**Transnational Vernacularity of Taiwan Floral Chintz: craft-design and cultural industry in Taiwan**

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**Introduction**

My paper is about Taiwan floral chintz (台灣花布) and its use in new craft-design products which are omnipresent in interiors of commercial premises as well as goods sold in shops, museums and airport. Its visibility has been noticed first in international art scenes and that has been caught up by the cultural creative industry that has been promoted since the previous DPP government, and has continuously developed to the present. Since 2000, there are several exhibitions on and related to Taiwan floral chintz, several books and catalogues of patterns as well as academic thesis have been written, and numerous new interior accessories and design were produced as part of creative cultural industry. (**Fig.** shop and products and book covers) I will discuss this cultural phenomenon from a design historian’s perspective, but also give analytical thoughts on cultural and political implications, in view of Taiwan’s ever more ambiguous political position in the current world order.

**Taiwan Floral Chintz as Regional-National-Transnational Tradition**

**Michael Lin’s Art of Taiwan Flora Chintz**

The artist Michael Lin (Lin Minghong林明弘) created dramatic spatial installation by using this fabric at the Taipei Biennial in 2000. (**Fig.)** He had been warming this idea in a smaller installations for a few years before that, but this was the first largest work. He is the spark plug of this Taiwan floral Chintz phenomenon lasting since then.[[1]](#endnote-1) He covered the entire entrance foyer space of TFAM with this vividly pink fabric. The visual power of colors and decoration transformed the Modernist white cube into a refreshingly warm people’s everyday space of relaxation. As Lin expected his work to be ‘pleasant, warm and welcoming’[[2]](#endnote-2), visitors immediately occupied the space, made themselves comfortable, lie down, squat, sat down, chat with friends and family, and children running around in his space. His art also evokes emotional expressions which appealed to a collective memory of Taiwan that was also his intention of his art to be ‘specific’.[[3]](#endnote-3) His art of floral chintz has been very successful in impressing the international audience with ‘Taiwaneseness’ at such exhibitions as Venice Biennial (2001) which was followed by many exhibitions in Europe and Japan.

Although Lin is identified as a ‘Taiwanese artist’ and his art is associated with Taiwanese culture, it is ironic though, he’s not really rooted in Taiwan. He is regarded in Taiwan as ‘foreigner’ called ‘trapeze artists’ （空中飛人）belonging to no specific place.[[4]](#endnote-4) Lin, a grandson of a key cultural and political Taiwanese elite during the colonial Taiwan Lin Hsien-t’ang (Lin Xiantang林献堂), ethnically quarter Japanese was born in Tokyo in 1964, grew up in Taiwan until he moved to the USA in 1971, he was trained as an artist in California, married to a French living, and now working between Shanghai, Taipei and the Brussels. Therefore, Lin’s ‘specificity’ is vernacular to Taiwan, but also open to the world and shared history. As he explains, floral prints existed everywhere in the world before the 18th century industrial revolution. There were vernaculars of flora prints across the world, but their patterns and techniques have all been mixed up and hybridized through historical cultural dialogue over many centuries. For example, the Dutch had acquired floral patterns and printing technique of Indian chintz through trades with Asia by the Dutch East India companies, and developed their vernacular. Similarly, patterns and colours of Taiwanese floral chintz have much influenced by the Japanese floral prints that rooted in Taiwan’s colonial ties with Japan. Lin’s installation in the gallery space at the Kanazawa 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art (2004-5) shows its similarities in subtle difference of Kaga Yūzen, a kimono pattern of Kanazawa’s regional tradition that was originally inspired by the Kyoto Yūzen tradition created by Miyazaki Yūzen in 17th century Japan.

**Taichung exhibition and Togo Rural Art Museum exhibition**

Michael Lin’s presentation of Taiwanese floral chintz in art context seems to have sparked many other formal activities. An exhibition ‘Enjoy the Beauty of Taiwanese Printed Cloth’ (花花世界：薪傳台灣之美)at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (2011-12) was one of such systematically organised one. It presented its educational aspect through which it teaches children the tradition of the Taiwanese ‘grandma’.[[5]](#endnote-5) The exhibition explains that this floral chintz is Taiwanese tradition and it has been omnipresent indoors and outdoors from beddings (被單 beidan), babies diapers to women field workers clothes. This is described as ‘Grandma’s fabric’ as this strongly invokes the nostalgic image of grandma and surrounding environment. When this grandma was young likely to be postwar in the 1950s, if we imagine this grandma is around 80 now. It also associates with the booming of textiles industry when grandma was young. It was the time when the KMT took over Taiwan, and also brought industry from the mainland China including mechanized textile industries. The Far Eastern Textile Company mentioned in the exhibition was one of those who came from the mainland and founded in Taiwan around this period and mass produced these floral chintz by using imported Japanese Rotary printing machines.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is the beginning of the success story of Taiwan which transformed to an industrial developed nation. It points to this transitional moment, thus the Taiwanese floral chintz interestingly associates with early mechanization as well as the nostalgic past of agricultural life. Grandma’s ethnic origin is unknown, but she is vaguely Min-nan people (閩南人) which dominate the majority of ancestral ethnic roots in Taiwan. In this exhibition it doesn’t appear to include Hakka and aboriginal people. This grandma’s hometown is set in some rural village. Women working in the field are wearing working clothes made of floral chintz, and they do sing and dance in the local festival. is such a place situated in still rural environment. In another exhibition at Togo Rural Art Museum in Tainan, they displayed these large fence or mural of Taiwan floral chintz open air in this rural village of the Min-nan people.

**Taiwanese Floral Chintz as both ‘hybrid’ and ‘distinctive’**

As all the cultural agents agree to the point that Taiwanese floral chintz is a hybrid product – a mixture of Chinese, Japanese and western elements to name a few. However, interestingly at the same time, subtle distinctiveness is also stressed. According to the Taichung exhibition, you can still identify the subtle distinction and what can be called ‘Taiwaneseness’ by saying the Taiwanese love of flowers different from Japanese and Chinese. Japanese likes ‘young and tender cherry blossoms’, and Chinese loves peony as it ‘represents wealth, status, and good fortune’, while Taiwanese ‘just love red and fragrant flowers’ because ‘red represents good fortune, passion, beauty and hope.’ The pattern book edited by Wu Qinggui visually shows the difference with focus on peony the most characteristic pattern for floral chintz. **(Fig.)** While China and Japan naturally grow peony on their land, Taiwan’s climate is too tropical for growing peony. However, as much as the Chinese and the Japanese love this flower as their own, the Taiwanese also love and internalized the symbolic and auspicious meaning of ‘happiness’, ‘wealth’ and ‘vitality’ embodied by peony. Taiwanese floral chintz shares this East Asianness, but the patterns are slightly different. While Chinese depiction of peony is often set in sharp contrasting dark blue and red which creates three-dimensional effects but printing is rough, Japanese puts gold outlines and adds delicate elegance and luxury to the idea of ‘wealth’ spreading on the two-dimensional space, while Taiwanese dominant expression is ‘happiness’ in its adoption of Chinese three-dimensional effect which is combined with Japanese delicate touch and outlining but not in gold but a little less expensive brown dye. [[7]](#endnote-7) Further more, Chen Zongping identifies the Taiwanese distinctiveness in its creation of ‘peony four seasons’ pattern which is most dominant pattern among his collection of 1000 samples of the Taiwanese floral chintz. He says in Taiwanese floral chintz, peony doesn’t appear independently but a variety of flowers from the four seasons. The concept of ‘four seasons’ obviously imported from Japanese culture, and dominantly use typically Japanese flower patterns but the range of flowers go beyond those, and most remarkably the way it is mixed all of them.[[8]](#endnote-8) This desire for mixing everything is also characterized in peculiar patterns mixing flower with Chinese auspicious animals, western and Japanese interior objects, western picturesque landscapes and sometimes children’s popular characters including Disney animals. **(Fig.)**

**Floral Chintz as a Political Movement**

**Colour coded concept: ‘Taiwan Red’ (台灣紅)**

This cultural discourse of Taiwaneseness and visualisation it as both ‘hybrid’ and ‘distinctive’ in Taiwanese floral chintz became also politicised. Led by Chen Yuxiu, the Council for Cultural Affairs (Wenjianhui, former body of Wenhuapu) under the previous government DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) started the project called ‘Taiwan Red’ in 2003. She gathered opinions from eminent designers, artists, writers, business people, academics of folklore studies and natural scientists to search for the concept of ‘Taiwan Red’. They tried to identify the concept of ‘Taiwan Red’ that characterises the essence of Taiwanese culture which can be colour coded as the French culture is coded with the Red, White and Blue. It has to be some kind of red as it is undeniably part of Chinese culture that is represented by red, but not the same as the red represented by PRC.[[9]](#endnote-9) Under this politicised ‘Taiwan Red’ movement, the floral chintz also played an important role. Wu Qinggui, one of the influential collaborators of this cultural movement, is a painter and designer who led the cultural industry. She published elaborate catalogues and pattern books of Taiwan floral chintz and made a visible connection between Taiwan floral chintz and the ‘Taiwan Red’ movement through her creative design which I will discuss later.

**Min-nan tradition vs Hakka tradition**

The Taiwan Red under DPP was inclusive of all Taiwan’s multiple ethnicities including aboriginal people, and the flora chintz were seen to be not inseparable from this multiple ethnic culture. However, the floral chintz has increasingly been empowered by claim for the Min-nan Taiwanese tradition as in the Taichung exhibition and the Togo Village Art Museum, while also effectively strong claim by the Hakka Taiwanese, but not by the aboriginal community. The Hakka claim for their sole ownership is another involvement of a political agent, namely the Hakka Affairs Council. According to Chang Su-hui, the exhibition ‘Beautiful Floral Chintz: Hakka Women’s Aesthetic of Life’ (**花布靚靚─客家女性生活美學**) held in 2002 endorsed by the Hakka Affairs Council marked the Hakka association with the floral chintz, and there was no identification before 2002.[[10]](#endnote-10) It commemorates Hakka women’s hard work in the field and their aesthetic in daily life that is represented by floral chintz. This Hakka ownership of this floral chintz has become increasingly visible through Hakka’s annual Tung blossom festivals in spring across the country which also initiated by the Hakka Affairs Council. (**Fig.**) The Hakka Affairs Council has been funding academic studies on Hakka studies, and several MA thesis on the floral chintz have been funded, for example from the National Central University.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Taiwan floral chintz has sparked the political movements in various ways. The ‘Taiwan Red’ movement under DPP seems to reflect Taiwan’s international diplomacy in mind, and resistance to PRC, while the separate claims by the Min-nan and the Hakka ethnic groups seem to reflect Taiwan’s domestic political issue.

**‘Vernacular Cosmopolitanism’**

The cultural discourse and visualization of ‘hybrid’ at the same time ‘distinctive’ seem somewhat contradictory, but it is providing a flexible space connecting from the domestic ethnic identity to a wider outside world. Cultural critic, Shih Shu-mei also observes this current phenomenon of ‘the refashioning of Taiwaneseness’ undergoing in ‘all its contestatory and contradictory ways, as the official discourse increasingly comes to adopt a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual orientation’. [[12]](#endnote-12) She calls this ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ that is the characteristic of Taiwan’s unique cultural strategy for Taiwan to survive through its vulnerable and precarious international position ‘squarely caught between the sometimes feuding sometimes collaborating empires of the United States and China’.[[13]](#endnote-13)

‘Cosmopolitanism’ is key because of its ‘portability and visibility’ enable ‘multiple registers and references’ beyond these empires. It also ‘draws on the resources of Taiwan’s multiculture as well as world culture with multiple forms and objects of address, so that it is possible to break from the circuit of oppression and marginalization’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Taiwanese floral chintz’s phenomenon also has this characteristic of ‘Vernacular Cosmopolitanism’ that creates multiple registers and references with Taiwanese grandmas, the Minnan people, the Hakka people to Chinese, Japanese and Western traditions. Vernacularity is firmly situated in Taiwanese everydayness of this chintz. This everydayness through community participation in Taiwan, artists presentation in international exhibitions, and domestic and international consumption of newly designed products, it not only becomes transnational, but also cross visual cultural boundaries of art-craft-design. Taiwanese floral chintz, though disarmingly soft, light and pretty little object, has a unique power as a cultural weapon.

**Creative Culture Industry and Retro Revival**

Lastly, I would like to look into the creative cultural industry of Taiwan floral chintz. It is promoted by the government, and spread widely inspired designers, community circles and DIY hobbyists interest in creating new products. The Council for Cultural Affairs’ president Chen Yuxiu emphasized the importance of cultural creative industry and the government’s promotion of it through cultural policies, because that would develop international trade and enrich people’s life.[[15]](#endnote-15) Wu Qinggui who was involved in the ‘Taiwan Red’ movement set the first wave of creative cultural industry by creating design ideas from her Spring Red Color (?) studio (Chun Cai Hong春采紅工作室). Her design for ‘Taiwan dress’ used floral chintz and various accessories she designed were displayed in the Council for Cultural Affairs’ showroom near the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall to which overseas visitors were often guided. They range from small accessories such as brooches to a large furniture such as floor lamps were also on display. (**Fig.)** Chang Wen whose design company called ‘Shin Taifeng’ (New Taiwan Style) which provided interior furniture for the Taichung exhibition created an idea for a living space of a modern trendy living with an accented Taiwanese flavor, and his products were shown repeatedly in official exhibitions. The Hakka Affairs Council also support creative industry and design production utilising floral chintz to create a Hakka brand. These are photos of the Hakka souvenir shop at the airport, and the catalogue of these Hakka brand sold at the Taipei County Hakka Museum in Sanxia. These shops also sell small interior and personal and home accessories ranging from tea cups, tea cozy and scarves. (**Fig.**) Michael Lin’s collaboration with Louis Vuitton at the opening of Taipei flagship boutique in 2006 marked Taiwan’s achievement in international creative industry. This is in a series of the company collaborated with Asian artists including Takashi Murakami and Yayoi Kusama. Lin designed the interior of the boutique, and their promotional animation projected his floral chintz work onto iconic buildings of Taipei.

**Global Retro of floral chintz**

Taiwan’s revival of floral chintz and its commercialization are not isolated phenomenon if you look around the world trends. In Britain, as observed by design historian Jonathan Woodham, chintz pottery such as Royal Albert (Royal Doulton)’s ‘Old Country Roses’ bone china has been the best-selling tableware design selling ‘quintessential Englishness’ boosted by the idea of ‘heritage industry’ since 1980s.[[16]](#endnote-16) Cath Kidston’s floral accessories produced with an idea of ‘modern vintage’ have been extremely popular creating a vintage boom, while her cousin Kirstie Allsopp’s TV programmes such as ‘Vintage Home’ and ‘Handmade Britain’ are equally promoting vintage styles that evokes emotive nostalgia to the 1950s Britain. East London is full of Retro vintage shops with 1950s-70s furniture and fashion, and young people enjoy swing dances in the 1950s hairdo and attire. The revival of chintz and ‘modern vintage’ floral patterns appear to be a global phenomenon with many visual dialogues. New products for sale at the British shop Graham & Green’s such as these floral cushions and night gowns were presented as ‘???’ but visually not dissimilar to Taiwan floral chintz design. As Michael Lin’s point reminds us that floral patterns are truly shared world cultural property which has been contaminated, hybridised, circulated and re-circulated across the world. Taiwan’s revival is also in full dialogue with this global trend of Retro.(**Fig.**)

Design historian Elizabeth Guffey in her book *Retro: The Culture of Revival* studies the last three decades of Retro trends. She argues that Retro quotes styles from the recent past that is based on a communal memory that are selective, subjective and irrelevant to historical accuracies.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Ahistorically rediscovered history is based on rupture that curiously makes the present self so distant, different and even superior.[[18]](#endnote-18) Therefore, global retro is purely subjective and free from any constraints. This precisely characterizes the Taiwan’s case, as Taiwan’s floral chintz has reference to the 1950s Taiwan, but with ahistorical multiple registers with Taiwanese grandmas, the Minnan people, the Hakka people to Chinese, Japanese and Western traditions. Guffey also points that Retro is primarily the culture of consumption. As we see the thriving creative cultural industry of Taiwan floral chintz, this also tells the typical symptom of Retro in dialogue with global trends.

However, on the other hand, Taiwan’s case also presents a unique case in view of its political condition and its artistic cultural strategy described by Shi Shu-mei as ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’. The timing of the revival was 2000 as observed by the designer and collector Chen Zongping.[[19]](#endnote-19) It is not easily dissociable with Taiwan’s political situations when the then opposition party DPP’s took over the government and implemented numerous Taiwanisation programmes. The floral chintz revival developed mostly during the DPP period, but continues to the present now back under KMT. It reflects the Taiwan’s constantly unsettling situation as an independent country squeezed between strong powers. Unlike the global frivolous subjective and purely commercial phenomenon, Taiwan’s floral chintz revival appear to suggest a wider collective social concerns specific to Taiwan.

**Conclusion**

**1. Revival of Taiwan floral chintz is a unique cultural strategy of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ which connects regional-national-transnational traditions**

Michael Lin has successfully presented his art of Taiwan floral chintz which sparked the domestic revival as well as consolidated Taiwan’s presence in international art world by making regional-national-transnational visual communication. The domestic revivals often led and taken ownership by different political agenda based by different ethnic groups. Despite the differences in aims and targeted audience, what characterized the discourses are rhetorically contradictory but uniquely embracing multiplicity. As described by Shih Shu-mei ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’, this Taiwan’s shrewd cultural strategy can be read in this Taiwan floral chintz.

**2. Revival of Taiwan floral chintz shares the global commercial ‘Retro’ phenomenon, while it reflects Taiwan’s vulnerable political situations**

Taiwan currently enjoys the thriving cultural creative industry through the revival of Taiwan floral chintz. This phenomenon is not isolated in view of the current global phenomenon of a ‘Retro’ boom. It is capturing the moment that people are yearning for the recent past, and enjoy recreating and consuming them in their own creative and imaginary manners. However, Taiwan’s case suggests more than enjoyment, but some more seriousness in relation to the survival of the country. Taiwan floral chintz, disarmingly soft, light and everyday object provokes curiosities on Taiwan’s specific aesthetic and political implications woven into this fabric.

Fig.

-A Variety of reds, colour chart, Chen Yuxiu, *Xunzhao Taiwan Hong*, Taipei: Wenjianhui, 2004, p. 14.

-Louis Vuitton animation projecting Michael Lin’s art on iconic buildings in Taipei, the animation work was done by ‘Dark Room’, a company based in London.

1. Chen Zongping categorise the period as initiated by Michael Lin, Chen 2012, p. 16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcwGyznqsKY [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sophie McINTYRE PhD thesis, ‘Imagining Taiwan: The Making and the Museological Representation of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)’, The Australian National University, December 2012, p. 349. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I’m grateful to Lee Ching-Fang of the National Chunghua University of Education who curated ‘Enjoy the Beauty of Taiwanese Printed Cloth’ exhibition at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taizhong for providing for organising an interview with her and her students on 6 July 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For further information on the history of textile industry in Taiwan, see 陳介英、台湾紡績産業発展史：牽紗引線話紡織（Textile Industrial History of Taiwan)、高雄：国立科學工藝博物館、２００８。 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wu Qinggui, *Taiwan Hwapu*, Taipei: Locus Publishing, 2010, pp. 14-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Chen 2012, pp. 22-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Chen Yuxiu, *Xunzhao Taiwan Hong*, Taipei: Wenjianhui, 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 張素恵、「客家花布的符號消費興族群認同」、国立中央大學、硕士論文、２０１１ [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. National Central University was the first institution in Taiwan that created the Hakka Studies Department with the initiation of the Hakka Affairs Council in 2003. For further information see the Hakka Affairs Council’s website <http://www.hakka.gov.tw/mp.asp?mp=11> (accessed 16 May 2013) MA thesis funded by the HAC includes 李怡萱　「客家花布産業発展之研究：以資源基礎的観點」国立中央大學、国立政治経済研究所、硕士論文、２００９；張素恵、「客家花布的符號消費興族群認同」、国立中央大學、硕士論文、２０１１。 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific.* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007, p. 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 167. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ### ‘好文化創意空間 <http://mypaper.pchome.com.tw/lostcity/post/1301689373> (accessed on 16 May 2013)

    [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Jonathan Woodham, Twentieth-Century Design, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 217-219. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Elizabeth Guffey in her book *Retro: The Culture of Revival*, London: Reaktion, 2006, p. 26 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., pp. 161-162. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Chen Zongping (陳宗萍) is a designer who runs台北永康街の彰藝坊, and published this book on her collection of several hundreds Taiwan floral chintz. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)