transformation from altar to temple beginning in the early 1970s. Construction of a nearby nuclear power plant required that the tiny altar, initially of interest only to locals, be interred. However, a high number of accidents and even a few deaths at the construction site inspired workers and locals, who attributed the tragedies to the ghosts, to push for the temple to be saved. The government ultimately acquiesced and built around it, preserving the original altar underground and erecting an elaborate temple overhead.

If the state's decision to preserve the Eighteen Lords accrued efficacy to the temple, Weller ascribes this to the fact that "they [the Eighteen Lords] had, after all, brought the government itself to do their bidding" (Weller 1994:126-27). While true, the government's response, in my view, falls more within the interpretive frame of a traditional practice where the state, in order to appropriate the power of unofficial deities, legitimized them by bestowing upon them rank and title (Duara 1988; Sangren 1987; Watson 1985). This form of symbolic "superscription" augmented the status of local deities, leading them to be pursued as legitimating forces within the contested conjuncture of state and society that Prasenjit Duara calls the "cultural nexus of power" (Duara 1988). In the case of the Eighteen Lords, the state did not promote the ghosts to gods; however, by taking pains to preserve the altar and erect a temple, it affirmed the efficacy of the ghosts and implicitly endorsed their being worshipped. In effect, then, the state endowed the Eighteen Lords with a distinctive cache that likely played a prime role in kicking off their exceptional snowballing popularity. By extension as well, this official gesture of implicit approval condoned the "superstitious" beliefs and speculative activities ineluctably associated with ghost worship in Taiwan.

This form of symbolic superscription hinges, I believe, on a version of the politics of the ban. In making the decision to save the temple qua ghost temple, the state implicitly condoned ghost worship in general without curtailing any of the chaotic and nonrelational aspects of its heterodox status. This neither rendered ghost worship orthodox nor denied its deviance; rather, it reconstituted the activity as an exception within a zone of indistinction. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, "there is no rule that is applicable to chaos"; consequently, "chaos must first be included in the juridical order through the creation of a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, chaos and the normal situation—the state of exception" (Agamben 1998:19). Since in order to refer to anything at all a rule or norm must "presuppose and yet still

establish a relation with what is outside relation,” the state of exception thus remains essentially “unlocalizable” or “nonrelational” (1998:19). This does not mean the absence of a finite territory, since the state of exception can be assigned spatiotemporal limits, as with the Eighteen Lords. Rather, it refers more to what Weller argues in the context of ghost temples is their “saturation” of significations—no uniform meaning or interpretation can be “precipitated” from them (Weller 1994).

In making a decision on the exception, the state establishes the basis on which what is included in this order and excluded from it acquire their meaning. Moreover, by dint of this determination, the state also strives to exploit the productive power of the local excesses preserved within the zone of indistinction as a medium of greater totalization, so that it can be at once the mighty Icarus flying above and the mobile Daedalus maneuvering below. In the paradoxical way that it at once sponsors the illegal and the heterodox, on the one hand, and expropriates the potent forces released therein, the politics of the ban can thus be viewed as a postmodern mode of symbolic superscription—a conflictual process that aspires to hegemonic totalization through techniques of individuation. This interpretation is more rigorous than resistance/accommodation frameworks, as it remains truer to the realities of power in accounting for conflict and struggle. It also breathes a much needed realpolitik into *yin-yang* complementary dualisms by not smoothly assimilating heterodoxies within an encompassing structure of meaning—the state of exception remains open and interpretively impossible to pin down. By emphasizing the conflictual and contested nature of the terrain where totalizing procedures and technologies of the self converge, this interpretation remains inherently open to contingency and change.

Weller’s work on the messy, feral side of popular religion and the “occult economy” with which it is mutually implicated expertly situates this off-centered, edgy lifeworld within the complex cross-currents of Taiwan’s wider social, historical, and especially economic circumstances. Most influential in this regard, for Weller, is

the deleterious impact on Taiwan's networked mom-and-pop capitalism of a globally oriented "millennial capitalism," which has unleashed the "amoral self-interest" on which popular religion has long thrived (Weller 2001). After more than a decade of remarkable economic prosperity in Taiwan, the "global cheap-labor frontier" began moving into China and Southeast Asia; consequently, local industry grew economically untenable for Taiwanese and they looked for return-on-investment through speculative undertakings, such as the stock market and lotteries. The result was "individualism run rampant" and a collapse of "family and community," which for Weller laid the groundwork for an identity crisis that merely redoubled people's self-interested proclivity to pursue "biased wealth,"¹⁵² and correspondingly the undomesticated realm of ghosts and superstitions that aid and abet it. This crisis of identity became acute in the 1990s owing to the intensification of the cross-Strait conflict and Taiwan's precarious political status as a "nonnation-nonstate" in a world of nation-states. What finally checked somewhat the raging interest in ghosts and speculation, according to Weller, was the stock market crash of 1990, followed by the

¹⁵² "Biased wealth" is Weller's translation of *piancai*. Weller assigns the term a negative valence, as in unearned wealth or making a quick buck or making money in suspect or disreputable ways. In certain contexts the term may carry this connotation, but in popular usage, according to my friends, it does not. The term commonly appears together with *yun*, or "luck," as *piancaiyun*. A person with *piancaiyun* simply has good fiscal fortune, and this is mainly inborn or god-given, as is more fully reflected in the common expression, *tiansheng you piancaiyun* (a natural born propensity for wealth). The contexts in which *piancaiyun* typically appear are therefore those where fate or luck—external agencies—come prominently into play, such as mahjong or the lottery. If "we" might conclude that this negatively implies biased or unearned wealth, the Taiwanese themselves do not. The term *piancai* typically passes as a matter of course, as a neutral expression of "fact." Most Taiwanese will concede that certain people do have *piancaiyun*, and there is nothing unsavory about this; indeed, my friends used terms like "proper" (*zhengmian*) and "normal" (*zhenggui*) to describe *piancai*. One author, writing about mahjong, asserts that those with *piancaiyun* are typically women, implying that this is so because women rely more on luck than skill when playing mahjong, or simply because women do not try as hard as men to win (Wang Shihong 1997:95-98). Elsewhere, in the context of the lottery, I have seen it mentioned that everyone has *piancaiyun*, but the trick is learning how properly to tap it, and this discourse (see below—it is a popular hygienic discourse) claims that buying a lottery ticket from the handicapped and suppressing any get-rich-quick lust is the key, suggesting that *piancai* itself shuns avarice and carries a preference for upright intentions (Staff 2003). Weller's definition of *piancai* seems to correspond more with the term *hengcai*, which is outside the sphere of fate/luck and more commonly associated with the ghostly underworld; therefore, according to my friends, *hengcai* is more unambiguously "heterodox" (*xiemen*). Notwithstanding, there is considerable ambiguity surrounding a term such as *piancai*, and context must be carefully considered.

removal of certain barriers on investment in China. To be sure, economic circumstances have played a central role in shaping the contours of the “playful” pursuits of Taiwan’s “heterodox” culture. But the economy’s impact is as unpredictable as it is undeniable. This was made plain by the altogether different economic circumstances extant at the time of the new lottery-driven speculation fever that erupted in 2002, when Taiwan’s economy was stuck in its worst economic rut in half a century and less than two months after the government inaugurated a new “aggressive opening” policy by lifting significant restrictions on investment in China (Landler 2001).

Lottery Fever Redux and Mingpai Madness

Since the canceling of the Patriotic Lottery, Six Harmonies has remained commonplace in Taiwan. During fieldwork between 1999 and 2001, however, I noticed that its popularity was restricted mostly to certain pockets of society, and in no way approached the widespread, feverish proportions of Everybody’s Happy or the Patriotic Lottery in the early and mid-1980s. I had one friend at whose home a small group of guys would regularly gather to drink homemade wine late into the evening. His elderly mother was sometimes visiting and she, often with a friend, spent hours in a back room engrossed in Six Harmonies numbers computations. Cab drivers are also big numbers punters and I often observed them perusing their Six Harmonies handicapping booklets. And according to reports, every Monday and Wednesday, the days before the Hong Kong Lottery drawing, Ghost temples become busy with people seeking inspiration, revelation, or simply conversation on winning Six Harmonies numbers (Yu Sen-lun 2002). For the most part, however, my friends were not lottery punters, but for occasionally trying their luck on an instant “scratch-and-win” (*guagua le*) card they might purchase along with cigarettes or betel nuts. According to them,

Six Harmonies was an “uninteresting,” “boring” form of action, something the elderly or housewives might take up to kill time.

When I returned to Taiwan for a field visit in summer 2002, however, I discovered that most of my friends were no longer quite so nonchalant towards numbers. In January 2002, fifteen years after canceling the Patriotic Lottery, the state launched a new, computerized drawing, formally named the “Public Welfare Lottery” (*Gongyi caiquan*), but more commonly called *Letoucai*, a Mandarin transliteration of “Lotto.”¹⁵³ Offering giant jackpots—the second drawing had a roll-over total worth NT\$300 million and sold 10 million tickets (Chou 2002)—the Public Welfare Lottery rekindled a ferocious lottery craze that seemed to breathe life back into an otherwise vibrant society rendered lethargic by a long-time floundering economy. Many previously quiet mom-and-pop shops became Lotto sales stations and were instantly transformed into briskly bustling centers of activity, where people stood for hours in long queues to purchase tickets or just loitered around to talk numbers. A tiny tea shop nearby my apartment that I was quite certain never sold much tea had become a Lotto station and was causing traffic jams when I returned that summer, six months after the Public Welfare Lottery was launched. Many of my friends too were abuzz about the new Lotto, and some even seemed to have been smitten by Lotto fever.¹⁵⁴ One friend, embarrassed to do so himself, had his wife ring me to ask if I could help her purchase a lottery ticket in the U.S.¹⁵⁵ At that time, one of the state lottery jackpots in the U.S. had grown so grotesquely high that it made front-page headlines

¹⁵³ The Bank of Taipei (*Taipei yinhang*) was selected to administer all aspects of the new lottery, including ticket station approval and the drawing. Drawings are twice weekly, with results appearing on Tuesdays and Fridays. It should be noted that the Public Welfare Lottery was initially launched in December 1999; however, at that time, there were only available “two in one” lottery tickets, which included an instant “scratch and win” game as well as a pre-selected number. “Lotto Fever” did not hit Taiwan until the launching in 2002 of the computerized drawing, which allowed people to select their own numbers.

¹⁵⁴ Indeed, some of my friends were not so enthusiastic about the Lotto, complaining that the pay out rate was too low.

¹⁵⁵ While taking this call from his wife, I heard my friend in the background apprising her on the details about the lottery in the U.S. so that she could explain it clearly to me.

in Taiwan's media, where for a couple of months tabloid news and sex scandals took a back seat to lottery madness (Cheng 2002).

The Public Welfare Lottery does not operate raffle-style but rather allows you to select your own numbers.¹⁵⁶ In a more direct manner than did the Patriotic Lottery, the new Lotto has therefore mobilized and legitimized the full Taiwanese panoply of mystical and mathematical methods of prognosticating numbers. The island's most popular glossy, the China Times Weekly, ran a special issue on the numbers craze two weeks after the Lotto's inaugural drawing. The first line of a series of articles reads: "To buy a Lotto ticket is to buy hope; the question is: Is hope what's being found in *mingpai*?" (Shi Ye 2002). *Mingpai* refers to numbers proffered, often for a price, by sources claiming to have secret knowledge or clairvoyant insight into winning lottery numbers.¹⁵⁷ While all along a fringe industry attached to the underground lotteries, *mingpai* madness has bared itself with the launching of the new Lotto and emerged as a booming business in Taiwan, characterized by all the color, dynamism, and diversity that the island's commercial culture is known for. *Mingpai* are offered by long-established sources of revelation, such as soothsayers, astrologers, peripatetic artisans (*jianghu yiren*), mediums using spirit tables (*shenzhuo*), ghost temples (*yinmiao*), and magical beasts (*lingyi shenshou*) (Lou Lan 2002; Shi Ye 2002; Yu Sen-lun 2002; Zhu Meifang 2002a). In keeping with popular culture currents, there have also appeared some innovative sources claiming uncanny access to the otherwise unknown. Most conspicuous in this regard have been "beautiful maidens" (*meinü pai*) and "clairvoyant kitty" (*lingmao pai*); the former referring to winning numbers picked by attractive young girls (embodiments of authenticity, see Chapter 4), and the latter I presume to numbers divined by the persistently popular Hello Kitty (Kaidi Mao) or some feline

¹⁵⁶ You can of course take a random number given by the sales machine, which is referred to as a "computer number" (*diannaopai*).

¹⁵⁷ The term is also commonly used to refer to stock market tips offered by people presumably in the know. In this context, *mingpai* are often suspected to be a means by which people manipulate stock prices.

affine thereof (Shi Ye 2002). And if the cult of “money worship” (*chongbai jinqian*) means that the mere fact of expending cash endows the item (or service) purchased with a certain mana, ordinary street hawkers who gratify chiefly by facilitating a quick and easy money transaction are now doing a brisk business selling *mingpai* (locale often also factors in here, as hawkers tend to turn up at enchanted places, such as around temples and night markets) (Yu Sen-lun 2002).

Quirker quests for *mingpai* have also been pursued. Flood areas from a recent typhoon have been popular Lotto ticket purchase sites because, according to a Chinese saying, “water brings fortune” (*yu shui ze fa*) (Cheng 2002). People have showed up at the scenes of car accidents looking for numbers clues, because it is believed that these are places of ghostly intervention (2002). And in a display of ‘modern medical technology meets traditional physiognomy’ that incorporates the body into the cultural universe of *mingpai*, many unsuccessful Lotto punters have undergone plastic surgery in order to improve their financial fate and avail themselves to winning Lotto numbers (Zhu Meifang 2002b). According to the classic texts on physiognomy, the area running between the nose and forehead is the cradle of fiscal fortune, so any moles or spots along this line should be removed in order to smooth the flow of luck. Other auspicious bodily sites, in this context ultimately linked to fiscal fate, are the chin and earlobes, and elongating either one is said to enhance fortune. The efficacy of a hypertrophic chin or earlobes is confirmed in referents that come immediately to mind for people. For example, the popular and still powerful former President Lee Teng-hui had a prominently protruding jowl, while the tremendously sagging earlobes of Bodhisattvas attest to the good fiscal karma of this exaggerated physical feature.¹⁵⁸ The Chinese New Year, which typically falls in late January or early February, is a time when people might take concerted measures to improve their fate, and plastic

¹⁵⁸ Although not mentioned in this source, no doubt Liu Bei, the famous long-eared character from *Sanguo yanyi* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms), also comes to mind for people.

surgeons at Taipei Veterans' Hospital reported that the new Lotto had sharply multiplied requests for laser surgery procedures by late January 2002 (Zhu Meifang 2002b).

Interestingly, the Public Welfare Lottery has also spawned a somewhat novel genre of hotly pursued *mingpai*, this one a privately fashioned public good linked to national politics and the nation-state. People are meticulously monitoring national (and also international) affairs for numerical revelations of any sort, chancing to parlay the auspicious force behind a politically momentous date or time into a Lotto jackpot. Political figures are the prime focus of this speculative gaze, with people mining national affairs hoping to identify a political leader whose personal fate—translated into numerical horoscope data¹⁵⁹—is a sure bet to trump luck in the Lotto draw. Horoscopes that have received much attention are those of the president, the premier, and a slew of legislators (Shi Ye 2002). According to one optimistic report, the expectation that winning Lotto numbers might be found in the political realm has rekindled people's interest in affairs of state (2002). However, national politics being so overtly filtered through a speculative lens colored by superstitions and fetishes has also been a disconcerting prospect to some, and the voice of these critics has dovetailed with that of others who blame state sponsorship of the Public Welfare Lottery for an expanding list of social ills.

It is perhaps ironic that many of the same public figures looked to for *mingpai* have made formal pronouncements calling for moderation toward the new Lotto and denouncing *mingpai* as foolish and superstitious. Academia Sinica President and Nobel Laureate Li Yuanzhe pleaded for people to refrain from skipping work in order to line up for lottery tickets and explicitly reproved the practice of seeking *mingpai* (Lin Zhicheng 2002a). People's First Party (PFP, *Qinmindang*) Chairman and

¹⁵⁹ Such horoscope data consists of birth year, month, day, and time (*shengchen bazi*).

presidential hopeful James Soong (Song Chuyu) and Taipei County Mayor Su Zhenchang denounced superstitious pursuits, a speculative mindset, and especially *mingpai*, exhorting people to earn money step-by-step through hard work (Lin Zhicheng 2002b). Soong reminded people that such Lotto-induced “abnormalities” were a main reason why the Patriotic Lottery was aborted in 1987 (2002b). Su called for people to face life through “duty” rather than speculation by embracing their “holy right to vote” and electing the best people to office (2002b). Each of these statements, to be sure, is playing a party politics card by taking a poke at the incumbent DPP for launching the Public Welfare Lottery, with Taipei City Mayor Ma Yingjiu tipping furthest his partisan KMT card by blaming the new Lotto for reinvigorating the mafia and the underground lotteries (Lin Zhicheng 2002c). He promised that City Police would be watching the situation very closely and taking measures as necessary to rectify abuses (2002c).

The Lotto’s political sponsors have responded by casting the Public Welfare Lottery within a hygienic discourse that hinges on moderation, a healthy individual approach to fate and luck, as well as public awareness of the new Lotto’s social welfare orientation. A popular business and personal information technology website, Taconet, offers a forum called “Secrets to Lotto Success” as part of its fate and fortune-telling service.¹⁶⁰ This site features an anecdote titled, “The Secret to Fiscal Fortune in the Public Welfare Lottery,” which crystallizes nicely a popular, domesticated version of the hygienic political discourse on the new Lotto currently being promoted in Taiwan (Staff 2003):

One day, while Xiao Chen and I were out for a stroll, I noticed that he began flipping through a calendar. Soon, he no longer paid any attention to me

¹⁶⁰ Nearly all such Taiwanese Web sites that I have seen offer a service dedicated to fate and fortune-telling.

and began looking around with intense concentration. I said, “Xiao Chen, what on earth are you doing?” He replied, “Don’t worry, give me a minute, if I hit the number I’ll treat you to dinner.” Xiao Chen was hunting for a Lotto sales station.

It was back in the days of the Patriotic Lottery that Xiao Chen became a lottery fanatic. Of course, if you buy often you win often; this is a universal truth. Oddly enough, however, Xiao Chen’s win rate was unusually high. Even though he never hit big and became rich, he did win on more than half his tickets. When his friends asked him his secret, he simply responded that he had good luck.

This time, he found a crippled person wearing a tattered red jacket selling instant “Scratch-and-Win” tickets.¹⁶¹ After carefully picking through several sheets, Xiao Chen bought eight tickets. He scratched them all clean and, sure enough, five of the eight were winners, for a total of NT\$2400. I was once again going to reap the benefit of a free meal thanks to Xiao Chen’s good fortune.

This time around, I pressed Xiao Chen hard for an explanation and he finally revealed his secret to me. “In fact, everyone has the potential to make money (*piancaiyun*). What matters is how you tap it. For example, I abide by my horoscope, follow my geomantic flows, and head the directives of the protector deity of my financial fate. In this way, I enhance my likelihood of making money as well as my chances of hitting the lottery. Take a look at these tickets.” Xiao Chen waived his lottery tickets in the air. Each one had a final digit of two—this couldn’t be his secret, could it? “Ok Xiao Chen. Next

¹⁶¹ Scratch-and-Win tickets are another part of the new Lotto program.

time I'll do as you do. I'll buy my tickets from whoever you buy your tickets from. If you buy all your tickets with a final digit of two, I will too."

"You can try that, but I guarantee you'll lose. I told you once before, each person must follow his own horoscope and geomantic flows. It's not the same for everyone."

I then entreated him to pass along a few specific secrets. "Sure. But just remember this: the objective of the Public Welfare Lottery is to help the disenfranchised, so you should buy your tickets from the needy, for example the handicapped. Only this strategy will work."

"Ok, ok, I definitely will," I responded with alacrity.

"The way you avariciously crave money guarantees that you'll never hit the lottery. When you buy a lottery ticket your desires must be pure. You definitely can't abandon hard work and rely on opportunism to get rich. And you most certainly can't approach the Lotto with a gambler's mindset and expect the gods to intervene on your behalf."

These voices are but the most recent tip of the iceberg of a hotly contested discourse sparked by the Public Welfare Lottery on whether Taiwan should legalize gambling, and the issue is heating up to become an important issue in the 2004 presidential election. The debates have once again coalesced around the long discussed proposal to build casinos in Penghu, a 64-island archipelago in the middle of the Taiwan Strait. Exponents, who comprise two-thirds of Taiwan's population and notably include officials in the Ministry of Economic Affairs, argue that legalization would simply legitimize an empirical reality, while keeping millions of lost gambling dollars within Taiwan rather than padding private and public coffers overseas (Quarty 2003). Over 85,000 Taiwanese pilgrimage to Las Vegas annually, unknown numbers flock to casinos in Macau and the Philippines, and many catch a ship in Keelung that circles in international waters for night-and-day gambling action before returning

home (2003). Penghu casinos would cash in on domestic wagering, and also the action of, according to Bear Stearns analysts exploring the prospects of investing in Penghu casinos, a wider “Asian population within a five-hour flight [of Taiwan that] has the highest propensity and frequency of wagering of any demographic in the world” (2003).

Detractors, who range from members of religious, public interest, and social groups to many public officials, fear that legalizing gambling will unfetter every flaw in Taiwanese society and turn a strong tendency toward speculative behavior into an incurable epidemic of pathologically compulsive gambling (Cheng 2002; Hsu 2003b; Quartly 2003; Shih Chao-hui 2001). They muster lotto madness’ swift transformation into a “national movement” (Cheng 2002) as proof that Taiwan is unfit for legalized gambling of any sort, expressing fear that lifting the ban on gambling will unleash violence and ensure that the public will remain superstitious and unscientific. Some have buttressed this concern with an economic critique, arguing that the rise in social welfare costs from gambling will exceed what the government will reap in gaming revenues. Strident nativists are also antipathetic towards legalizing gambling. They harshly deconstruct all popular culture fetishes--Hello Kitty is one, *mingpai* have become another—as subconsciously pursued distractions from facing squarely the insecurities and anxieties of the mainland China threat.¹⁶² They fear that legalized gambling will leave Taiwan vulnerable to China’s persistent overtures for unification. One critic, a scholar in biomedical sciences at Academia Sinica, explicitly indicts the state for the emergence of Taiwan’s gambling-related “social psychopathology,” posing a provocative question: “How can we educate our people in such a way as to eliminate their unscientific, selfish, vulgar, speculative and cowardly characteristics formed under 50 years of authoritarian rule?” (Cheng 2002). This indictment

¹⁶² I have read editorials where nativists have accused the PRC of infiltrating Taiwan with such fetishes precisely in order to distract the people.

highlights awareness of the state's historical cultivation of a convergence between national culture and the culture of chance in Taiwan. The irony of this indictment, as I have tried to explain, does not reside simply in the fact that gambling has all along been strictly illegal, but rather in the paradox inherent in the politics of the ban.

While exponents and detractors alike acknowledge that gambling is a widespread and ineradicable empirical reality in Taiwan, what seems ultimately at issue is that legalization even in the restricted space of casinos would, as one reporter puts it, "in effect lift the ban on gambling across the country" (Hsu 2003b). The new speculation frenzy that has engulfed Taiwan since the launching of the Public Welfare Lottery might appear already to have loosened the moorings of the ban. Two policemen did more than intimate as much at a Taipei County ghost temple where worshippers waived lottery tickets instead of joss sticks, hawkers openly peddled *mingpai*, and punters plumbed their fates by playing rounds of mahjong at the fringe of the crowd (Yu Sen-lun 2002). As the policemen returned to their motorcycles after a menacing stroll through the temple, a reporter questioned them on the gambling activities going on inside. One policeman responded that it is not easy to make arrests because sufficient evidence for a gambling charge is so difficult to obtain. But the second one "struck at the heart of the matter": "The government itself is now taking the lead and being the banker of its own gambling system. What's legal and what's not has become even more blurred" (2002).

Structural Nostalgia and the Commodification of Cultural Imagination

Given the proliferation and diversity of *mingpai*, their pursuit might appear to entail an assertion of individual agency that surmounts the external agency of fate, on which the efficacy of the ban has hinged for so long. But the surfeit of *mingpai* choices has multiple implications. *Mingpai* are necessarily multivalent, indexing different temporalities that belong to divergent meaningful universes and therefore

exploding any ideal of one unified cosmos. The “sign-economy” rapidly circulates *mingpai* images through advertising, film, radio, television, tabloids and other branches of mass media that saturate and desacralize everyday life (see Rojek 1995:121). Continuous cycling through the commodity loop adds to the objectification of *mingpai*, further distancing them from a “magically whole cosmos” and dissolving their sacrality within an increasingly complex and commodified cultural value-sphere (see Bennett 2001:63). But because *mingpai* nevertheless necessarily disclose a pre-ordained fate, they are pursued, like so many objects and images exchanged and circulated in Taiwan’s vibrant commercial environment, under the haze of nostalgia (see Chow 1993:72), where they take on an imagined, even magical, authenticity that they otherwise could not have (Bennett 2001).¹⁶³

The new Public Welfare Lottery has only thickened this nostalgic haze, since it recalls the earlier authoritarian era that rapid social change has placed at a qualitative remove from the present that is vastly disproportionate to the quantitative passage of real time. Especially for Taiwanese who lived through the Patriotic Lottery era of high political mobilization, such as the sentimental punter mentioned above, the Public Welfare Lottery has acquired significance as *déjà vu*, so that the very act of recalling the previous period seems to assume a spiritual quality. The misty recollections of the Patriotic Lottery that have popped up in mainstream media and popular discourse might even have made the new Lotto a vicariously nostalgic experience for the younger generation as well.¹⁶⁴ In contrast to the more ideological and future-oriented national hope once embodied in Patriotic Lottery tickets, however, *mingpai* appear to be more resolutely objects of longing, part of the modern quest for solidity and authenticity in a (post)modern world where the sacred aura of a

¹⁶³ Indeed, a recent Taipei Times article discusses how even the customs associated with the Chinese Lunar New Year that are still celebrated are shrouded in an aura of nostalgia (Bartholomew 2002).

¹⁶⁴ On the modern importance of vicarious experience in the context of “chance,” especially games of chance such as lotteries, see (Caillois 2001:120-28).

“nationalized” cultural whole has been domesticated through the reproductive mechanisms of the culture industry. If the authenticity longed for in the pursuit of *mingpai* has become bound up with the earlier authoritarian-era hope, the haze of nostalgia allows this hope to assume an unprecedented purity and amorphousness, having been reactivated through miasmatic memories of the Patriotic Lottery. As many have explained, longing is a reaction to the disenchantment of the modern world and wears a utopian face oriented towards a future-past, a face that wistfully turns its back on an unknown future in favor of embellished representations and memories of a vanished, often youthfully simpler, and always sacred past (Bennett 2001; Stewart 1993). This describes the face of many a punter now scouring Taiwan’s popular and political culture for lucky *mingpai* and lining up at Lotto stations across the island.

This trajectory of fate’s mode of mediating the lottery from national hope to nostalgic longing closely corresponds to a transformation of “cultural imagination” from idealistic to commodified that, according to Allen Chun, has been the inevitable result of a deliberate process of state formation in post-war Taiwan (Chun 1996). From the outset of its rule, the Nationalist regime sought to solidify legitimacy through a process of “nationalizing” culture, so that imaginings of “cultural China” simultaneously signified the nation (1996). During the first two major phases of this process--the periods of “Restoration” (beginning in 1949) and “Renaissance” (1966-77)—the nation was conscientiously constructed as a “cultural ideal” (1996). The KMT appealed to a cultural policy of “traditionalism” by selectively promoting venerable Chinese treasures, customs, rituals, habits, and icons, and by invoking the authority of classic Chinese myths, beliefs, values, language, and history (1996). According to Chun, the coherence and systematic quality of this “sacralized” panoply of Chinese things and knowledge powerfully reflected the utopian vision of the Nationalist state and its urgent need to develop a sense of “spiritual consciousness that could directly engender national solidarity” (1996:135). Beginning with the Cultural

Renaissance Movement (*Wenhua fuxing yundong*) launched by Chiang Kai-shek in 1966, there was an organized effort to lead people to believe that national solidarity through tradition was the key to the “fate” of the nation in all aspects of life, from economic progress to athletic success. Elementary, middle, and high- schools were made the focal points of the Movement. Curricular and extra-curricular programs were overhauled with courses on society, ethics, citizenship, and morality as well as Chinese culture, thought, and military education (1996:134-35). This effort by the government to extend cultural consciousness to the local level was, according to Chun, simply the first step in a “long-term process to objectify (and ‘commodify’) culture” (1996:134-35).

In 1977, President Chiang Ching-kuo began to promote Cultural Reconstruction (*wenhua jianshe*) as part of a national development package to stimulate economic progress and raise living standards. Cultural Reconstruction still aimed to use culture to advance society, but it was meant to be “nonpolitical” by placing national culture specifically in the context of the “arts.” Towards this end, Cultural Centers were set up in each local township to organize and promote cultural activities (1996:143). This domestication of culture coincided with a rapidly expanding culture industry, which also channeled national culture through media commercialization, tourism, public festivals, and popular arts (1996:143). The upshot, as Chun explains, was a “secularization of culture” consistent with the KMT’s overall attempt to “indigenize Nationalist ideology”--in order in part to defuse mainland-Taiwanese ethnic tensions--by institutionally diffusing the hegemony of the whole onto the local level (1996:142-45). Within the framework of Cultural Reconstruction, “the commodification or objectification of culture was the inevitable result of a deliberate process of demystifying the traditional (sacred) aura of culture as a precondition for making it a tangible entity accessible to all citizens” (1996:145). The *Mingpai* phenomenon should, I believe, be viewed within the hegemonic cultural

scheme begun under Cultural Reconstruction, wherein culture has become “*categorized* (as an object of gazing, discourse and practice), *commodified* (for public consumption), and *totalized* (through universal accessibility) in a way [that] was not previously possible” (1996:145, *italics* in original).

What Chun’s Gramscian-inspired analysis suggests is that the process of state formation in Taiwan, partly in response to global forces, has cultivated the commodity loop to facilitate greater totalization of national culture. The domestication or democratization of culture has therefore not meant a relinquishing of the writing and practice of culture by the state. On the contrary, the culture industry has remained very much a state enterprise. But greater totalization here means that nationalist values have also become more distal, or less proximal to their abstract origin, owing to myriad market mediations. Indeed, I believe Taiwan is somewhat distinctive in the degree to which, not only political ideology, but also politics and political figures themselves have become domesticated—both objectified through the media and circulated through the commodity loop, as the recent *mingpai* madness evidences. Rarely does a significant local ritual or cultural event pass without public officials making highly publicized appearances, often with unexpected political or cultural consequences. The Hakka minority’s “divine pig” (*shen zhu*) competition and Pingdong County’s local black-tail tuna festival (*heiweiyu chanji*) are just two recent examples worth noting.

President Chen Shui-bien’s July 2003 visit to Pingdong Harbor to sample the black-tail tuna is said to have spurred a rush for the delicacy, tipping the delicate balance of a tight market and causing the price to skyrocket. As a result, eating black-tail tuna this year became a highly exclusive status marker, manifesting the power of one’s purse, and therefore inaccessible to many (Guo Mingfu 2003). Moreover, for fisherman, black-tail tuna became “black gold,” leading them to risk arrest and other dangers by venturing into restricted Philippine waters to hunt the fish; indeed, five

Taiwanese vessels were taken into custody while trying to flee Philippine waters with their catch, creating an embarrassing international imbroglio for Taiwan. The President's visit was blamed for triggering this chain of events, and critics have been vocal in calling for "political figures to use more caution when promoting local cultural events linked to agricultural and marine products embedded in fragile production and consumption chains" (2003).

Chen Shui-bien's recent visit to Hsinchu County for the local Nationalist government-sponsored Hakka Yimin Cultural Festival has become even more "soaked with political flavor" (Qiu Guotang 2003). Hakka compete to raise the fattest pig, which is believed to bestow luck and honor on the winner by being sacrificed to ancestors. During elections, it is also believed that offering over-stuffed pigs as sacrifices to gods will bring luck to candidates as well as peace and prosperity to the nation, so many political figures in Taiwan financially support pig breeders (Chiu Yu-Tzu 2003). During a visit to Yimin a year ago in 2002, President Chen was asked to pledge support—both spiritual and financial—for a local pig, which thereafter was called, "The Divine Presidential Pig" (Editorial-1 2003).

Sparked by the president's 2003 visit to Yimin just before the Ghost Festival (Universal Salvation), right after which the Hakka sacrifice their fat pigs, a whirlwind of debate swept the media. The conflicting interests of politics, local culture, and civility have all been engaged in this critical discourse. Hakka leaders have castigated outsiders for interfering in their local customs. Animal rights activists have called for "swinitarianism" (*zhu dao*), arguing that such cruelty towards pigs is an affront to humanity and a set back to Taiwan's civilization process: "human sacrifices of ancient times were done away with; it's time to abandon fat pig sacrifices" (Chiu Yu-Tzu 2003; Staff-1 2003). Not to be left out of this media-generated political tempest, People's First Party Chairman James Soong along with a retinue of legislators also visited Yimin Temple, publicly calling for respect for this ancient Hakka custom and

questioning President Chen's claim to be a Hakka opportunistically made at election time (Qiu Guotang 2003). President Chen defended the more than 170-year-old Hakka custom, stating that sacrificing divine pigs "cannot be vilified, distorted or insulted by any individual or group" (Huang 2003).

The exceptional degree to which political culture has become so visibly localized within popular culture through the course of democratization in Taiwan is no doubt due at least in part to the island's ambiguous national status. Self-recognition as a nation among nations derived from prestigious stately ceremonies of foreign diplomacy is practically non-existent for Taiwan, with only a few tiny countries willing to snuff the PRC and establish diplomatic relations with what the latter calls a "renegade province of China." As Chun emphasizes, the Nationalist state from the outset turned to culture for legitimacy, a strategy which has also driven ever-deeper the historical wedge between Taiwan and the PRC, where tradition was attacked during the Mao era and all remnants of Chinese culture were deemed reactionary obstacles to socialist progress (Chun 1996).

The transformation of national culture from abstract ideal to local reality has been most forcefully impelled since the mid-1980s by the steady rise of the nativist movement, which climaxed with the victory of the DPP over the KMT in the 2000 presidential election. But it is important to note that while ethnic nationalism has largely succeeded in "demonstrating the reality of Taiwanese ethnicity," it has been far less successful, as Chun explains, in "unmask[ing] the hegemonic fictions of traditional Chineseness that have been inculcated as a result of decades of cultural discourse" (1996:146-47). One reason for this is likely because Taiwanese ethnic nationalism has also become assimilated into the structure of nostalgia, whose object of longing still invokes mainland China, albeit as the negative basis for defining a locally rooted source of historical identity. To be sure, as I demonstrated in Section 2, nostalgia for China as timeless tradition remains a powerful source of authenticating

images and marketable commodities in contemporary Taiwan. But this nostalgia now exists, sometimes awkwardly, alongside the nativist one, which, as Rey Chow has noted, “expresses itself as a massive concern over the suppressed wounds of Taiwan’s local history,” with the annual campaign to commemorate the tragic “228 Incident” of 1947 being the most obvious example (Chow 1993:73). It is this nativist nostalgia that is being inculcated as a component of the new cultural nationalism under DPP President Chen Shui-bien, who is popularly dubbed the “native son” (*Taiwan zhi zi*) and at least for a time embodied this localized sense of ethnic longing.

The culture of nostalgia so prominent in contemporary Taiwan expresses not so much a desire to return to some historical past as a “movement of temporality”—a sense of “temporal dislocation” (1993:73)—which explains why such sharply divergent objects of nostalgia can coexist. My friends thrive on this sense of temporal dislocation; indeed, they systematically structure it into their lives, most importantly through the activities I am writing about in these chapters—spearfishing, gambling at mahjong, and drinking flower wine. It is the spatiotemporal dislocation integral to each of these ritualized activities that triggers fantasied memories of the past, which offer men a way of imagining identity that is alternative to the one imposed by the real-time of the rational, consumerist, workaday lifeworld—as Levi-Strauss once remarked, ritual is a machine that destroys the effects of time (see Gell 1992:27). If to be nostalgic is to be “homesick” (Chow 1993:71), memories become nostalgic when they become idealized as a source of shared values that conceal the hardships and frustrations of the present, so that the collective reanimation of memories creates the psychic comfort of returning “home.”

To everyone but Taiwanese men, perhaps, it might seem silly to refer to being installed at a mahjong table together with friends as akin to being “home.” For all but the most basic creature comforts during the productive years of a Taiwanese man’s life, however, friendship arguably runs deeper than family, despite (or perhaps in part

because of) the central ideological status of the family in Chinese culture and society. In the following chapter, I further substantiate this claim through an analysis of high-stakes mahjong as played among male friends. This is a pervasive and unanalyzed social situation in which the distinctive interplay of fate, luck, and the martial imaginary entails such allure for men that they would almost never pass up the opportunity to square off at a mahjong table in order to return “home”—because this is precisely what the “war of the square table” (*fang cheng zhi zhan*) is for them.

Chapter 6

Mahjong Agonistics: Fate, Mimesis, and the Martial Imaginary

Introduction

Given that mahjong is such an inescapable part of cultural intimacy and mass-mediated culture in Taiwan (and elsewhere throughout Asia), it is remarkable that the game has received so little attention from scholars, especially anthropologists. The one scholarly analysis of mahjong that I have seen is set among overseas Chinese in India and treats the game, on inspiration from Clifford Geertz and Erving Goffman, as a “deep play” “character contest” (Basu 1991; see Geertz 1973; Goffman 1967). During two years of fieldwork on male friendship in Taiwan, I played mahjong regularly among different groups of male friends, most intensively at a pool hall and in the basement of a shop, both in downtown Taipei. I found that high-stakes mahjong played among male friends is more than a social activity about gambling and status. In this chapter, I treat mahjong as a ritual mode of male agency fraught with political significance. First, I sketch the ethnographic setting. I then develop my conceptual framework and situate the game in historical and sociopolitical context. Next, I return to game phenomenology, analyzing how men conjure fate and battle luck. In conclusion, I discuss the possibilities for a pluralistic public culture from mahjong agonistics.

Ethnographic setting: Of mahjong and men

It was 11:00 p.m. on a drizzly December Sunday in the dank basement of A Zhang’s shop in downtown Taipei, one species of the genera of ubiquitous set-apart hang outs where Taiwanese male friends habitually come and go. That evening, friends routinely stopped by as usual, but six of us hadn’t budged since 3:00 in the

afternoon. Four of us were firmly fastened to the click-clacking mahjong table at one end of the room and the other two had melted into the fluffy sofa at the other end while brewing *gong-fu* tea, chain-smoking cigarettes, staring toward a silently flickering TV, and chewing betel nuts along with the fat. In front of the sofa stretched a long tea table cluttered with snacks, tea cups, soft drinks, cigarette packs, ash trays, betel nut boxes displaying bikini-clad beauties, cigarette lighters similarly adorned, tiny and intermittently singing cell phones, and a hotpot now cold with the scant remains of a homemade herbal consommé. Our nine-hour mahjong marathon had been earlier interrupted by an hour or so break to make and take the health-giving concoction, which my friends over and over averred was “highly replenishing,” in a ritually compulsive manner suggesting that the votive discourse partook in the production of the potion’s medicinal efficacy.¹⁶⁵

Somewhat unusual but by no means unprecedented about our mahjong match this evening was that we extended play to a third game. It was an unspoken rule that a complete match--and we played at least two a week during the winter months--consisted of two full games, which means eight “rounds” or “winds.” You could not quit early unless a proxy who met with the remaining players’ approval was willing to take over for you. But unless substitution is approved at the outset, there is a strong preference that the same four players who start the match also finish it. Two games typically spanned roughly five hours, or, as my friends resentfully opined at every conceivable opportunity, six hours when I was one of the four “legs” (T: *ka*), which is Taiwanese slang for mahjong players.¹⁶⁶ So the decision to play a third game entailed an additional two-and-a-half to three-hour time commitment at the table.

¹⁶⁵ The soup is simple—you simmer in water a large teabag-like herbal sack, which can be purchased at the market. Other ingredients can be added to taste. There are many colloquial names for the soup, which most generally is called *shiquan dabu tang*.

¹⁶⁶ There are improvised ways to play mahjong with more or less than four players and I have played both types of non-standard games; however, the circles of friends in which I played mahjong would never play one of their serious, high-stakes matches—where the protocols I am describing obtain—with any number other than four players.

During the brief and busy interval between games when we swooshed and shuffled tiles and blindly drew “winds” to settle seating and determine the “dealer” (*zhuangjia*), we took turns visiting the loo and stretching our legs, as usual. But two of my friends—A Zhang and Little Big—also rang their ever-awaiting wife and kids at home to break the bad news, which meant relaying variations of the message that daddy had business to attend to and would be home late. An ineluctable staple of men’s culture in Taiwan, these unpleasant dilatory phone calls can be rough going and have the Taiwanese nuclear family firmly suspended in a state of endless deferral, ensuring that any stereotyped Chinese ideal of a “complete household” remains more fantasy than reality.¹⁶⁷ At best, these calls are cold and quick; however, they can and often do swiftly erupt into a violent flurry of nasty invectives before one party abruptly cuts off the other.¹⁶⁸ The latter describes the episode that evening of Little Big’s call to his wife, who was at home alone with their three young children, an entirely typical situation except perhaps on Sunday, when families seemed most strongly to assert a claim on men’s time.¹⁶⁹ After being suddenly cut off, Little Big furiously flung his cell phone onto the sofa. “What happened,” I inquired, if only to break the awkward silence. “No problem,” he responded, “let’s play.” With a look of disgust on his face, he decisively reinstalled himself at the mahjong table, stuffed his mouth with betel nuts and a cigarette, and proceeded to work the tiles with each extended arm alternating a smooth circular sweep from outside to inside. He appeared instantly soothed as soon as his swooshing arms fell into kinetic rhythm with the clacking refrain of the tiles. But what appeared to be a safety-valve effect was entirely incidental and by no means a ritual objective of playing mahjong (see Tambiah

¹⁶⁷ Feuchtwang nicely crystallizes the romantic stereotype of the Chinese family by referring to the Spring Festival “homecoming” as “celebrating the continuing narrative of a complete household” (Feuchtwang 1992:25).

¹⁶⁸ In these calls, my friends often invented excuses for their delayed return home that their wives might deem more dignified than playing mahjong with the guys.

¹⁶⁹ A desperate strategy commonly employed by wives to get their husbands to go home, especially on weekends, was to have the child call and entreat daddy to come home soon.

1979:125). On the contrary, Little Big was merely poisoning himself, as we will see, for what Goffman calls “problematic and consequential action” (Goffman 1967), which means availing oneself voluntarily to risk, chance, uncertainty, fate, and contest, things that in mahjong “lie side by side as so many holy things” (Huizinga 1955:91).

Money was also an issue in extending play. Going bankrupt and being unable to make immediate payment at the mahjong table is taboo—a violation of the mahjong code of ethics, which is a subset of the classical code of correct conduct among friends (*yi*), and a terrible loss of face. Therefore, you had to make certain that on your person you had enough cash to cover the losses that the worst unlucky streak might deliver in two games. Since our ante was NT\$300/100, another unspoken rule, you would typically be safe to sit down with NT\$15000 (US\$450).¹⁷⁰ The decision to play a third game therefore required an impromptu assessment of one’s personal finances, and because our continuation was unplanned, asking for a loan or dashing off to an ATM machine was not unacceptable.¹⁷¹ Indeed, at this point, A Zhang borrowed NT\$6000 from Mushroom, whose wallet was always bursting, and Little Big hit me for NT\$4000. Upon completing arrangements for time and money, A Zhang, Little Big, and Mushroom were prepared to plunge into game three. But all four players must

¹⁷⁰ The mahjong ante is a flexible matter and ultimately decided by the players, though there seems to be a set of conventional configurations consisting of two amounts spoken one after another—e.g., 50/20, 300/100, 600/300, 1000/200--the first is the flat amount paid for a winning hand and is usually always higher than the second amount, which is the amount paid for each point of which a winning hand consists. I noted that, on average, a winning hand will be worth between two and four points (though point values ranging from zero to six are not at all unusual), which in an NT\$300/100 game would yield payouts of between NT\$500 (for two points) and NT\$700 (for four points), to be paid by the player who discarded the winning tile. If the winning hand came from a “self-drawn” (*zimo*) tile, each of the other three players would pay the winner the total winning amount. I have computed a conservative average NT dollar amount of cash that changes hands or circulates in two typical NT\$300/100 games: NT\$35200 (US\$1,126). Typically, however, any one player could expect to win or lose on average between NT\$3000 (\$96) and \$6000 (\$192) in two games. One man in his fifties who I interviewed, but with whom I never played, had been spending eight to ten hours every Saturday night, from 10:00 p.m. until breakfast Sunday morning, for the last ten years playing mahjong with the same group of buddies. Their ante was NT\$600/300, and he said that in one night you could win or lose a maximum of NT\$40000 (US\$1,280), but that, on average, one could expect to win or lose between NT\$5000 (US\$160) and NT\$10000 (US\$320).

¹⁷¹ It is typically considered bad luck to play mahjong on borrowed money, especially when the lender is one of the other players.

consent if a game is to continue beyond the norm, and I was reluctant. On this occasion, beckoning one of the two couch potatoes to substitute for me was out of the question, since it was because of me that my friends called for a third game.

My friends motioned to advance the match and enter a ninth hour because game two ended with an unlikely and, for them, unacceptable outcome that they desired immediately to rectify: I was the big and only winner, up just over NT\$12000. By a stroke of luck—and it had to be luck because my skills were inferior to those of my friends—I discarded very few tiles that completed winning hands (*fang pao* or *fang qiang*), so I made very few payouts, and also won a very generous number of hands myself, including eight on a “self drawn” (*zimo*) tile, which yields a triple intake since all three players compensate the winner. I had been on a winning streak for a month or so and a few guys in our mahjong gang had already become so spooked by what my consistent winning intimated about the uncanny forces in mahjong that they were simply refusing to play with me. And even though I had emerged as the big winner a couple of times before, this was the first time that I had been the only winner. A Zhang was deepest in the hole, down around NT\$6000. Given his acute sensitivity to loss of face, he was highly reluctant to call it quits and leave me with this triumph to boast about and memorialize in post-match story telling, which is when game moves are strategically retold and registered into a narrative history that all friends build amongst each other and draw upon regularly for reinforcement. Moreover, he was a confident player and particularly given to blowing his own horn, so he knew that I would crow over this victory and that others would also seize the opportunity to rub in his humiliating defeat to the “foreigner” (*laowai*). Mushroom was out around NT\$4000, and I could not feel too badly about this since he was at times nasty with me, complaining in a dismissive manner about my every hesitation or deliberation.

A Zhang and Mushroom were convinced that my good luck derived from my illegitimate subversion of mahjong protocol. I presumably pulled off this act of

sabotage by making unorthodox or nonsensical moves, deemed so for being logically disproportionate to game situations or probabilistically foolish, and with my slightly off-tempo pace, which they perceived as disrupting the smooth and snappy rhythm of the game—and rhythm, as we will see, is paramount in mahjong. Even if willy-nilly, they protested, such flouting of mahjong protocol meant that my luck had been unfairly procured. They were convinced that my lucky streak could not hold out if they played up-tempo and rigorously required me to keep pace. They challenged me to give them another game in order to prove this and also to win back some money, though in the last instance their anxieties were not about their secular bank accounts, *per se*, but rather about what such a highly improbable loss intimated about the mysterious forces that turn up in mahjong tiles and, correspondingly, that turned over their celestial account balances (see Gates 1987).¹⁷² They also warned that I would be required to make all moves briskly and that all “infractions” (*xianggong*) would be strictly enforced, as though up to this point they had been lenient with me.¹⁷³ Put this way, I could not refuse them another go without being deemed a flagrant spoil-sport with an unfavorable “game character” (*paipin*) and “no regard for friendship” (*meiyou*

¹⁷² We played together regularly, two or three times a week during the winter months, and the general belief is that, in the long run, wins and losses get distributed fairly evenly. My friends therefore knew that they would have occasion to win back their money, so their desperation to play a third game that evening did not make strong pecuniary sense.

¹⁷³ *Xianggong* is the term used to describe certain breaches, most commonly when a player has an incorrect number tiles in his hand due to a draw or discard error or oversight. This most often occurs at the outset of a hand, when multiple activities take place simultaneously—when players stack the wall; when the “dealer” rolls the dice to determine where to crack the wall, counts out the roll, and begins the draw; when players in turn draw their tiles four at a time to fill their sixteen-tile hand while simultaneously organizing it; and when the dealer calls for the replacement of flower tiles and then formally begins play by discarding the first tile. This was the most difficult moment of play for me and, in my view, the only time when my moves were off-speed a bit, especially if I was the dealer. Very occasionally, I might forget to replace a flower tile and therefore *xianggong*, which would disqualify me from winning—but not losing—the hand. The disqualified player must play out the hand by simply drawing tiles and safely discarding them so as to try to avoid losing—he cannot complete sets by “eating” (*chi*) or “trumping” (*peng*) tiles. A speedy dealer can create tense conditions leading other players to *xianggong*, and thereby also possibly seizing control of game flow. In other contexts, *xianggong* has different meanings, including premier, young gentleman (especially in traditional Chinese opera), and catamite, so the term is richly evocative.

renqingwei) (see Wang Shihong 1997:77). Such a charge would amount to a loss of face worse than cheating (see Huizinga 1955:11), so I acquiesced.

The tensions of playing mahjong were intensified in game three. My friends were concentrating extra hard and seemed to have mustered a third wind. Although bleary eyed from fatigue and cigarette smoke, I was trying my best to hold up. A Zhang drew each tile with crisp confidence and instantly determined its identity with a brisk brush of his thumb across its embossed face, discarding or retaining it without ever looking at it. His movements were at once flamboyant and efficient, and even the early arranging and rearranging of a hand he endeavored with minimal entropy. He announced a *chi* by abruptly finger-flicking his discard into the “ocean” (*haidi*) and then, with just the right touch, flicking over in front of his rack the bracketing tiles of his newly formed set, only thereafter getting around coolly to retrieving the set-completing tile. He pronounced each *peng* with a barely audible but unmistakably monotone “um,” which never failed to give my heart a jolt as this was the same quivering drone he made to declare a win (*hu*) immediately before slapping over his completed hand with a crisp crack of his plastic ruler.¹⁷⁴ And he somehow exposed the matching pair of his *peng* in the same smooth and continuous motion of reaching out for the third tile. I always felt that A Zhang’s brassy mahjong bravado was consistent with his Byzantine personal life, in which he dexterously juggled, on precarious economic means and with three separate cell phones, a wife with whom he had a son and a daughter, a long-term mistress with whom he had a second son, as well as a fairly steady girlfriend.

The markedly swaggering style of A Zhang’s mahjong moves--performed with only one hand, his other arm motionlessly draped over the back of his chair--were

¹⁷⁴ Each player uses a plastic ruler, which is a standard part of mahjong accoutrements and roughly the length of sixteen racked tiles, to organize tiles neatly and also to slap over a completed set, which players endeavor with varying degrees of bravado. The first dealer of a game usually uses a different color ruler, which helps locate the progress of each round.

intended to be a decisive display of confidence and especially skill, for even if A Zhang attributed my winning to luck, he was too self-possessed to cede control of his own fate to a fickle force. Indeed, in conversations with me and others, he unabashedly scoffed at those sublime aspects of “traditional” Chinese culture such as religion, fate, and luck as “superstition” (*mixin*), self-assuredly repeating his favorite pet phrase: “I don’t fall for that stuff” (*wo bu chi nei yi tao*). And from hanging out with him in a variety of contexts, I would say this was generally true of A Zhang--if only until he was really down on his luck. When, in the same week, a nineteen-year-old girl smashed her motorbike into his double-parked SUV and lost three teeth (he paid her hospital bill), his partner’s puppy darted out his shop door just as he absentmindedly opened it and was struck by a car (he paid for the pup’s hip surgery), and he futilely attempted CPR on the lifeless body of a scuba diver that he helped drag from the sea, he surprised me by desperately announcing among a sizeable gathering of friends that he absolutely needed to visit a temple and worship (*baibai*).¹⁷⁵ And I still recall vividly the distant expression of despair on his face, which manifested abundant fear at what disaster his next move might turn up.

A Zhang knew that his brash predictions raised the stakes of game three’s consequentiality, so he was pulling out all stops to harness uncanny game forces that his combative performance acknowledged but that he nonetheless would be loathe to admit existed. He even went so far as to exploit my strained and bloodshot eyes by blowing cigarette smoke straight across the table at me rather than off to the side, unsympathetically trumping my reproaches by invoking a respectable fieldwork maxim: “Smoking and mahjong go together...it’s part of the game...if you want to play with us...if you’re going to become a mahjong Ph.D. (*majiang boshi*)...then

¹⁷⁵ I, along with a few other friends, was with A Zhang at the time of each of these incidents. Had I been alone with A Zhang, I would have been concerned that he viewed me as a harbinger of bad luck. Indeed, as only I complained about cigarette smoke, I believe he moved to open the door out of which the puppy raced only because he anticipated my complaint, so I felt partly responsible for this accident.

you'll have to tolerate it... 'when in Rome do as the Romans do' (*rujing suisu*).” And if his smoke screen was not enough to break my concentration, he seized several opportunities to try to intimidate me (as well as the others) by exercising the option of “surveillance” (*kan-pai* or *yan-pai*) when his hand was “win-ready” (*ting-pai*). When a player’s hand is “win-ready,” which means one tile short of complete, he can opt to freeze his hand and walk around the table to inspect other players’ moves from behind, like an ambulating panopticon. This “assertive strategy” (*caigong*) aims in part to intimidate other players into abandoning any hope of winning and adopting the “defensive strategy” (*caishou*) of breaking up their hands in order to play only “safe tiles” (*anquan pai*). If a player believes that the tile(s) needed to complete his win-ready hand is tied up in other players’ hands, surveillance might transform an otherwise stale hand into a winning one, which would amount to momentous “seizure of game disposition” (*zhengqu jiyun, paishi, pailiu* or *paifeng*) (see Jullien 1995). If players do shift to a defensive mode, the surveyor will also be much less likely to lose by discarding another player’s winning tile (*fang pao*), thereby creating a situation where he could more safely play for the win.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, under the watchful scrutiny of the surveyor’s gaze, I experienced a palpable disruption of the unreflexive subject-centered perspective from which I gauged the intangible game disposition that factored critically, if inexplicably, into my choice of moves. Amidst my tacking back and forth between the “I” and “me” that the gaze induced, I sensed some formal cognitive framework over-ride my “sixth sense” (*diliu gan*) and all I could do was struggle to bring this framework to bear on the concrete game situation. And since my technical skills and experience were relatively limited, my cognitive game framework was not a powerful one and therefore I was more easily disoriented than my friends

¹⁷⁶ A player who tends to exercise the surveillance tactic might be especially inclined to do so when he believes that his winning tile has become “safe” or if he believes he has a good chance of drawing his winning tile (*zimo*). But encompassing both these tactical considerations is the more paramount one of influencing the flow of luck or “game disposition” (*paishi*).

were by the surveyor's gaze--and more often than not I would adopt a defensive strategy.

But if the surveyor should still happen to lose the hand by *fang pao*, surveillance not only costs him an additional point (*tai*) but also carries with it the perceived high likelihood of relinquishing any hope of gaining control over game disposition or luck (*shouqi*).¹⁷⁷ Since the ultimate objective of surveillance is to alter game disposition and procure luck, rarely will a player on a lucky streak choose surveillance, unless this tactic was deemed responsible for generating the lucky streak in the first place. Some players never exercise surveillance when win-ready, while others do so only occasionally and with much discretion, most often when they feel a desperate need to undermine another player's game luck and improve their own. In our third game that evening, A Zhang played the surveillance card aggressively and chose to linger mostly behind me—after all, it was my lucky streak that he was hoping to subvert. He carefully inspected my every move and drew his own tiles by reaching menacingly over my shoulder. His surveillance tactic paid off at least three times during the game, once when he drew his own winning tile and on two other occasions when Mushroom and I completed his hand.

Mushroom's manner was far less flamboyant than A Zhang's and his style more contemplative. I thought of his generally quiet and steady strategy as befitting of his station as a rank-and-file clerk at the Customs Bureau. He was one of only a couple of my friends who was unmarried, and I sensed that the divinatory desire that filtered his focus on the cosmos had much to do with finding a girlfriend and crossing the marriage threshold, as he was already in his mid-thirties. Rather than maneuver to grab "luck" (*shouqi*) by the horns, he seemed more interested in reading and reacting

¹⁷⁷ Even though the surveyor knows the tile that another player may need to win, since he cannot change his hand once choosing to exercise surveillance, if he draws this tile he must discard it and take the loss (*fang-pao*).

to it. But he was nonetheless passionate and combative in his own way. He always played in an intensely captivated state, wholly in thrall to the game's sounds and rhythms, so much so that he signaled *chi*, *peng*, and *hu* with a subtle flip of his hand rather than vocally disrupting the snapping, sliding, and clacking refrain that channeled luck and kept him mesmerized. Whenever he won a hand, he slowly and suspensefully turned over his tiles for all to witness. With his head pulled back as if to signal detached judgment, he trained his eyes on his achievement as if it were a painting, appreciating the aesthetic beauty and coherence of his completed sets while moving his hands back and forth over the ordered arrangement like a priest consecrating a Eucharist. He read off the name of each set and its point value in a weighty tone, as if words alone were inadequate to the meaning, and seemed almost heartbroken each time he destroyed his perfect creation by thrusting his tiles into the "ocean" for reshuffling.

Because of Mushroom's intensely sensuous engagement with game forces, he complained most vehemently about my unconventional moves and off-tempo pace, which presumably monkey-wrenched game flow and broke the spell integral to playing mahjong for him. If I discarded back-to-back tiles that he felt betrayed foolish decision making, he might shake his head and bite his tongue or else succumb to his frustrations and begin ranting at me. In our third game that evening, he finessed a middle ground not too disruptive of his spellbound state, for he needed to remain captivated if he was going to win back some money. If I balked even slightly before discarding a tile and broke game flow, he shot me a fierce grimace and then plaintively turned toward A Zhang as if making a plea for divine intervention. A Zhang would respond in turn by exhorting me sternly to pick up the pace.

For Little Big, I sensed that playing mahjong was at all times acutely consequential, both economically and psychically. He was a cab driver with three kids and making mortgage payments on a new Taipei apartment. And while he

consistently amazed me with his razor sharp wit and worldly sensibility—he was without doubt the savviest mahjong player I encountered--I was simultaneously struck by his doggedly meticulous, if generally clandestine, tactics to conjure cosmic forces. He was forever finagling fate and I could rarely keep up with his surreptitious estimations and stratagems. It is hardly unusual that he should have consulted with geomancy experts to ascertain celestially propitious days on which to undertake significant events in his life, such as moving into his new home (*xinju luocheng*) and throwing a massive house-warming banquet—most Taiwanese do.¹⁷⁸ But when faced with a string of personal setbacks—the nadir of which was not being compensated for two months of hard roofing labor he did down south for a construction boss who squandered the payroll on an expensive hostess club addiction—he shocked me by changing his given name, making it official by issuing new name cards. When I asked my friends what was up with Little Big’s new name cards, they told me that he believed his name was “inauspicious” (*bu jili*). Little Big explained it to me this way: “My former name had a lousy ring to it...it sounded awful...I couldn’t make any money with a name like that...I had to change my name.”

Little Big felt differently about playing mahjong with me, but not because he had a more favorable assessment of my game. He did not. But rather because when we played together, he tended either to win or else break about even. One afternoon during my winning streak when we were performing what had become a new ritual--persuading A Zhang to revoke his repeated moratoriums on playing with me--Little Big secretly revealed this to me: “I could care less that you’re a lousy player...lately I’ve been winning right along with you...your good luck has been good for me too...don’t tell this to A Zhang or he definitely won’t play.” Little Big’s style of play commingled moving flamboyance and fervent meditation. I viewed the connection

¹⁷⁸ According to a report in the *Liberty Times*, a survey poll found that 79.8% of Taiwanese select an auspicious day (*xuan rizi*) for moving (Cai Zongxi 2000; see chapter 2).

between these contradictory extremes as an “as if” one. The overwhelming depth of his investment in estranged game forces demanded an equally overwhelming expression of personalized skills in order convincingly to style his play “as if” he ceded nothing to an external agency. He habitually bracketed his rack with two slightly cupped hands, and sticking out from the first two fingers of the left one was nearly always a lit cigarette. His moves were swift and certain and could generate from a flash of either hand, irrespective of the cigarette and typically accompanied by a groan, grunt, or cuss, which was not so much expressive of his actual game situation as performative of a mahjong poker face. He also offered impromptu colorful commentaries at irregular intervals. These laconic outbursts sounded like random fragments of an ongoing game analysis, so that their ultimate origin registered to me as deriving from some unknown source that was speaking through Little Big’s fixated game trance.¹⁷⁹ He might, for example, blurt the following while flipping a “green *fa*” into the ocean: “Here’s a beautiful tile for you all. F... your mother [T: *gan li niang*]. It’s not the *yiwan* [one *wan*] Mushroom’s been fishing for, but I don’t have that one. ‘*Gongxi facai*’ (congratulations and prosperity to you).”¹⁸⁰ On that night, I knew Little Big was taking pains simply to play with his usual flair and focus—no surveillance, no subversive *peng* or *gang*¹⁸¹—since he believed that game disposition was favorable for him *because* it had been favorable for me.

¹⁷⁹ During these “high stakes” games among friends, I found that players almost never conversed directly with each other, despite the fact that Taiwanese will tell you that one thing they enjoy about playing mahjong is chatting and gossiping with friends. At most, players might interject a variety of comments concerning game moves, but these are rarely made in a discursive mode. Even between hands, rounds, or games there is very little chit-chat outside the context of the match. I elaborate on the analytical implications of this point below.

¹⁸⁰ *Gongxi facai* is a bit of a pun since the “*fa*” in the phrase matches the “green *fa*.” The tile is sometimes referred to as *facai* (among other things), which matches the phrase and, if uttered when discarding the tile, is like saying, ‘Here’s an auspicious tile...I hope you can use it...take it and win good fortune.’”

¹⁸¹ A player might execute an otherwise unnecessary *peng* or *gang* in order to disrupt a game flow that has been particularly favorable to another player. This tactic is perhaps even more common than surveillance (see below).

Perhaps due to a combination of fatigue and my friends' concerted efforts, I committed two infractions during that third game, each one the result of my ending up with an incorrect number of tiles immediately after the hectic ordeal of the deal. The frustration accompanying these infractions, on top of the fact that my winnings were being rapidly redistributed, provoked me to a heightened level of engagement and drew me more deeply into the match. I began drawing tiles with an exaggerated pomposity and hurling sordid curses when flinging "rotten tiles" into the ocean. I stopped short of exercising surveillance, but not of aggressively slapping face down my win-ready tiles with a single swift swipe of my ruler, issuing a warning to the others to be extra cautious about their remaining moves. Also fueling the escalating deterioration of my game character was the painful realization that my luck had indeed flagged, since the tiles were no longer turning up for me, no matter how earnestly I strived to retain possession of favorable game forces. As the one-thousand and one-hundred NT dollar bills flew from my pocket and back into my friends' hands, I experienced more palpably that night than before the special double-character of money as measure and medium of value (Graeber 2001:78), for those unguarded aspects of my "self" that the battle called forth and that I released into the game seemed somehow to become hitched to those bills and to flow around the table along with the currency. The deeper into my pocket I reached, the more of my "self" became invested in each payout. Consequently, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that my exalted "big brother" status was being eroded and recirculated, the sense of camaraderie I felt seemed only to intensify.¹⁸²

That third game turned into a tough and tortuous struggle for me, and when it finally ended I found myself physically, psychically, and financially depleted. My

¹⁸² In this context, "big brother" (*dage*) refers to the big winner. In a mahjong match among close friends, big brother status usually comes with a string attached: the big winner will be expected to treat his friends to food and drinks.

friends scored a victory over my profits, winning back nearly all their money, as well as over my lucky streak. And while I was completely frazzled after the match, they emerged from the mêlée in self-satisfied spirits, upbraiding me unmercifully for losing my cool in the heat of the battle and for folding in the face of my faltering good fortune. They now felt they had a legitimate punitive excuse for sidelining me from the action for a time, putatively to allow me to reflect repentantly upon my game-character lapse, but more pertinently to make certain the winning momentum from my mysterious mana would be fully defused. The match had now become gainful grist for everyone's grandiloquent narratives, and over the next few weeks my friends recapitulated everywhere and to everyone highlights of my rise and fall that evening, and especially of how they brought me to my game-character break-point. And while they emphasized the triumph of their strategy and skills, their glory could hardly have derived from a victory of their skills over mine, for that would have been nothing at all to boast about. This was a triumph over an unnamed and silently simmering adversary—the fickle forces of luck, which my uncanny winning streak had rendered unusually transparent—and my friends' impressive conquest over this elusive foe that night seemed to fortify the fatefulness of the bond between us. After barely a two-week disciplinary reprieve, I was back at the mahjong table again, and a better player for it all.

The Ritual Analysis of Play: *Agôn*, *Alea*, *Mimicry*, and *Ilinx*

In his classic *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga defines play as free activity occurring outside “reality” within its own spatiotemporal boundaries according to fixed rules (Huizinga 1955). Levi-Strauss famously distinguishes play from ritual, arguing that the former is disjunctive while the latter conjoins (Levi-Strauss 1966:32-33). Huizinga, however, sees both innovation and order in the uncertainty and chanciness of play. For him, as for Georg Simmel, play is likened to the work of art,

which in its own crowded state of intense action is a microcosm of life itself (Simmel 1971). In mahjong, I analyze how the interaction of play and ritual elements at once carves out a parallel space-time and activates an imaginative interplay between game action and the wider sociopolitical universe--and my analysis will tack between these realms.

Roger Caillois, in *Man, Play, and Games*, classifies play into four main types, depending on whether the role of competition, chance, simulation, or vertigo is dominant. He calls these four rubrics, *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*, respectively (Caillois 2001). According to Caillois, in Dionysian societies (e.g., Australian or African), play is highly ritualized and dominated by a combination of simulation and vertigo. These societies are ruled, he argues, by masks and possession, and people's collective release to the rhythmic intensity of pantomime and ecstasy achieves a tense cohesion of social life. In what Caillois calls "orderly" or "rational" societies (e.g., Roman or Chinese), play hinges on competition and chance, making the chief elements of the "game of living" a complementary combination of merit and fate. On the one hand, there is competitiveness, contest, strife, creativity, the spirit of conflict; on the other, there is the will of destiny, a gift of the gods. Whereas modern societies affirm the *agôn*, even if in routinized form, *alea* affords an alternative hope, a counter rationalization, a spirit of imagination. Drawing upon an eclectic archive, Caillois demonstrates how these modalities of play reflect socialized forms that sustain, and are sustained in, institutional structures, be they official, private, or marginal (2001:81-128). In my analysis, I retool Caillois' developmental teleology by incorporating all four modes of play into a dynamic and socially encompassing ritual framework. My main objective is to show how *agôn* and *alea* animate dominant aspects of sociopolitical culture in Taiwan, and to conceptualize how in men's mahjong matches the four modes of play constitute the imaginary core of men's social

being, which, as Maurice Godelier puts it, “is a constant source of imaginary realities which have become social reality” (Godelier 1999:176).

More broadly, my analysis is informed by political debates on the *agôn*, particularly concerning modern Western culture’s “fall from agonistic grace” (Lungstrum and Sauer 1997:2). Nietzsche has poignantly portrayed the predicament, namely that the *agôn* as an ineluctable human force has been tamed by modernity’s asceticism, and especially by the bureaucratic edifice of the modern state. Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt have each issued influential wake-up calls by idealizing the classical Athenian *agôn*, affirming its elitist masculine aesthetic, while contemporary agonists, such as Bonnie Honig and Chantal Mouffe, have turned to a pluralistic agonal politics by way of advancing a radical democratic agenda (Arendt 1958; Honig 1993:42-125; Lungstrum and Sauer 1997; Mouffe 1995; Nietzsche 1997 (1872); Villa 1999:chapter 5). Whether their politics are closed or open to the social, these agonists uphold the unity of *agôn*, seeking “ground” in perpetual conflict that steers clear of Habermasian consensus. A postmodern strain of agonistic thinkers, notably Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, has postulated the disunity of *agôn*, where hyper-real or virtual conflict breeds either haphazard creativity or hopeless confusion (Baudrillard 1993; Lungstrum and Sauer 1997:1-6; Lyotard 1984). I endeavor an anthropological intervention that views the unity of *agôn* as inadequate, and that expands this unity to include three other ineluctable human forces: *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*. By thus situating agonistics in the play-ritual sphere, I incorporate the agonal impulse into the micropolitics of self and social production. I view this as an open process where state and society, the personal and the national, the body and power clash, conflict, and converge.

In a more speculative spirit, I wish to suggest the possibilities for a pluralistic democracy from conjoining agonism and mimesis, particularly by building upon Michael Taussig’s reading of Walter Benjamin on the modern resurgence of the

mimetic faculty, or the capacity to become the other (see also Benjamin 1979; Taussig 1993b). “Tactile knowing,” explains Taussig, once the patriarchal preserve of ritual masters, is restored by mimetic machinery and “encased within the spectrality of a commoditized world.” “Contact-sensuousity” thus circulates through the commodity loop and at once defetishizes and reenchants, generating “mimetic excess” that denaturalizes borders between self and other (Taussig 1993b:19-32). As we will see, the spellbinding sensuousity of mahjong mimesis mimics commodity spectrality in “staging” “second nature,” thereby conditioning reflexive awareness that “natural” boundaries are a historicized artifice (1993b:233, 255).¹⁸³

Whereas the mimetic merging of subject into object realizes for G.W.F. Hegel “pure self-identity” and for Caillois the surrender of self to similitude, Benjamin maintains the unsurpassable negativity of the commodity, so that “mimetic immersion in the concreteness of otherness can only teeter on the edge of stable knowledge” (1993b:37; see also Caillois 1984). As Taussig points out, Julia Kristeva, for whom the fundamental mimetic moment is the child’s body dissolving into the mother’s, affirms instead the gendered negativity of patriarchy (Taussig 1993b:36-37), which I view as encompassing the commodity form and, as I aim to show, instantiates agonistically at the core of mahjong mimesis.¹⁸⁴ Animated by a self-refuting patriarchal negativity, mimetic excess entails “restlessness,” “perpetual contradiction,” and “unstoppable metamorphic reproduction” (1993b:36-37), and therefore constitutes a core condition for a democratic politics of agonistic pluralism as envisioned by Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe 1995). Mouffe maintains that the other is not an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary with whose ideas we struggle and who has

¹⁸³ For an incisive analysis of reification, mimesis, and second nature in critical theory, see (Vogel 1996). These are of course central themes in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993).

¹⁸⁴ As Michael Taussig explains, Julia Kriteva develops a mimetic notion of the “semiotic chora,” which is a “pulsational force of bodily drives invested in but developing before the acquisition of language per se, before syntax and the sign proper, but essential to their functioning” (Taussig 1993b:36).

the right to defend those ideas (1995:120). If for Mouffe the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism, the mimetic impulse to “copy” and “connect with” (Taussig 1993b:21) the other generalizes a pathos that I call “sympathetic agonism,” a revitalizing oxymoron which suggests sensuous adaptation to situations of conflict and posits porous boundaries and a political public reinvigorated by the social body. My analysis reveals how mahjong mimesis is a powerful reproductive mechanism of sympathetic agonism in Taiwan, and I conclude by offering instances of gender boundaries being blurred and official policies that point toward a plural democratic *agôn*.

Agôn and Alea in Taiwanese Democracy

During the initial post-war decades in Taiwan, the exiled Nationalist government (KMT) channeled the alarm of China’s looming military threat into a “spirit of conflict,” which became the island’s officially mandated esprit de corps. Martial law remained in effect from 1949 to 1987. High-school politics and civics classes revolved around anti-communist patriotism, and military training anchored the core curriculum. While single-minded political mobilization has subsided in post-authoritarian Taiwan, the spirit of conflict persists unabated. Currently, China has deployed along its coast 496 ballistic missiles within 600 kilometers of Taiwan and aimed at the island, and Taiwan’s political leaders do not permit the people to forget the imminent threat to their freedom and their lives lying ominously across the Taiwan Strait. Elaborate live-fire war games staging mock invasions by Chinese forces are an annual event, as are island-wide emergency air raid drills that clear the streets. Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) President Chen Shui-bian recently likened the fear that 23 million Taiwanese live with every day to the 13 alarming days faced by the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 (Text 2003). And each stride Taiwan takes along a perceived path to national independence invites

retaliatory threats from China admonishing the Taiwanese people that their leaders have pushed the island one step closer to the “abyss of war.”¹⁸⁵

Although during the initial decades of its rule the KMT consolidated power with a tight authoritarian fist, the spirit of conflict from the outset has been ideologically couched within a principle of democracy. Only gradually, not to say agonistically, has the spirit of conflict transformed Taiwanese democracy from pure propaganda into procedural and cultural reality.¹⁸⁶ It is interesting how both *agôn* and *alea* have figured in Taiwanese democracy, which is a continental legacy of Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People (*Sanmin zhuyi*). For Sun, true freedom is an exclusive prerogative of the state, which acts as an arena of contestation where a “naturally endowed” “moral-intellectual-political elite” must “demonstrate... [its] ability to move the nation” (Strand 1997:345). Sun insists on “party contestation” (*dang zheng*), which is vital in order to “avoid the deterioration of government, to make the government stable, and to effect progress” (Metzger 1992:19). In Taiwan, the ban on opposition parties only ended in 1986, but party politics has swiftly bloomed into a uniquely theatrical *agôn*, with passionate partisan disputes being the norm and fist-to-cuff flare-ups on assembly floors far from unusual. Although political leaders today are constrained by a constitution that institutionally diminishes conflict, an agonal flame still sparks Taiwanese political action, shedding retrospective light on Sun’s conviction that “when the state can act freely, China will be a strong, flourishing nation” (1992:16).

But Sun sharply distinguishes agonistic politics from social life, where he is obsessed with order and unity--with “bonding together” (1992:16). If the state is to

¹⁸⁵ This threat was most recently issued by China when Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian announced, about four months prior to the March 2004 presidential election, that a “defensive referendum” on China’s military threat would be held simultaneously on election day (Kahn 2003).

¹⁸⁶ Highlights of Taiwan’s democratic achievements include the lifting of martial law, the removal of the ban on opposition political parties, freedom of the press, the complete re-election of the legislature, and the direct election of the president.

obtain “complete freedom,” emphasizes Sun, individuals “cannot be too free” (1992:16). Sun famously describes Chinese society as a “sheet [or plate] of loose sand” (yipian [pan] sansha) in need of solidification (Strand 1997:329-330). He explains the need to subordinate individual freedom to a national body using a sand-rock metaphor:

...if one compares sand and rock, rock is basically something formed from sand. But once inside the solid body of rock, sand cannot move. It has lost its freedom. One way of thinking about freedom, simply put, is that freedom is the ability to move about within a [larger] body. (Strand 1997:330)

To fetter freedom, Sun declares self-abnegation a virtue, calling for individuals to eliminate all thoughts, habits, and actions not in accordance with compassion for others (*ren*) and correct principles (*yi*). Two factors collude to ensure this ascetic ethic: moral revolutionary zeal and psychological characteristics. Sun believes that individual freedom is ultimately limited by a “universally rational need to act on objectively correct principles” (Metzger 1992:13)—a modern scientific repackaging of a deep-rooted Confucian ethos still at home in the Taiwanese habitus today. By linking the negation of individual will to a universally rational need to act according to principles, Sun sidesteps a Nietzschean agonal affirmation of rank and appeals to *alea* to foster a more fatalistic apprehension of hierarchy as inherent in the nature of things.

The Martial Agôn

The cross-purpose of Taiwan’s “spirit of conflict” and “aesthetics of domination” (Strand 1997:345) is legitimately transcended only for men, owing to the martial *agôn*. All men between the ages of eighteen and forty must serve twenty-four months of full-time compulsory military service, which is the main productive force of

a martial *agôn* and drives a wedge between male and female culture.¹⁸⁷ Sociologist Chen Cheng-Liang demonstrates how the disciplined and combative drilling of military training fragments individual bodies and reconstructs them through a unified body-power-knowledge matrix, producing a corporally internalized masculine totality, of which an imaginary female body is invoked as the other (Chen Cheng-Liang 2002). From indecorous marching jingles that denigrate women to requisite brothel, hostess club, and strip bar outings that demean them, female alterity is a defining attribute of the martial *agôn* and goes far to explain the persistence of all-male mahjong matches as a widespread social phenomenon. Moreover, by implicitly teaching men that their “home” is both inside and outside the normative order, the martial *agôn* bestows upon them the power of a transcendent perspective that assimilates military training’s contradictory pedagogy, namely, to be agonally assertive and discerningly defiant while also surrendering to an orderly, unified, and homogenous male totality.¹⁸⁸

Military training as a rite-of-passage to manhood receives widespread social recognition, as is evident in the colloquial usage of the term “*bingbian*,” which means “mutiny,” but here carries a literal connotation—“military transformation.” It is common knowledge to most Taiwanese, including women and uninitiated boys, that *bingbian* refers to three momentous lifecycle changes expected of the soldier: he should break with his girlfriend and family (*ganqing shenghuo*; this is most widely understood), concentrate on developing professional knowledge and skills (*zhuan ye zhishi*), and actively cultivate extra-familial and extra-scholastic social relationships (*shejiao guanxi*). This prescription for manhood, which one uninitiated teenager anxiously described to me as the “dark underside” (*hei’an mian*) of military training, reinforces how an embodied martial *agôn* insinuates itself at the core of a masculine

¹⁸⁷ The duration of compulsory military service has recently been reduced; see below.

¹⁸⁸ My argument here about the power of a transcendent perspective from moving between two different “orders” derives from Alfred Gell’s analysis of temporality and transcendence; see (Gell 1992:275-285).

counterpublic grounded in the exclusion of women and affirmed by the patriarchal political community. I call the martial *agôn* a “counterpublic” because its male centered double-standard at once permeates civic culture and flouts the egalitarian democratic ideals on which political leaders stake the island’s claim to national self-determination. Given its frictional position vis-à-vis the rational-normative public, the martial *agôn* is animated by a salient “poetic-expressive character” (Warner 2002:120) with the same consciousness-raising effect of subaltern counterpublics. However, the tense interpenetration of the martial counterpublic and the dominant public inserts at the center while also generalizing a performative modality of sociopolitical conflict that moves away from stigmatized antagonism and toward sympathetic agonism.¹⁸⁹

Mahjong Mimesis, Rhythmic Intoxication, and the Martial Imaginary

It is arguably a small step from Sun Yat-sen’s appeal to *alea* to the vibrant and diverse culture of gambling in Taiwan, which, in different ways, permeates nearly aspects of social, economic, and political life. I detailed in chapter 5 how, from the outset of its rule on Taiwan, the KMT has exploited gambling in order to appropriate the spiritual forces at play in the Chinese culture of fate as the “mystical foundations” (Taussig 1993a:217) for reimagining the nation. From the Patriotic Lottery and “fortunational capitalism” to the new Public Welfare Lotto, I argued that this modern history of official exploitation of *alea* has gone far to ensure that, in Taiwan, to gamble is to merge in your imagination the personal and the national. And, furthermore, that a crucial mediation in this aleatory convergence has been the gender

¹⁸⁹ Here I build on Michael Warner’s concept of “counterpublics” (Warner 2002:56-63, 119-124). For Warner, counterpublics are chiefly the preserve of subaltern groups defined by their subordinate status. I am arguing that heteronormative men also form their identities within a counterpublic, one which frictionally overlaps with the dominant public. The significance of this frictional overlap is that it constitutes within mainstream public culture a modality of social and political conflict, specifically away from stigmatized antagonism and toward sympathetic agonism, thereby leading toward the blunting of hierarchical boundaries and the revaluation of statuses. I elaborate further on this point in my conclusion.

system, with no form of gambling surpassing mahjong in the production of masculine values.

Games of chance everywhere, as the work of Caillois, Huizinga, and most recently Jackson Lears makes plain, have been closely associated with divination, which, as Lears puts it, is “an attempt to conjure mana—to discern fate and also, perhaps, to alter it” (Lears 2003:11). When I queried my friends about the ratio of skill to luck in mahjong, they responded, almost without exception, that mahjong is twenty-percent skill and eighty-percent luck. Indeed, I have seen this precise proportion also stated in more than one mahjong manual. That mahjong is believed to hinge so heavily on luck allows game outcomes to reveal the sacred favor of fate. Moreover, *alea* becomes the ultimate obstacle and expands the conflict from among competitors to between players and luck, explaining why mahjong involves as much coordination as contestation. Coordination in mahjong entails the regulated improvisation of a rhythmic game flow, which adheres in the concerted production of the game’s click-clacking refrain, a synchronized effort that I only gradually came to realize was mimetic of formatively embodied military drilling techniques.

I often engaged my friends on the topic of military training, and they delighted in recalling boot-camp episodes as well as extracurricular activities, of which mahjong matches were a highlight. One day, I solicited a few friends’ views on the anti-conscription sentiments bubbling in Taiwan, assuming the voice of a critic discontent about sacrificing two-years of his life. When I blurted the Song dynasty anti-martial phrase that has become the mantra of the anti-conscription movement—“a good piece of metal does not become nails and a good man does not become a soldier” (*hao tie bu da ding, hao nan bu dang bing*)--Little Big became instantly irritated. “Let me tell you something,” he snapped, winding himself up, “those two years were the best two years of my life. These kids today who wiggle out of military training or wiggle into

substitute service are soft. They could never defend our country and they're symptomatic of what's wrong with Taiwanese society."

Little Big had served with a maintenance unit in the remote interior of the island, and spent a stint holed up in the mountains. One day he described how he played mahjong with fellow soldiers every night by a fire, on which they brewed a replenishing herbal soup—the same soup that was part of our mahjong routine twenty-years later. Only then did I begin to comprehend mahjong as a kind of “materials memory” (Terdiman 1993:35) into which had migrated a male regime of formative military experiences.

Nicknamed “the war of the square table” (*fangcheng zhi zhan*), mahjong is shot through with a martial idiom. Most prominent is the discourse on offensive versus defensive strategies (*caigong* versus *caishou*), and mahjong manuals invariably cite from Sunzi's classic treatise, *The Art of War in China*. Significantly, fate and luck also mediate the martial. Summarizing Huizinga on war and play, Lears writes, “since archaic times war has preserved the element of play; it has been the ultimate game, the ultimate opportunity for men to match wits against dark fate” (Lears 2003:143). Francois Jullien, a philosopher of Chinese culture, recently commented, with reference to Sunzi, that “warfare has often seemed the domain of the unpredictable and of chance (or fatality) *par excellence*” (Jullien 1995:25). One mahjong manual explains the classic martial strategy of “eighty percent offense, twenty percent defense” as follows: “Observe carefully game situation and poise to seize game forces, never give up too soon or blindly attack, and use defense to mount offense and to ensure that your luck (*paiyun*) doesn't flag” (Lin Xinghui 1995:30-31).

This metaphor of the martial is metonymized in the body through military drilling techniques. All soldiers receive core training in bayonet fighting, which drills modes of attack and defense. Soldiers assemble in a “square” formation and four sounds alternate and repeat to form a refrain that organizes the men into a unified and

coherent whole: 1) the instructor's "thrust" and "retract" commands, 2) the soldier's "kill" scream (*sha*), which also disrupts the enemy's psychological balance, 3) the synchronized stamping of soldiers' footsteps—and bells are often affixed to their boots, 4) and the sharp click-clacking of the rifle's empty bullet cartridge rhythmically knocking against the metal gun-belt-buckle with each thrust and retraction of the bayonet (Chen Cheng-Liang 2002:10-15). A soldier recorded the following sentiments in an unpublished memoir: "I see the same body forms, the same pace, the same gun playing. It's so touching. There is beauty and majesty. I can't control my emotions. My eyes are almost watering. I want to cheer....[I was] called into the military to become a part of it....[I am] transformed" (2002:1-2). The martial refrain merges discipline and aesthetics, conditioning young men to experience beauty and majesty through coordination and unity and to release themselves to this officially orchestrated male totality.

In playing mahjong, men reenact a martial imaginary through the military rigor of mimesis in the skillful and concerted production of the game's sharp and repetitive click-clacking refrain. Proper imitation sonorously reanimates the ordered sense of beauty and majesty, which, as with the sentimentalized soldier, intoxicates and seizes players. By performing a sort of auscultation upon the game's reverberating refrain, men vertiginously release themselves to game flow, transporting both them and the game to a sacred second universe.¹⁹⁰

The ritual efficacy of mahjong thus entails an expressive, skillful, and fluid interplay between mimesis and the body that constitutes a mode of memory unusually powerful because it hinges on forgetting—the mimetic faculty being, as Michael Taussig puts it, "the nature that culture uses to create second nature" (Taussig

¹⁹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue that sounds, specifically repetitive ones like refrains, at once organize a space of home around a central point and entail a breakaway dimension that provides sensory access to the cosmos (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:308-313). See also Jane Bennett's sharp analysis of Deleuze and Guattari (Bennett 2001:166-168).

1993b:70). To be sure, there is much that Taiwanese men must forget in order to orchestrate a “pure space” in which to display idealized selves and to reveal the public secret that conceals the shared illusion on which their privileged fraternity depends. The public secret, unbeknownst to no one, is the martial imaginary, whose mimetic revelation conceals men’s unmasculine “non-recognition” of fate, the transcendent power they conjure up and accrue to themselves while agonistically masking their collective complicity in its estranged production.¹⁹¹

However, precisely because mahjong is not pure chance, not a cast of the dice, these imaginary aspects of the game unfold phenomenologically through a dialectic between the deployment of action and the submission to fate, between *agôn* and *alea*. We must therefore return to this level of the game in order to glimpse the dynamics of *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* in action.

Conjuring Fate and Battling Luck

Mahjong protocol is rife with taboos. From prohibitions on borrowing money and pre-game washing to patting a fellow player on the back, taboos suspend everyday rationality and recontextualize the game, placing men on an equal footing, regardless of their different class, ethnic, or occupational backgrounds outside the game context. Through observing pre-game taboos, men tarry with, but are careful not to taunt, the estranged forces of fate, which these preliminaries quietly conjure up. Any clumsy head-on confrontation with these dicey forces could, at best, douse everyone’s desire to play or, at worst, turn luck against you from the outset of the game.

Men play mahjong only if the people, place, and time are “right.” Among my friends, it is taboo to call enthusiastically for a match. You have to float the idea

¹⁹¹ I am describing a dialectic of power and reification or objectification akin to that employed by P. Steven Sangren; however, whereas for Sangren the alienating structure of this dialectic is central, I emphasize a process of disavowal, which entails denial with recognition or self awareness (see below) (Sangren 1991; Sangren 1998).

delicately. My friends might scratch an arm while flipping an eyebrow, or even utter achingly, “I’m feeling so itchy.” Moving to set up the table and chairs was trickier, as no one dared to take the initiative and risk tempting fate by showing alacrity. Arranging the table was premised on the common belief that ghosts lurk about in mahjong, which inflects the game as heterodox. Since mahjong is “heterodox” (*xiemen*), you always set up a mahjong table “obliquely” (*xiezhe de*), and never parallel to, surrounding walls. The pronunciation of the two different ideographs meaning “oblique” and “heterodox” is identical, so there is a chthonic play on homophones here. Once the table is up, the tiles are out, and seating is determined, all four players partake in the disciplined and coordinated swooshing of the tiles, vertiginously releasing themselves into the game’s crisp click-clacking refrain, which reverberates sharply like a repeating automatic rifle, penetrating the body both aurally and corporally through the hands. It is taboo to play mahjong amidst noise that drowns out the game’s click-clacking refrain, whose kinetic rhythm carries the fateful forces conjured up through pre-game taboos.

As a Taiwanese friend instructed me, to pursue divination is necessarily to accept or recognize a preordained fate (*renming*). Anthropological studies argue that the efficacy of fate in proffering divine intimations entails an “abeyance of agency,” to adopt the term that Hirokazu Miyazaki develops in a different ritual context (see also Hatfield 2002; Miyazaki 2000). In Taiwan, men are keenly concerned about their fates, but tend to eschew conventional forms of divination, such as casting blocks and drawing fortune slips, where conviction requires that agency be ceded to an external force.¹⁹² This point is illustrated by an episode of one friend of mine, Quick, an avid mahjong aficionado who played a prohibitively high-stakes all-night match once a

¹⁹² It has often been noted by scholars of Taiwanese religion that “by far the majority of individual worshippers...are women” (Sangren 2000:156). While Taiwanese men are indeed religious and especially fatalistic, the dearth of men in daily temple worship activities, such as divination, has somehow escaped sustained scholarly explanation.

week. Quick's sister, who desired to be apprised of her fate on an upcoming civil service examination, asked him for a lift to meet with a renowned fortune teller at a small temple in a remote part of Taipei County. According to Quick, during the drive his sister became obsessed with persuading him also to meet with the soothsayer, even though he was dead set against it. Eventually, in order not to jinx his sister, he acquiesced, figuring at least he might receive a forecast on his construction business. Much to Quick's dismay, the fortune teller divined that he would soon meet a woman with whom he would have an amorous affair. Because of his family situation at the time, this news was profoundly disturbing to him—an illness had resulted in his wife's hysterectomy and they had just adopted his older brother's newborn baby boy. When I met up with Quick the day after his meeting with the medium, he was visibly flustered by his fate and even angrier with himself for submitting to the divination. "I never do that sort of thing," he insisted, slamming his hand hard on the steering wheel of his SUV in anguish. "I don't know how I let it happen to me this time," he added, registering distress at his lapse of self-control.

Taiwanese men are socially conditioned to be in control and assertive, to shun mystery in favor of mastery. This patriarchal lesson is reinforced by the progressive imperative of the modern nation, and formally drilled in military training. Consequently, men prefer to divine fate through mahjong, where they "forget" to suspend agency and muster strategy, skill, and expressive style to finagle "luck" (*shouqi* or *yunqi*), which becomes, as mentioned, each player's ultimate object of contestation. Luck is the fickle and reversible flip-side of the Chinese conception of fate (*mingyun*), and manifests in mahjong through game flow or propensity (*paishi*), which men collectively constitute through the rhythmic refrain.¹⁹³ Mahjong is thus a

¹⁹³ Donald J. Hatfield offers an analysis of the temporal distinction between *ming* and *yun*, though he never translates *yun* as "luck" and instead refers to *ming* and *yun* as "two types of fate" (Hatfield 2002:868). Whereas I emphasize the different modes of agency entailed in producing these subtly interrelated categories, Hatfield adopts a formalistic approach, suggesting that the interplay of these two categories constitutes "a correlative logic that literally cofashions the self with the other" (2002:868).

distinctively male mode of ritual divination that simultaneously suspends agency and disavows the abeyance of agency.

Agonal strategies by which men suspend the abeyance of agency and risk engaging luck as their mutable adversary are many, and here I name but a few. When one player is very hot, another player might make a “malicious *peng*” (*e’peng*) to block the flow of luck to that player. A *peng* is a call for a tile discarded by another player that completes a three-of-a-kind set, and the flow of turns then jumps directly to the player exercising the *peng*, a disruption of game propensity deemed potentially momentous in harnessing game flow for that player.¹⁹⁴ Because a winning hand requires one two-of-a-kind set, however, it is often strategically wise to pass on a *peng* opportunity in building one’s hand. A malicious *peng* is therefore an assault on another player at the immediate expense of the initiating player’s own hand for the purpose of disrupting, and even better capturing, the hot player’s game flow (*zuzhi wangjia de qishi*).

A player down on his luck might opt to “insert a flower” (*cha-hua*) on himself, which means to double his own ante for that hand. The other players are called upon to alter strategy, lest they risk discarding that player’s winning tile and paying out double value. Alternatively, an unlucky player might exercise “surveillance” (*kan-pai* or *yan-pai*), the most aggressive mahjong strategy. When a player needs only one tile to win, he can freeze his hand and stake a point in order to walk around the table to inspect other players from behind. The objective is to flout game flow and disorient game play, compelling others to adopt a defensive strategy.¹⁹⁵ In both instances, if the

My treatment of fate thus builds more on a Marxist analysis of ideology, along the lines developed by Sangren in his study of fate in Chinese myth and ritual (Sangren 1998). For an interesting analysis of fate in Chinese folk ideology from the perspective of class, see Stevan Harrell (Harrell 1987). Both Sangren and Harrell distinguish between *ming* and *yun* and translate the latter as “luck.”

¹⁹⁴ There is only a jump in turns and therefore a disruption of game flow when a player calls to *peng* a tile discarded by either the player to his immediate right or the player across from him. The game flows counter-clockwise, so if a player calls to *peng* the tile discarded by the player to his immediate left, there is no disruption of game flow.

¹⁹⁵ If the player exercising surveillance should win, he also earns an extra point.

player exercising the assertive strategy should win, he will have captured firm command of game propensity; if he should lose, his hope for a reversal of fortune might be irretrievably lost.

Expressive style represents another form of agonal agency in mahjong. Men slam tiles, slap rulers, and hurl ugly invectives. The three-character expletive, “f... your mother,” is *de rigueur* in mahjong and unambiguously marks male territory and marginalizes women in manifold social milieu. For example, this curse--euphemistically referred to by the media as “The Three-Character Classic” (*San zi jing*), a Confucian primer for children—is so often heard in legislative meetings that a law was recently passed in Tainan to fine and demote any legislator uttering it (Shijie ribao 2003a). In mahjong, stylized masculine flourishes are intended to subdue game forces and bring them within one’s control.

Opening a Public Space of Sympathetic Agonism

Since the early Republican period (1920s), as historian Robert Culp has recently argued, the Nationalist government has used military training to instill fundamental patterns of masculine citizenship that implicitly marginalize women, excluding them from important spheres of civic culture (Culp 2003). Through mimesis, the “war of the square table” reactivates a martial imaginary and reinforces idealized patterns of masculine citizenship each time men coordinate in the swooshing of tiles and collectively release themselves to the staccato refrain.

The male mode of divining fate in mahjong assimilates the temporal ambiguity of nationalist ideology, which demands that men at once make history and forget it, so that what fills the void are timeless images of national authenticity. The bodiedness of mahjong mimesis allows men to disremember their collective “non-recognition” of fate by invoking the martial imaginary, which then dons the mask of fate’s preordained and timeless sacrality. The mask also preserves a key patriarchal conceit

of nationalist pedagogy, which teaches men that “reality” is defined in the last instance not by fixed hierarchies of class, ethnicity, occupation, or financial success, but rather by how well present contingencies are embedded in shared memories of a male totality deemed eternal and whole.

But mahjong mimesis is not bound by national military training. It also invokes the mythologized world of rivers and lakes (*jianghu*), of lawless rebels and bandits who band together in the name of righteousness and cultivate secret martial skills encoded with occult meanings. This venerable Chinese knight-errant tradition espouses the ideals of altruism, loyalty, courage, and honor (Liu 1967), and develops from the native civil-martial (*wen-wu*) dyad (Louie and Edwards 1994). While unmistakably masculine in appearance and essence, the romantic world of rivers and lakes is not closed to women who master its lofty values and martial skills. This fugitive martial imaginary has long maintained an ambiguous relationship to official authority. During the Republican period, as historian Andrew Morris has recently shown, the KMT strived to co-opt it by nationalizing and modernizing the martial arts (Morris 2004:chapter 7). In Taiwan, however, it remains a vibrant and feral force in popular culture, consumed in retro and nouveau genres of martial arts novels, films, and television dramas. Consequently, when men reenact the martial imaginary through playing mahjong, the political constellation of meanings crystallized behind the sacred mask of fate is open and contested. What is unambiguous, however, is that the ritual mode of divining that fate is a masculine mode of exercising agency.

Significantly, the masculine mode of mahjong mimesis not only creates second nature but also “stages” it, so that the reification or forgetting of fate is accompanied by a degree of self awareness. Mahjong mimesis thus entails a disavowal in which the tense and unstable space between denial and recognition is generative of mimetic excess, a restless force taken up in the pathos of sympathetic agonism and put on in

transgressive imitations.¹⁹⁶ For example, two female friends took me to a place where they promised I would find masculinity prominently on display: a lesbian bar. Taiwanese refer to lesbian bars as “T-bars,” with the “T” standing for tomboy.¹⁹⁷ As we took a table in the downtown club, we were joined by three clean-cut young hosts with short hair and neatly dressed in crisply pressed shirt, tie, and slacks. Shortly after we sat down, a tall and professionally attired woman with long hair and a leather briefcase entered and seated herself at an empty table in a dark corner, and a host hurried over and joined her. From a quick survey of the dozen or so tables clamoring with hosts and female guests, one could easily assume that this was the conventional hostess club world turned topsy-turvy—instead of female hostesses facilitating fun among male guests, in a T-bar male hosts did the same among female guests.

Even though I knew that a T-bar was no straight inversion of hetero-hostess clubs, I was nonetheless disoriented when I observed the sharp incongruence between the overstated macho manner of our hosts’ gesticulations and their thin wrists, small hands, and smooth skin. Recalling like a flash the image on the conspicuous advertisement by the club entrance—a woman ripping open her shirt and bearing a flat chest bound tightly by a breast girdle—I felt compelled to query gratuitously one of my friends, “Are our hosts....” She responded before I could complete my question, “Right. They are female.” After our drinks arrived, the host sitting beside me struck up a conversation. Against the backdrop of her petite frame, the masculinity she fluently exuded was eye catching, and I became self-conscious of my own presentation. Upon learning that I had been scuba diving all around Taiwan, she insisted that I accompany her and a group of friends as a guide on their planned

¹⁹⁶ I earlier referred to this as the disavowal of the abeyance of agency. In psychoanalysis, disavowal is defined as denial with recognition; see (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973:118-20).

¹⁹⁷ As Scott Simon explains: “Although the categories are fluid and some women do not make the distinction, Taiwanese lesbians usually make a social distinction between masculine ‘T’s’ (short for ‘tomboy’) and feminine ‘*po*’s’ (a Chinese word for ‘woman’). These categories are only superficially similar to the ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ lesbians of North America” (Simon 2003:86-87).

snorkeling trip to the southern coast. When I told her I played mahjong, a feisty grin instantly formed on her face and, biting her bottom lip as if ready for battle, she swooshed her arms a few times and then told me that there was a table in the back room and that I should come by during the daytime and play with them. After squaring off at few rounds of the Taiwanese finger-guessing drinking game, she pulled a name card from her pocket and asked me to keep in touch with her.

The right hand and wrist of the host sitting across from me was wrapped in a thick bandage, so I asked her what happened. In a scruffy voice, she relayed how she sliced her hand breaking up a fight between two girls in which one smashed a beer bottle over the head of the other. She explained further that on weekends things get really rowdy. After a while, everyone in the club was on the dance floor twisting and jumping to loud and powerfully thumping music. Before I realized it, I was sweating and being body slammed on all sides by roughhousing hosts. As my braced chest collided indiscriminately with the bound breasts of one T after another, I experienced a vertiginous rush of energy that seemed to exceed the physical confines of my body and merge with a heteroglossic field of restless forces that in turn seized and intoxicated me. In retrospect, I realized that the visceral intensity of body slamming merely dramatized the mimetic impulse in the T-bar scene to become the other to the point of becoming one, thereby erasing physical distinctions and dissolving the material basis of a masculine essence. T-bar mimesis thus upstaged the second nature of gender antagonism through the performance of sympathetic agonism, a polymorphous force that passed promiscuously through an androgynous body of bodies and that I found exhilarating and liberating.

The pathos of sympathetic agonism is also prominent in mainstream society, including places proximal to power. Women are making inroads in the male-dominated political realm, and one of Taiwan's most boldly confrontational politicians since the DPP defeated the KMT in 2000 has been female Vice President Lu Hsiu-lian

(Annette Lu). Currently, women constitute 15 percent of Taiwan's powerful Legislative Yuan, and they do better than hold their own in the fiercely agonistic disputes that are the operational norm of this government branch (Ko Shu-ling 2003).¹⁹⁸ Neither do female legislators relent when verbal disputation degenerates into physical confrontation. In one assembly meeting during my fieldwork, two legislators, a man and a woman, clashed in an intensely acrimonious dispute that culminated in the male legislator traversing the assembly floor and delivering a blow that grazed the woman's head as she motioned to meet him with a glass of water to the face—a scene replayed for days on national television. Talented women are also opting for agonism by entering the staunchly male world of national defense. In 2003, several girls who earned top scores on the college entrance examination received national media attention when they passed up coveted opportunities to study at prestigious civilian universities and applied instead for only two slots allocated for women in the Law Department at the National Defense Management College (Hsu 2003a). The gender blindness of sympathetic agonism was also apparent when, at the 2003 World Book and Copyright Day ceremony, First Lady Wu Shu-zhen, permanently handicapped in a politically suspicious hit-and-run car accident, specially recommended *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the fourteenth-century classic saga of war and rivalry set in the second century that remains Chinese culture's handbook of brotherhood and heroism (Shijie ribao 2003b).¹⁹⁹ It is my contention that mahjong

¹⁹⁸ Taiwan's female legislators (including senior officials and managers) make up fifteen percent of the total, which ranks Taiwan sixty-third in the world. Taiwan has adopted a quota system constitutionally guaranteeing that the number of women to be elected, and the methods pertaining thereto, shall be fixed and prescribed by law (Wang Yeh-lih 2003).

¹⁹⁹ In 1995, UNESCO designated April 23 "World Book and Copyright Day." April 23 is the date on which William Shakespeare's birthday is commonly celebrated.

mimesis plays a key role in internalizing and generalizing Taiwan's public culture pathos of sympathetic agonism, which affirms conflict, struggle, and contestation while denaturalizing boundaries between self and other and opening a public space for democratic progress.

Coda: A Pluralistic Public *Agôn*

Faced with the ever-looming China threat, Taiwan has embraced democracy as the basis of its claim for national self-determination. In the current post-authoritarian context of democratic urgency, a public *agôn* is increasingly affirmed by Taiwan's political leaders, and the island's civic culture is an unusually open arena of contestation. Democratic elections and party politics have resulted in social claims for human rights and ethnic and gender equality being heard and acted upon. For example, the Presidential Office and the Cabinet are about to approve legislation to end the death penalty and to recognize gay "marriages" and the right of homosexual couples to adopt children--firsts for the Asian world (Taipei Times 2003).²⁰⁰ Also, the Premier has launched an initiative to raise the ratio of women admitted into military academies (Chang Yun-Ping 2003), and the duration of compulsory military service required of men is being gradually shortened, down to 20 months beginning January 2004 (Hsu 2003a). As long as the "war of the square table" remains a vital part of Taiwanese life and people go on vertiginously releasing themselves to the game's staccato refrain, these agonistically fought-for changes, which point toward a pluralistic public *agôn*, stand to become quickly eternalized behind the sacred mask of fate. It seems to me that the poetics and politics of mahjong go far to explain the exceptional Taiwanese

²⁰⁰ Thus far, the legislation has avoided use of the word "marriage" (*jiehun*) and opted instead for a term that more broadly means to "form a family" (*chengjia*).

capacity to struggle for and embrace the new through a “game of living” that remains remarkably unchanged.

Conclusion: Intimacy, Ethnography, and Reflexivity

Drawing on fieldwork in urban Taipei, this dissertation examines questions and issues germane to men's culture, particularly the interconnections between gender, public culture, and the nation-state. Why are extra-kin homosocial relations so indispensable to so many men? Why do men work so hard at producing "pure spaces" of nonproductive, nonessential activities defined as such by their marked contrast with the everyday norms and values of work and home? Why does the capacity of these activities to create conditions of common sociality tend to reside in their degree of social disrepute? How and why is the shadowy class of sexualized public women integral to this male-centered public realm? And finally, how do we explain the fact that these penumbral zones of cultural intimacy are at once an embarrassment to the public persona of the modern nation-state and synecdochically constitutive of national and local identities? These questions have been of increasing concern to social scientists working in different areas across the globe, not least because they reaffirm the need for a critical anthropology no longer restricted to the exotic and the marginal (see Herzfeld 2005:91). Somewhat ironically, however, they continue to elude anthropologists in the Taiwan/China field, where the apprehension of public culture as a domain of intimacy and power has been occluded by the canonical preoccupation with the patriarchal family system.

Drawing on a body of critical political theory rooted in classic works by Hannah Arendt, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Friedrich Nietzsche, I have developed an empirically grounded formulation of public culture as an idealized arena of plurality and freedom where authenticity and purity are pursued and contested through individual acts of symbolic invention. Towards this end, I have remained ethnographically sensitive to the vision of *virtù* politics—of agonistic conflict as the basis of both self-realization and democratic political action—and so the accent of my

analysis has been on (often symbolic) dissonance, struggle, and resistance in the face of normative political and social forces. My main point of departure, however, has been to probe the often overlooked “off stage” pockets of public culture, where the verbal and gestural codes of cultural intimacy manifest as discreetly maintained secrets generated through the creative contravention and deformation of everyday norms. From the normative perspective, therefore, shadow zones of cultural intimacy are both the breeding grounds of manly vice and the basis of national and other local identities.

Most significantly, I have taken ethnographic pains to reconstruct the symbolic logic by which the social poetics of manly vice—that is, the subvention of the normative order—actually reforms and reinforces historically constructed points of articulation with the nation-state, the central legitimating authority in people’s lives. The logic of this social poetics hinges on a paradox: social poetics is a temporal process of social construction that affirms self-eternalizing values by disavowing the temporality of their production. This tactical act of forgetting enjoins social poetics and nation-state ideologies in their common pursuit of authenticity and purity. Or, to put it more precisely, social poetics mimic nation-state ideologies in the very process of deforming them by taking reification as an ineluctable aspect of social life (Herzfeld 2005:47). Consequently, the agonistic conflict of *virtù* politics, in the last instance, is a secular quest for the sacred aura of authenticity that plays out among the nation-state and its citizens through the strategic deployment of essentialisms.

Anthropology, it turns out, has developed a refined methodology for examining the temporal process of detemporalization, namely ritual analysis. I have adapted classic ritual analysis to accommodate the secular context of reification, wherein ideological representations of national authenticity turn up spectrally—recall Taiwanese Fortuna (which embodies men’s expropriated patrimony), the three idealized female figures (which embody images of national authenticity), and the

martial imaginary (which embodies memories of an officially orchestrated male totality). In each ritual instance, spatiotemporal displacement triggers nostalgic longing for authentic times and places, that is, for prelapsarian times and places unspoiled by the alienating structure of modern social life. As many scholars have found, and as empirical evidence from Taiwan affirms, gender stereotypes signify the locally efficacious binarisms—e.g., premodern/modern, pure/alienated--ideologically activated in the secular ritual process, and female gender is most often constructed as the ideal embodiment of timeless images of authenticity and purity. This empirical condition explains why the codes of cultural intimacy that I examine in this dissertation tend to be bifurcated along gendered lines, and also why my ethnographic subject position is from the inside of men's culture looking out.

From the perspective of gender studies, this dissertation breaks new ground by decentering the common assumption that marriage and family are most central to gender politics in Taiwanese/Chinese society. I have advanced the argument that the firmaments of power and order are built fundamentally on the *virtù* politics of the public realm, particularly on the poetic contraventions and deformations of the normative order that, paradoxically, establish the cagey codes of cultural intimacy for citizens and state alike. By shifting the analytical lens from the private to the public realm, I hope to obtain new critical purchase on the contemporary contours of the *historical* mechanisms by which the sexual division is *dehistoricized*. I also wish concomitantly to call attention to the fact that the axiomatic basis of any given system—such as the patriarchal family system--cannot be guaranteed within the confines of that system, but only by another one of greater power. Towards this end, I have argued that the “fifth cardinal relationship” of friendship constitutes the alternative system that affords men the power of a transcendent perspective over both systems as a whole, and that the concept of cultural intimacy is particularly well suited

for both comprehending and deconstructing the poetic practices and principles of male sociality.

If both power and meaning are therefore central to my approach to gender (see Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002:5-10), some might raise the charges of “recidivism” and “positivism” at my reconstructions of unequal gender structures and symbolisms, claiming that anthropology should partake actively only of analyses that might change the world for the better. But the analysis of cultural intimacy is necessarily intensely ethnographic, and ethnography cannot but be a poetic performance of contravention and deformation. To shed critical anthropological light on the shadow zones of cultural intimacy is therefore to partake of the process of their *rehistoricization*, and therefore also, as I most self-consciously seek to do in chapter 6, to recapture them within the historical dialectics of change and transformation of which the dynamics of cultural intimacy are an integral part. More pointedly still, the ethnography of cultural intimacy is a relentlessly bottom-up performative critique of the nation-state, whose prime interest in eternalizing itself as a reified abstraction continues to pose a challenge for the phenomenological performativity of some feminist criticism.

In a world ordered increasingly according to a global hierarchy of values, with “the West” emerging as the dominant external referent of embarrassing intimacies everywhere (see Herzfeld 2005:47), ethnographic performativity can sometimes smack of conceit without a degree of critical reflexivity. And here cultural intimacy can make a claim to be cutting edge, as its intensely empirical orientation demands embodied fieldwork participation and, as a corollary, ethnographic reflection, what I grasped in this dissertation through the concept of mimesis as both embodied imitation and the staging of second nature. In calling for reflexivity, I do not mean to deny “reality” or “objectivity” tout court, and to follow the hyper-postmodern impulse of invoking self-reference as a form of self-validation (see Salzman 2002). Throughout this dissertation, I have made every effort to validate my analysis by careful and

persistent reference to “external reality,” while simultaneously taking stock of my active participation in this “object,” defined and apprehended by no means entirely subjectively but at every turn perspectively.

I wish to conclude by undertaking a more experimentally reflexive ethnographic analysis, one that examines how the embodied fieldwork memory of cultural intimacy shaped my experience of a post-fieldwork American Anthropological Association (AAA) annual meeting. More specifically, I decontextualize the Taiwanese codes of cultural intimacy and redeploy them to decontextualize my experience of the 2002 AAA annual meetings in New Orleans. From this displaced ethnographic perspective, I reflect critically upon both the professional meetings and my fieldwork in Taiwan, thereby highlighting the limits of the nation-state to contain its codes of cultural intimacy while simultaneously performing a culturally intimate contravention of conference protocol that embraces fieldwork knowledge and experience. This reflexive reversal installs me, the ethnographer, front and center as a principal agent and object, thereby affording enhanced self-disclosure, while the displacement in turn minimizes the risk of subverting the agency of my Taiwanese informants. In addition, by thus undermining a sense of radical ethnographic relativism, this transnational reapplication in “the West” of Taiwanese cultural intimacy should also augment the social scientific significance of my analysis. And finally, through performing an encounter between the typically estranged private (fieldwork) and public (meetings) aspects of anthropological practice, my ethnography stands to bring about unintended professional and epistemological effects, ones that might profit from the reflexive ethnographic transparency increasingly demanded in the current age of “audit culture.”

Following fieldwork, I first began writing up my material on flower wine drinking, and proceeded to organize an AAA panel on the topic that I titled “Imbibing

Disreputable Pleasures.” I had never been to New Orleans, but I knew of the city’s French Quarter music, the Creole voodoo, and the casino gambling. A couple of weeks before the conference date, the thought of New Orleans’s proximity to the Gulf of Mexico had me itching to scuba dive, so I did some research on the spear fishing scene in New Orleans. I discovered the following book by freelance journalist Humberto Fontova: “The Helldiver’s Rodeo: A Deadly, Extreme, Scuba-Diving, Spear Fishing Adventure Amid the Offshore Oil-Platforms in the Murky Waters of the Gulf of Mexico” (Evans, 2001). The book so resonated with my own spear fishing adventures in Taiwan that I could not put it down. Fontova, himself a New Orleans spear fisherman, narrates the escapades of middle-aged, disco nostalgic members of different local spear fishing clubs—all ardent “rig divers”—who gather annually for a spear fishing “rodeo” to compete and party.²⁰¹ The crisscrossing steel beamed support structures of the roughly 3,800 oil platforms—or “rigs”—scattered throughout the outer continental shelf of the U.S. Gulf of Mexico constitute luxurious artificial reef systems that attract different breeds of giant game fish.²⁰² The Louisiana “helldivers,” infamous for their bravado and the object of much local environmentalist criticism, push the scuba diving depth limits to bag these fish, and death from entanglement, fierce currents, shark attack, and the bends are not uncommon among them.

By late November, as I learned, the Gulf seas are cold and rough, so there is limited dive boat activity. Moreover, in fall 2002, the Gulf was walloped consecutively by two major hurricanes in September (Isidore) and October (Lili), so in November the waters were still unusually turbid. I called several dive shops in New Orleans, but failed to find one still taking out divers. One shop, however, succeeded

²⁰¹ “Rig diver” is the local nomenclature for one who spear fishes below the oil platforms. “Rodeo” here refers to the ride on which a giant fish takes a spear fisherman who fails to make a “kill shot.”

²⁰² The so-called “oil platforms” are actually “oil and gas production platforms” that supply approximately 25% and 13% of the U.S. supply of natural gas and oil, respectively. The steel network of beams (called “jacket”) on which these platforms are erected can extend down more than 800 feet to the sea floor.

in locating a boat captain in Pascagoula, Mississippi, who was willing to go out, if conditions permitted. Although a two-hour drive east of New Orleans, I booked the dive for 7:00 a.m. on the last day of the conference, which meant I would play hooky at depth while colleagues attended Sunday morning panels. Booking the dive went far to rekindle my fieldwork persona, and I began to assume a silent conversation with my Taiwanese informant-friends, as though they had showed up and were coming along to New Orleans with me. In an unmistakably somatic register, I was also experiencing a recurrence of White Lighthouse stomach butterflies whenever I thought about my upcoming rig dive in an effort to make mental preparations. This physical and psychic reconnection with fieldwork also altered my orientation towards the AAA meetings. I now felt considerably less anxious about the reception of my paper and the panel, and much more optimistic and excited about the event as a whole. By immersing myself once again within an alternative system of meaning and identity, I was able to mitigate my apperception of the high professional stakes of the meetings while also strengthening my felt capacity to make the meetings a success.

The weather forecast for my Sunday dive turned out to be perfect. I departed from New Orleans at 4 a.m. in my rented red Pontiac Sunbird with spoiler. I savored the sensations—the feeling of freedom riding on an empty predawn Interstate 10 was at once intensified and focused by the anxieties of my imminent rig dive. I offset these anxieties now by reflecting back on the meetings, particularly my panel, which drew a respectably sizable audience. In addition to my own paper, three other panelists presented highly insightful papers on different aspects of hostess club culture in Taiwan and China. Feminist sociologist Hwang Shu-Ling offered a systematic class-sensitive analysis of hostess clubs in Taiwan, arguing that in all cases hostesses boost male dignity and inflate masculinity, thereby hurting wives and threatening family and marriage (Hwang Shu-Ling 2002). In the end, Hwang made a passionate plea, “if there are any feminists in the audience,” to empathize with her antipathy for

hostess clubs. Sociologist Shen Hsiu-Hua analyzed the “masculine type of Taiwanese capitalism” and male bonding in the hostess club activities of Taiwanese businessmen in south China. She argued that Taiwanese men’s commodification and sexualization of Chinese hostesses reinforces uneven power structures that are likely to intensify conflicts between Taiwanese and Chinese (Shen Hsiu-Hua 2002). Anthropologist Scott Simon described how heterosexual hostess clubs condition gay men in Taiwan—who are compelled to accompany colleagues to these clubs—to compartmentalize and commodify homosexuality. He argued that this conditioning enables gay men to keep heterosexual marriages, in effect keeping them in the closet and undermining global gay identity and universal gay rights as inalienable human rights (Simon 2002).

I thought to myself, while cruising along the dark Interstate, that each of these excellent scholars had crafted, from the perspective of anthropological protocol, a politically proper indictment of a normatively disreputable institution. But if hostess clubs are normatively disreputable, then are these indictments compelling performative critiques, especially when they expand the breadth of the institution’s normative ill repute? Are there tools for the critical anthropology of a seemingly ineradicable institution whose social efficacy and mode of production appear to be fortified by its capacity to generate criticism? As I pondered the hostess club puzzle, I passed a sign indicating that I was entering the swamplands of a bayou wildlife refuge, and within seconds a thick sheet of blinding dew blanketed my windshield. The wipers were entirely ineffectual, so I lowered my window and followed the broken white line. The zero visibility that nature enforced upon me for the next five miles made it immanently clear that I was now at a far spatiotemporal remove from downtown New Orleans, and especially from the crisp, clean, and clear clime of the academic conference.

Entering Mississippi was another exciting first for me, and I had already allowed certain sightings—such as a restaurant named “Jerry Lee’s”—and the oldies I

had tuned in on the radio to animate an exotic cultural imaginary of the deep south. I eventually passed through a low-keyed casino town called Biloxi and determined that I would stay there overnight, giving myself something to look forward to after my dive. Just outside Pascagoula, with the sky beginning to brighten, I came upon a Waffle House in Gautier and stopped for a light breakfast to settle my shaky pre-dive stomach. The central attraction inside the Waffle House was a large glitzy jukebox stocked with fifties' 45's, which were queued up and playing for a few 6:00 a.m. customers. My waitress was Jessica, a pretty young girl who was going about her business sleepily, as if somnambulating. With hair everywhere errantly escaping from a bun bursting through a crestless Waffle House baseball cap, she appeared to be at the tale end of the night shift. I asked her some questions about the menu and she followed up in a heavy southern drawl, "Ya ain't never been to a Waffle House before, have ya? Where ya from?" "New York," I told her, leaving out the upstate. "New York ain't for me. All those people there. No way. I ain't never been out of Gautier. Well, I've been to Jackson once. And those people think who they are. But I don't care who they are. How long ya in town?" "One day, for scuba diving. Think I'll stay over down the road in Biloxi," I replied. "Biloxi. I stay away from there. All the traffic and people. Nope, not me. I could never survive in New York." Impressed by her pluck, I countered, "Actually, I think you'd do just fine in New York."

Jessica disappeared into the kitchen with my order, reemerging several minutes later carrying my plate of eggs and hash browns. I immediately noticed that she had removed her cap and untied her hair, which was now freshly combed and flowing thickly down well below her waist. She delivered my plate, and in the same motion turned away with a snap while asking, "Coffee?," so that when I looked towards her to affirm I was lightly brushed by her long wafting hair. As I took in my eggs and the fifties tunes, my mind jumped from Jessica to Taiwan's betel-nut beauties. I recalled those early morning pre-dive interludes at our favorite roadside betel nut stand in

Keelung. The stomach butterflies I experienced then and was experiencing now connected me somatically with those memories. What was it that gave gravitas to those otherwise facetious sexualized exchanges? What compelled us to make the betel nut beauty the fleeting embodied object of our desires and perhaps our pre-dive apprehensions as well? I wondered, especially given the caveat on criticism I took away from my AAA panel, how I might find a way to go deeper critically into the betel-nut beauty phenomenon, to grasp the wider social and political-economic conditions of desire and alienation in order better to unpack abstractions like commodification, sexualization, and masculinity. I asked myself if within these encompassing conditions I might discover some fundamental connection between my own stomach butterflies, sexualized women, and the compulsion that drove me to take on the unpredictable natural forces of the sea.

When I arrived at the dock, Captain Jack was on the boat with his crew of two—Skipper Henry and Dive-Master-in-Training Sammy. I was the only guest diver. As I assembled my gear, Captain Jack eased the boat out of the launch area and chugged along slowly. After a few minutes, I noticed that all three crew members were impatiently watching me tinker with my gear. Captain Jack finally yelled over, “Let me know when you’re set so I can blow this thing out or we’ll never get there.” I quickly locked down my tank to the boat and apologized. Captain Jack turned forward and floored the throttle. Within a few seconds we were skimming off waves. Once cruising in the open sea, I went to the helm to chat with Captain Jack. We were heading for “Shark Rig,” which was 50 miles out. The Mississippi River muddied the waters within tens of miles of its mouth, so the further out the better the visibility. Captain Jack, Sammy, and I would dive while Henry watched the boat.

Captain Jack would be spear fishing, and spent as much time preening his long woody gun as navigating the boat. He was also excited to be trying out a brand new dry suit, which signaled to me that I would be cold in my 3 millimeter wet suit. I

guessed Captain Jack to be near 60 years old, given his weathered face and gray hair, and was taken aback when he told me he was 45. Sammy was a young Mexican who had been in the U.S. for less than two months. He spoke little English, but Captain Jack wanted to make a Dive Master out of him. Whenever I looked at Sammy he smiled affably. Henry was a shrimper, and Captain Jack explained that a shrimper labors hard hauling in nets during the short harvest season and then recovers for the remainder of the year. Captain Jack asked Henry to lift his shirt for me and he did so, revealing a tennis-ball-sized hernia protruding from his pot belly. Henry never uttered a word or changed his facial expression; he just attended to his Budweisers. After meeting this cast of characters I asked myself, as I had done so many times during fieldwork, “what am I doing here?” But I asked this question, both then and now, not because I felt out of place among these Gulf Coast Everymen—my blue-collar family background has fated me only ever to feel unselfconsciously at home when among “regular guys.” Indeed, I had asked myself the very same question while walking past the clusters of academic cliques lining the AAA conference halls, but there class might have incited my reflexive impulse to query. On the dive boat, we were putting our biological lives in each other’s hands. As fieldwork painstakingly impressed upon me, this condition demands a collective commitment to mutual trust and therefore necessarily to the sharing of certain “secrets.” I had learned that the only way to make this commitment was to surrender myself fully to the circumstances, and a moment of doubt never fails to appear when on the brink of this precipice.

When the imposing Shark Rig came into view, a psychosomatic anxiety seized me just as it did when I caught a glimpse of the giant cargo ships my buddies and I dove beneath at White Lighthouse. Part of me was also awed at the thought of the transnational impact of these oil platforms on modern political, economic, and military development. Why was it that middle-aged Everymen of the East and West desired to take the risk of hunting amidst these icons of global modernity? A long supply ship

was anchored alongside the platform, so Captain Jack suggested we check out another rig 30 miles further out; though he had never been there, he had heard they were getting big fish there. I affirmed his motion and off we sped.

As we pulled up to the eerily isolated new rig—in all directions only the horizon was visible—Captain Jack delivered instructions: “We’ll go down along the front beam. It might be murky for the first 60 to 80 feet, but things should clear up below that. If the current’s strong, duck behind a beam to hold your position. If you see an open pipe, stay far away from it—those are vacuum pipes. Don’t touch any dangling wires. And whatever you do, stay inside the structure. Outside the structure, it’s nothing but blue and you could get swept a mile away in seconds without knowing it.” I asked how deep to the bottom, and Captain Jack replied that it was below 200 feet and that I should not plan on reaching it.

We quickly geared up and jumped in. I followed Captain Jack down, keeping a firm grip on his dangling octopus hose, for I could see nothing, not even Captain Jack. Visibility was literally zero until about 110 feet, at which point I could see no more than five hazy feet, but I became comfortable enough to release myself from Captain Jack. What registered most to me was the feeling of being engulfed by the dull reverberations of a churning motor radiating from the steel structure. The oil rig was alive and laboring, and once again I reflected on the muffled roar of the rumbling cargo vessels at White Lighthouse. I also caught an occasional fuzzy glimpse of swiftly swirling shadows—I could ascertain only that these fish were big, but I could not make out their species. I had no sense of bearings at all, and the terrifying stories of currents, sharks, and entanglements from Fontova’s book rushed into my mind. I mustered confidence, however, from the thought that my Taiwanese dive buddies and White Lighthouse had prepared me well for these challenging conditions. Within 20 minutes or so I was shivering, but the exhilaration from being down there inspired me to persevere.

Captain Jack named the platform “Shit Rig” because of the rotten visibility, and made a record in his log. He decided we needed to head due east for improved visibility on the next dive. After speeding along for 20 minutes or so, we spotted a large swath of fish activity on the surface, what looked like a forty-foot-diameter patch of vigorously boiling water. I saw a black dorsal emerge and shouted, “shark!” Captain Jack slowed the boat and yelled, “What’s doin’ there Henry? Yellow tail? Blues?” Henry, still holding a Budweiser, spoke for the first time: “That there’s one of them devils...them giant rays.” As we approached slowly, the outline of the monster emerged—what looked like a dorsal was a curled up wing tip. The total wing span of the creature was at least 15 feet. Captain Jack and I both raced for our cameras and we shot multiple pictures. He asked me if I wanted to jump in. I entertained the idea of grabbing my mask and snorkel, but I was still shivering and the thought of sharks possibly prowling in the lurch below the boil sapped my courage. Within a few minutes, the devil ray began to swim away gracefully and gradually submerged. This was likely a once-in-a-lifetime sighting for me—indeed, neither Captain Jack, Henry, nor Sammy had ever seen a devil ray before—and I was angry with myself for not jumping in. The encounter sparked life into Henry, who had now cracked a smile that revealed a nearly toothless mouth as he rigged up two trolling poles at the back of the boat. Having now shared together something rare with these three men, the trip acquired a special significance that seemed to add temporal depth to our relationship, and we began chatting and interacting as if we had known each other for much longer than only one morning. I imagined how my Taiwanese friends would react when I showed them the pictures of the devil ray. I was now excited for the next dive, and hoping to make more special memories with these guys.

As Henry hooked the boat to the second rig, we spotted two men high up on the platform looking down at us. Captain Jack informed me that every rig had a small crew of workers living on board; indeed, I recalled hearing about rig workers being

rescued during bad hurricanes. Captain Jack announced that he was going down to secure the anchor line and disappeared below the surface with his speargun in hand. I turned to Henry and asked, “Should we wait for him to come up?” Henry replied, “He’s got his speargun. He’s like a kid in a candy store down there when he’s got his speargun. He ain’t comin’ up.” I turned to Sammy and said, “It’s just you me, Sammy. Let’s go for it.”

The visibility was now much better further east of the Mississippi. I could see at least 25 feet, and the rig structure was swarming with large jack, snapper, grouper, and spade fish. At about 90 feet, Sammy and I weaved our way through the beams on the inside of the humming structure. The water temperature on one side of the rig was 70 degrees, while on the other side the temperature was 10 degrees cooler. We gradually worked our way to the bottom, about 125 feet. Sammy was peeking under the giant foundation beams and had found something. I swam over and peeked into the shadows with him—there we observed a large sleeping nurse shark, no less than 7 feet long. Once I had a good look I moved away, as I had read that nocturnal nurse sharks could turn nasty if disturbed during the daytime. At one point, I heard the familiar rocket-like release of a speargun, which I knew was Captain Jack at work but which I allowed to comfort me with the feeling that my Taiwanese buddies were spear fishing nearby, as it did when I was hunting at White Lighthouse.

Sammy decided to try out his Dive Master role by leading me for a swim outside the structure. The current was mild so I followed him. As we moved away from the outside beam, the dancing needle of my compass steadied and I took a careful reading, especially because I knew that Sammy had no compass. Outside the busy, noisy rig there were no more fish—only quiet blue water and a sandy bottom. Within a couple of minutes, the rig was out of view. Sammy never even looked back. I swam with him a bit further before attracting his attention and signaling for us to return. He pointed and swam west of my reverse compass reading, but I followed him

nonetheless, wanting to give him as much face as I could. However, I now swam alongside him and discretely steered him slightly eastward, and we soon spotted the dark shadows of the rising rig way off to one side.

On the boat, Captain Jack proudly displayed his fat two-and-a-half-foot grouper. Henry had also hooked three hearty red snapper, and we took several photos as we road back to port ahead of the setting sun. After the photo shoot, Henry began wrapping his red snapper in a thick blanket, and I asked what was up. Captain Jack apprised me that red snapper were out of season and that the coast guard would inspect the boat at the port. I stared at him silently and he produced a devilish grin that seemed somehow intended to reassure me. Having just posed for several photos with the red snapper, I was now an accomplice to this crime, which, from Captain Jack's grin, seemed to carry with it assurance of social insiderhood. At the dock, I helped the guys load the boat onto the trailer. Captain Jack gave me directions for the scenic route to Biloxi. I promised him that I would be back with my Taiwanese spear fishing buddies and we each went our separate ways. The Mississippi Gulf Coast was gorgeous and lined with impressive stately homes. I drove around for a while in Biloxi before deciding to take a room at Casino Magic. After rinsing my dive gear and showering up it was nearly 8:00 p.m. I grabbed my notebook and pen and headed downstairs for a late dinner and a carafe of wine.

At the casino café, before I began recording the details of my rig diving adventure, I reflected on how gambling and fate were inflecting my trip. On the day prior to my panel, I attended other sessions and ran into one of my co-panelists, who introduced me to a Taiwanese guy, Little Ma, who was doing a doctorate in political science at a university in the U.S. After the panel session, Little Ma and I walked together back towards my hotel, which was about a mile or so from the conference site and only a couple of blocks from Harrah's Casino. Just as we alighted the Riverwalk to cross the street, red lights began flashing and a long arm lowered to block our path

while a train passed by. As we stood waiting, Little Ma leaned over and yelled in my ear above the roar of the train, “Perhaps we should visit the casino.” I looked at him curiously and asked why. He replied, “Well, the train came by just as we were about to cross the road. Today might be our lucky day.”

Little Ma’s remark was one that could have been made by any one of my informant-friends as well, and reminded me of how everyday life in Taiwan was rather self-consciously animated by a dialectic of gambling and fate. With the uncertainties of both my panel and my rig dive open at the time, I decided to embrace this fieldwork formula for coping with life’s contingencies, so that night I made a brief visit to Harrah’s. I went straight to roulette and on one spin of the wheel covered two-thirds of the table with an outside bet of \$50 to win \$25, which I hit. I took my \$25 chip and promptly returned to my hotel. The next morning, I placed the \$25 chip in my pocket and headed off to my panel. There were moments when I felt in my pocket for the chip as good luck charm, but mainly I drew confidence from the fieldwork lifeworld of friendship that the chip signified for me. The collective certainties of the friendship lifeworld gave me a refreshingly concrete perspective from which to face the imponderable contingencies of the professional meetings, and this liberating vantage point no doubt improved my panel performance.

As I poured myself into my rig diving details, I was startled from my vertiginous writing zone by a cloyingly sweet voice, “You okay, baby?” I looked up and the maître d’, a matronly middle-aged black woman, shot me a warmly mischievous smile while walking by. A few minutes later, she detoured by me carrying a mop and said, “You’re awfully quiet over here, baby.” I replied, “You can see I’m all alone. If you have a seat I promise I won’t be so quiet.” She followed up, again with a playfully devious smile, “I’ll see if I can get someone to fill that spot.”

I am not sure how much time elapsed, but I had reentered my writing zone when the maître d’ reappeared, this time seated in the chair opposite me. Before I

could speak, someone else walked up beside me and took hold of my left hand, but it was the maître d' who spoke first: "This is Leola," she said, brandishing that same unforgettably playful smile. I looked up into the glowing grin of a young heavy-set black girl, a waitress, who was now softly stroking my palm with her fingers. "What's your name, baby?" It was clear that Leola and the maître d' were going to have a little flower-wine fun with me, and make sure the lone tipsy scribbler in their house was not lonely. I had learned well how to extemporize in flower-wine fashion, and slipped myself smoothly into this familiar fieldwork persona. Leola again queried cloyingly, "Are you single, Paul?" "I am today, Leola." Both women laughed approvingly at my comeback, but in a hushed tone that they compensated for by buckling at the waist to gesture greater volume. Still chuckling, Leola continued, "What's happenin' with you tonight, Paul?" I became aware that the two women were with me on the sly, because they kept glancing furtively over to the bar, which was absent a bartender. I acknowledged the insider knowledge by quieting my own voice and joining them in occasional peeks toward the missing manager. The aura of transgression added suspense to this improvisational scene, and our silently shared secret established a spontaneous boundary that set the three of us off against the norms of the establishment, but that also bound us obliquely to those norms as the source of our common transgressive code. My suspicion of contravention was soon affirmed, for the instant the bartender reemerged, both women scampered, and the maître d' spoke back softly to me as she hurried away, "hold on, honey."

In the aftermath of Leola and the maître d', I once again reflected on my hostess club conference panel, and especially on how I might find a way in my work to fashion a middle ground between responsible ethnography and ethnography that purports to change the world. What I have done in this dissertation is systematize only slightly the preliminary formula I sketched out at the Casino Magic café. That formula goes something like this: By taking ethnographic pains to make "others" see

themselves through my participation as an “outsider,” these people can, if they wish, take stock of what they see and pursue measures, however miniscule, to tweak if not transform themselves and their lifeworlds. And through taking a scholarly chance by crafting a displaced ethnographic reflection on my AAA conference trip to New Orleans, I would force myself to see me and my participatory practices through my embodied fieldwork memories of “others.”

Taking heed of Giambattista Vico’s admonition that there is a parallel between scholarly and social fallibility (see Herzfeld 1987:191), I wish the overarching critical objective of my ethnography merely to be the generation of self-awareness, which would be tantamount to delivering everyday discourses and practices to the doorstep of historical dialectics. To be sure, there are a great many contingencies inherent to all social processes, ensuring that both fate and human fallibility would remain formidable forces in the unfolding of history. But recognition of fate and human fallibility need not be a formula for fatalism, and with the preliminary threads of this thought in mind, I paid my bill at the Casino Magic café, unfolded fifty-dollars from my back pocket, and, feeling energized to face the challenge, headed straight for roulette.

Map One



Map of Taiwan
(Note: Chi-lung = Keelung)

Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia04/taiwan_sm04.gif

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