

A photograph of a person sitting in a chair, viewed from behind, watching a television. The television screen shows two women's faces. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from three large windows with blinds. A small round table with a glass is next to the chair. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

# the glass eye

edited by

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Taiwan Video Club (1999)

## LANA LIN

### The Taiwan Video Club\*

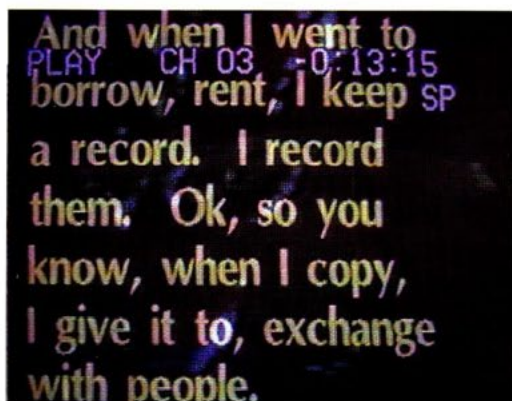
Taiwan Video Club is a fabricated name for a community of Asian immigrants, primarily women, who participate in a system of exchanging videotapes, which are either rented at suburban Asian malls or recorded off Taiwanese broadcast television. These cost-cutting senior citizens residing in the U.S. purchase bulk videotapes by the hundreds, ship them to Taiwan where they are dutifully filled and returned to anxiously awaiting parties, and then copied to be traded like baseball cards or Tupperware amongst friends and neighbours. This benignly illegal trafficking unites club members who share their native culture and common past. The club profile describes a diaspora of Asian female spectatorship. Like Constance Penley's examination of a *Star Trek* subculture where women publish and distribute transgressive zines that rewrite the Spock/Kirk relationship as a homosexual love affair, I am positing the Taiwan Video Club as a self-organised system where women can, as Penley describes, "manipulate the products of mass-produced culture to stage a popular debate around issues of technology, fantasy, and everyday life."<sup>1</sup> Although not self-identified as politically motivated, their non-hierarchical distribution of degenerated pirate copies that reject 'broadcast standards' and copyright rules, constitutes a passive resistance. Taiwan Video Club is the name of the project through which I extend these women's aims.

My mother is the original member of the Taiwan Video Club. Her favourite videos are based on classical Chinese literature and traditional Taiwanese folk opera. Their dual origin dates back to classical arts and more recently to current TV aesthetics, bearing the look and feel of American afternoon soap opera and heroic adventure series such as *Hercules* and *Xena*, Hong Kong action films, and low budget sci fi. These epic series derive from stories that have been passed on from generation to generation, stories so familiar that their original sources are sometimes difficult to trace. My mother simply states that everyone already knows them, so that telling the stories is not about finding out something new but reaffirming something old. Narrative desire seems to stem not from expectation but from an historical drive, an impulse to record one's history. Furthermore, a predilection for repetition is built into the classical stories because many of them are written in a poetic language that is difficult to understand on first viewing or reading. An opera troupe might perform for ten days, and villagers return to watch the same show every night. "It's not like you lose interest," my mother explains, "because every time you watch it, you catch something more." The tradition of accumulating experience is carried on through the medium of videotape, which lends itself to rewinding and archival study.

There are several different genres of daily serials broadcast in Taiwan. My father divides them into Japanese and Chinese, and then subcategories include historical costume dramas, original modern day melodramas, and *Perry Mason*-esque detective stories. My parents are particularly interested in those performed in Taiwanese – their native tongue – as it represents, they say, "true Taiwanese culture." Taiwan's ethnic make-



up is roughly composed of a small percentage of indigenous aborigines, a majority of descendants of 16th, 17th, and 18th century emigrants from Mainland China who consider themselves native Taiwanese, and



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Chinese who emigrated after 1945, some of whom regard themselves as New Taiwanese and others who think of themselves as Mainlanders in exile. My own family proudly bears their Taiwanese identity even though they only emigrated a hundred years ago. Each ethnic variety speaks its own dialect, but until recently, Mandarin Chinese was enforced by the Mainlander ruling elite as the official Chinese language on Taiwan. Beijing Opera, or Peking Opera as it is more widely known in the West, is officially recognised as the National Opera of Taiwan. This terminology is contested because it confers a Chinese cultural superiority and related political sovereignty. Supporters of Taiwanese local opera would like to claim it as the National Opera, although there are opposing opinions about its metamorphosed form on television since one of its primary initiatives is to preserve traditional Taiwanese culture. One of the main visible distinctions between Peking Opera and Taiwanese folk opera is that in Peking Opera the main roles are played by men, whereas in Taiwanese

opera the main roles, regardless of gender, are played by women.

When my mother was a child, Taiwanese opera was performed both outdoors and in theatres. The audience for Taiwanese opera was largely poor villagers, many of whom were illiterate, in contrast to the more highly educated enthusiasts of Peking Opera. Staged Taiwanese opera was first aired on Taiwan's first TV station, established in 1962, Taiwan Television Enterprises or TTV, and was later produced specifically for television on CTV, China Television Company. It was restaged in a studio setting and adapted to make it more accessible to TV audiences. The rise of televised Taiwanese Opera corresponded with Taiwan's economic boom. Families that once could not afford a radio purchased televisions, so Taiwan's entertainment industry skipped from touring live performance to home entertainment centres. Televised Taiwanese Opera was at its peak when its golden age was thwarted by the Radio and Television law of 1977 requiring that all programming be in the primary language of Mandarin, and dialect programming was restricted to one hour per day. However, there was a revival when Taiwan Television United, an opera troupe, was formed with major stars such as Yang Li Hua. Eventually the restrictive law was ignored, bowing to the custom of Taiwanese opera as an integral part of daily life. My mother reports that now these serials, though not exclusively opera, are broadcast three times a day. Yang Lei Hua was a major star of Taiwanese opera when my mother was a child. Every day after school, when my mother was on her way home, she would squeeze into packed theatres to catch the last ten minutes of the play when entrance was free. These were always the most attractive parts of the performance meant to lure you back the next day. So my mother was and continues to be, a devoted fan of Yang Lei Hua who is credited as one of the main forces in developing televised Taiwanese Opera. "This lady was very smart," she says, "she made herself as a producer." The Barbara

Streisand of TTV, Yang Lei Hua controlled every aspect of production – acting, producing, distributing, and forming her own production company. She revived all the operas she performed as a traditional opera star. For my mother, watching these videos is a re-enactment of what she experienced as a child, and for the producer, it was a way to rejuvenate her career, reappearing in the roles that made her famous. For both the maker and the viewer, then, it is a return to the past that re-activates the present.

The Taiwan Video Club employs home video technology from the analogue phase of its historical development. It demonstrates the pinnacle of analogue's success as an information disseminating system still based on an exchange between hands, using cardboard boxes, padded envelopes, and community interaction. We witness what was once an oral tradition that fed into a literary and theatrical tradition being maintained as an electronic medium appropriate to the needs of the group it serves. Constance Penley defines appropriate technology as that which "refers to both everyday uses of technology that are appropriate to the job at hand and the way users decide how and what to appropriate.[...] The emphasis is on keeping the technology accessible and democratic."<sup>2</sup> Analogue video is appropriate to the Taiwan Video Club as a consumer industry available to users both here and in Taiwan. Almost every household is furnished with a VCR. My parents own two for duplication. The equipment is accessible – it's easy to push play and record – and within the means of these generally middle class viewers.

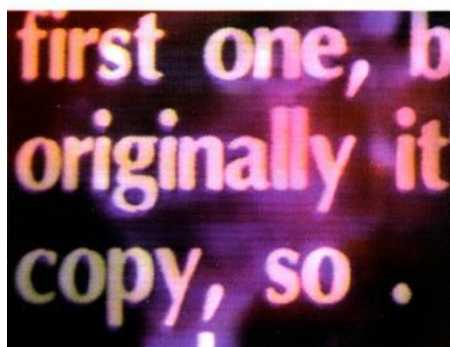
In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau argues that there is a secondary production hidden in the process of utilisation that is distinct from the initial production – an art of using.<sup>3</sup> For De Certeau, consumption is production, and receiving and redistributing art is an everyday practice. How these women confront their lives is enacted in the duplication/distribution process, and their desire to maintain their native culture is a practice of everyday life. From this perspective, one could regard the Asian suburban housewives of the Taiwan Video Club as agents in reproducing their past while producing a new dialogue in which to contextualise their shared cultural experience. The exchange among the club members extends the conventional model of sender/receiver by converting the receiver into yet another sender. The programmes that the corporate broadcast powers televise don't end in their viewing, but rather begin a process of exchange and regeneration. My mother relates an anecdote about how she got her hands on a coveted Japanese tape. An older gentleman guarded his collection of rare Japanese originals until he had to sell them because they were too heavy to move. News travels quickly in localised clusters such as her church group, and my mother tracked down the new owner to make copies for my father who still retains his Japanese from his childhood education during the Japanese occupation.

My mother emphasises that this activity can be very expensive. In order to economise, club members buy tapes in bulk, share tapes, record over used tapes, and record in SLP (Super Long Play.) Their illegal pirating undermines the production values of the original signals. The dubbing process is loose, and there are commercial leaks – parasites embedded in the narrative body – but even the inadvertent recording of advertisements is subverted by the remote control. Viewers shuttle past corporate sponsors to get to the most attractive parts, recalling the child sneaking into the theatre during the enticing last free minutes. Profit value



is overturned a little in this way. The videotapes as fetishised objects serve as tangible evidence by which the Taiwan Video Club's process of duplication and distribution can be traced. The frayed edges and labels overlaying labels, through erasure and revisions, leave a trail of the tapes' origins. You can see the copies of copies. The tapes display their weathering of time in the way yellowing photos display their ageing process. A form of correspondence situated between hand-written letters and the internet or e-mail, the videotapes are an electronic version of the traditional hard copy but remain physical containers for information, something you can touch, hold, and exchange.

My mother notes that recording on used stock in SLP degrades the image quality, but she rationalises that the original was a copy anyway. Whether she is referring to the televised version as a copy of the original poem or performance; or the Asian distributors who copy the original television programmes; or Taiwanese viewers who tape off the TV for their relatives abroad; or the pirated copies that are dubbed on home VCRs from friends' copies, her statement is accurate. In short, the Taiwan Video Club exploits video as a medium



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meant to be copied. The notion of the original degenerates with the ever-increasing duplication of the image. Ownership is dissipated in current cultural production. According to the Critical Art Ensemble: "notions of origin have no place in electronic reality. The production of the text pre-supposes its immediate distribution, consumption, and revision. All who participate in the network also participate in the interpretation and mutation of the textual stream."<sup>4</sup> The Critical Art Ensemble discusses plagiarism as an aesthetic erasing the idea that there is an original located somewhere that is authentic. "One of the main goals of the plagiarist is to restore the dynamic and unstable drift of meaning by appropriating and recombining fragments of culture."<sup>5</sup> Plagiarism can be looked upon as an empowering tool for this community. Duplication bears the imprint of each viewer/producer, so that the life of a work transforms and is extended in an afterlife like a root system

whose path or outcome you can never foresee. Literary critic Susan Stewart's remarks on quotation seem applicable here: "In quotation we find the context of production transformed and the utterance detached from the authority of that context. In fiction, reframing the utterance transforms both the context of production and the mode of production."<sup>6</sup>

The question of origin is of considerable poignancy to the Taiwanese who struggle over issues of authentic ethnic identity. The crisis of authenticity between the Republic of China, known to its people as Taiwan, and Mainland China, the People's Republic of China, remains of paramount importance to its citizens. Which is the real China? Who has the claim to originality? If the Republic of China is merely a province of China, a kind of degenerated copy, then the Taiwanese identity is threatened with non-existence. We must understand the original in relation to translation in order to rethink cultural representation and to assert cultural difference. Conceiving of origins and translations as equal partners exerting influence upon each other, secures the promise of both difference and identity. Etymologically, translation is linked to tradition and

betrayal, which is significant for the immigrant who wishes to hold onto her mother tongue while she suffers guilt for having abandoned her motherland. But in her book, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Rey Chow shifts this somewhat negative connotation and contends that tradition is nothing if not a transmission and asks how tradition is to be transmitted, to be passed on from generation to generation, if not through some kind of translation.

To position my video as an ethnographic project, I must take Chow's advice and redefine ethnography so that it includes an acknowledgement of translation at its heart. Chow insists that the process of cultural translation "encompasses an entire range of activities including the change from tradition to modernity, from literature to visuality, from elite scholastic culture to mass culture, from native to the foreign and back."<sup>77</sup> To redeem ethnography, she looks to Walter Benjamin for a theory that might be considered anti-ethnocentric. Benjamin's description of translation is that "translation is primarily a process of putting together."<sup>78</sup> Implied in this conception of translation is that the 'original' is something, too, that has been put together. This understanding of the 'original,' which must now always be put in quotes, negates the presupposition that there is an authentic language or authoritative point of view, and underlines the proposal that we live in an age of assemblage and appropriation, what the Critical Art Ensemble calls a recombinant culture. Benjamin's configuration of the relationship between the original and the translation is one that allows that the original opens up toward the translation, which in turn liberates the original. This reading of Benjamin dismantles the notion of origin both in text and culture.

My videotape of the Taiwan Video Club is heavily inscribed with text as an invitation and challenge to work through one's own process of translation throughout the tape. Text is placed centre screen on the same level as the pictorial images, so that it doesn't function as traditional subtitling meant to be accepted as a direct, unmediated translation of the truth, ignored or passed through as if it were invisible. It is, rather, foregrounded and manipulated, so that it acts out my own reading and interpretation. My own mediation is made visible through shuttling, fast forwarding, rewinding, and pausing the text translation. For Chinese viewers who do not understand the particular dialect of a programme, watching these tapes involves a literal process of reading subtitled characters. When my mother says she likes to keep a copy of a tape because someday maybe she'd like to take it out and read it and watch it again, she refers both to reading the on-screen translation and to reading the stories because they exist in her mind as written texts, ones she memorised in her childhood. "I just like the words," she says. In my video version of the Taiwan Video Club, I reiterate the relationship to reading and translation pre-existing in the TV series. I transcribe my mother's interview about the Taiwan Video Club, screen it on a monitor, and videotape my mother reading her own words. Behind her we see the favourite programmes she describes. I hope to thereby activate my mother as a subject of her own story, inserting her into the videos she herself watches.



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Almost all the material for my videotape of the Taiwan Video Club is generated from a single show, *The Dream of the Red Mansions* or the *Story of the Stone* (*Hung Lou Meng*) which is a famous epic novel dating from the Ching Dynasty, such a celebrated novel that its scholarly analysis is collectively known as the Red Studies. The story begins before the protagonist's birth. He starts as a stone wandering the heavens. He comes upon a flower whom he nurtures. The flower bemoans the fact that she cannot repay the stone because he has little need of water, but she declares that perhaps in another lifetime she can repay her debt to him in tears. Tragedy abounds in these epic tales. When I ask my mother what draws her to these stories, she responds, "the sorrow." The reason she believes young people today don't like them is that there is too much sorrow. The emotional connection amongst the older generation comes from a collective memory of occupation, war, poverty, and immigration. They witness their earthly sorrow enacted in these epic dramas. The story of the flower who would like to offer up her tears as succour to her caretaker asks the question of how you repay a kindness. As for me, I choose to repay that kindness to my mother through videotape. ●



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#### NOTES

\* This paper was originally presented as a lecture given at St. Ann's Church, Brooklyn, New York 1999.

1. Constance Penley, "Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology," *Technoculture* ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 137.
2. Penley, 140-141.
3. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
4. Critical Art Ensemble, "Utopian Plagiarism," *Critical Issues in Electronic Media* ed. Simon Perry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 114.
5. Critical Art Ensemble, 107.
6. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 20.
7. Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 192.
8. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin Essays and Reflections* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 185.



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