

## Editor's Introduction: Praxis of On-Sitedness

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By *on-site* I am referring to *hyŏnjang* 現場, which relies on two Sino-Korean characters meaning “to appear or to be present” and “open space or place.” Pronounced *xianchang* in Mandarin Chinese, the term is fluid and context dependent, as are all Sinographs, and it is used broadly to refer to public space, and in aesthetic practice to being “on the scene” to witness and spotlight marginalized places (Robinson 2014). In the historical context of the South Korean democracy movement, this “place” took on particular significance wherever the political struggle could be waged, whether that was the factory floor, a school campus, church halls, or simply the streets (Lee 2007). Ordinary people were hailed to be *on-site*, to show up and join the scene of mass political protests against authoritarianism—in short, to be agents of history. As the term gained currency, it became a quality that could attach to aspects of politicized life worth evaluating. Activists and cultural critics

alike would critique political strategies or literary works for lacking “on-sitedness,” or *hyŏnjangsŏng* 現場性, if the work was unable to attract popular support and seemed detached and unrealistic from what was happening on the ground. Do you have the correct analysis, the right pulse on the situation to offer a path forward? Each of the articles in this issue of *positions* answers this question with examples that range from aesthetic movements, experimental music, and cinematic techniques to on-site struggles in the era of infrastructural capitalism.

Opening the issue is Inhye Han’s “Undoing the Nation-State-Capital Trinity.” From the outset, the nation-state itself comes undone as the article centers the work of Korean writer Li Kyŏngson’s little-known stage play *Taiwan* (1930), written in Chinese about the real-life struggle of Taiwanese farmers, first reported on by a Japanese journalist in 1928. Connecting these different “nations” is of course the Japanese imperial project, which attempted to claim the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere by 1940 as a direct manifestation of the nation-state-capital trinity. But as Han deftly shows through her reading of *Taiwan*, the trinity was never as firmly united as it may seem, just as the claim to mutual prosperity for East Asia was a sham. Han asks: What prompted the Korean writer to recount a story of Taiwanese farmers in his non-native Chinese language? What propelled a handful of illiterate and destitute farmers into a violent anti-Japanese action?

Going beyond historical positivism, she invokes “melancholy historicism” to urge us to pay heed to “what was simply unsaid, what was discouraged to say, or what was denied enunciation . . . the interstices of presence and absence, or speech and silence, seeking to register the negative.” While *Taiwan* was never completed because the socialist Chinese-language magazine *Pioneer* in which it was serialized was discontinued by the state, Han draws a parallel between its incompleteness with the unfinished farmers’ resistance within the play, indicating how the past is never past and leaves open-ended the future anteriors (that is, the futures envisioned in the past) as yet another possibility. Rather than the forward linear movement in conventional historical narratives, an anachronistic appeal to ethical obligations undermines the nation-state-capital trinity, as Han argues. Indeed, it is the literary imagination that enhances historicity by filling in the absences and silences in positivist historical accounts with “passion, dispassion, and intu-

ition of the ordinary, local or national malaise, and other details outside the purview of cognitive knowledge." She thereby imbues an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and transnational future within the unfinished play itself.

A similar kind of destabilization of national identities and *Nihonjinron* ideologies is at work in "Between Koenji and Brooklyn" by Katherine G. T. Whatley, but this time through the global circulation of Japanese experimental music. Focusing on a group of musicians based in Tokyo and New York, namely Michiyo Yagi, Ikue Mori, and Koichi Makigami, Whatley's ethnography emanates from her own positionality as a koto musician with multiple hybrid identities, as she writes, "between East and West, traditional and experimental, musician and academic, observer and participant, visitor and community member, English speaker and Japanese speaker." By centering experimental music as "a constellation of genres including experimental, free jazz, noise, and avant-garde musics," she shows the fluidities and interconnections that make up any music, so that the boundaries between genres or cultures are rendered porous and ultimately illusive.

Much like Han's claim that *Taiwan* was illegible through a nationalist literary canon, Whatley's experimental music lies external to the conventions of what is deemed part of "Japanese culture." She reminds us that ethnomusicology was as much a Cold War project as area studies. "This context," she argues, "is critical in understanding why initial postwar scholarship on Japanese music focused on this canonical 'traditional' Japanese music—it fed into a kind of conservative nationalism that was integral to US-Japanese relations." While the United States–Japan–South Korea tripartite alliance in the Asia Pacific lives on as a major cornerstone of US foreign policy, facilitating the very exchanges that led to the emergence of these experimental music scenes, the anti-canonical quality of experimental music as "noise" could signal disruption that ultimately breaks open genre and national boundaries.

Similarly, the avant-garde films of 1960s and 1970s Japan embodied new possibilities in the hypermediated urban environment. Through a close reading of Ōshima Nagisa's *Man Who Left His Will on Film* (1970), considered the foremost postwar avant-garde film, Junnan Chen's "Imperishables" explores the gender dynamics of avant-garde media practices in an era when cityscape and mediascape were entangled. Invoking "the imperishables" as

a prevalent trope for vanishing men and “plastic” women in the literary and filmic works of the times, Chen finds female resilience and endurance, going against the grain of conventional interpretations that viewed women simply as “victims” prone to violations or fetishization as objects. Rather, Chen ascribes their failure to disappear from the screen to the possibility of “internal dissidence in the leftist urban critique and the emergent somatic politics in the avant-garde imaginaries of alterity.”

As she explains, this era in Japan was marked historically by massive infrastructural development, rapid economic growth, expansion of mass media technologies, radical social movements, and major environmental disasters. Rejecting state control over media and commercial appropriation of images, avant-garde filmmakers sought to reinvent a space of potential resistance through cinema rather than simply recording the cityscape, whether as documentary of the quotidian or the spectacular. As Chen argues, “The interrogation of media and its relationship with global capitalism and state apparatuses was vital in the critics’ and artists’ critique of the homogenizing, mass-consumer society shaped by Japan’s postwar economic growth.” Paralleling Han’s careful attention to silences and absences, Chen gravitates toward the “threshold between visibility and invisibility, between mediation and remediation, a space that is always extending, and always encourages a return to the momentum that seeks depth and, for lack of a better word, the real.” She therefore emphatically urges us “to find new vocabularies . . . to articulate differences in the entangled ecology of urban media that is, critically, pregnant with not only expansive potentialities for change but also impoverishing constancies and reproductions.”

Such new vocabularies are found in Jennifer Dorothy Lee’s exposition on the artist Wu Guanzhong’s (1919–2010) rearticulation of abstraction in the Chinese art scene. In “Ideology of the Image,” Lee treats a comparable period of disruption in early post-Mao China. Examining the discourse of abstraction among Beijing intellectuals in response to Wu’s essays on formal and abstract beauty between 1979 and 1980, Lee shows how Wu was able to use the prevailing language of historical materialism and Maoism to authorize abstraction as an acceptable art form by 1983. Rather than simply paying attention to his art practice, Lee underscores Wu’s writings through which he rehabilitated abstraction from its associations with the bourgeois

capitalist art worlds of Paris and New York. Much like Han's and Chen's attention to silences and absences whether in stage plays or films, Lee notes the invisibility of potential radical lineages in the contemporary art world, precipitated by the hegemony of global capitalism and market reforms in China.

Against such "visible invisibility," Lee firmly positions Chinese abstractionism as a politically engaged form of abstraction by tracing the Chinese neologism for abstraction, *chouxian* 抽象, from its first usage in the nineteenth century into the twentieth. The term was *not* assigned a moral value, Lee argues, as it did not mean the negation of concreteness or materiality. Anti-materialism would indeed have rendered abstraction counterrevolutionary, but in fact, abstraction was a neutral concept within scientific socialism, appearing frequently in radical leftist discourses throughout the Mao era. Accordingly, Wu drew on Mao's 1937 essay "On Practice," which prioritized sense perception as a basis for knowledge to define abstractionism, aligning it with materialism rather than bourgeois ideology. In short, abstraction turned out to be "universal and human," as Lee succinctly concludes.

If the first four articles of this issue form the historical contours of the way cultural movements and the arts envisioned alternative possibilities based on their on-site experiences in the half-century between 1930 and 1980 from Korea to Taiwan, from Tokyo to New York and Beijing, Pun Ngai's theorization of infrastructural capitalism throws into relief the on-sitedness of the next set of articles. While centered on examples from China, each of the arguments could very well apply to other sites, given the permeation of global capitalism. Pun's "China's Infrastructural Capitalism and Infrastructural Power of Labor" attends to the making of the Chinese working class through the student-worker alliance known as the Jasic struggle of 2018. The infrastructural power of labor arises in conjunction with the rise of infrastructural capitalism, she argues. *Infrastructure* here refers to building projects of all kinds (highways, railways, cities, etc.), including digital platforms (e-commerce, data storage, etc.) that facilitate the expansion of capitalism. China's Belt-and-Road initiative is an infrastructural project par excellence to increase productive capacities in the Global South for greater resource extraction. Despite what she considers the failures of first-wave

socialist experiments with the rise of neoliberalism, she is careful to note the legacies of the Chinese Revolution that continuously inspire class struggles of the working masses a century on. Given the “rise” of China in the current configuration of global capitalism, Pun pointedly asks, “Is a left radical movement against global capitalism possible in contemporary China?” and “Would new forms and methods of organizing arise from the changing landscape of infrastructural capitalism?”

The answer is in the affirmative, not just for China but as part of a global anti-capitalist movement. At stake in infrastructural capitalism, Pun argues, is “the material base of all other forms of the materiality of capitalism, namely, extractive capitalism, . . . industrial capitalism, . . . and digital capitalism.” Going beyond simply the production side of the equation, Pun’s attention to infrastructure as a key concept allows her critique of infrastructural capitalism as “an organic whole” to include production *and* reproduction, uncovering “the logic of crisis inherently built into the network of infrastructures . . . and thus prepares the material base for the infrastructural power of the working class to take action.”

Such immanent crises are starkly brought to the fore in the contradictions between housing reconstruction and place making in the aftermath of disaster in “The Social Production and Political Potency of Home” by Qiaoyun Zhang, Guanli Zhang, Wen Huang, and Yun Tang. Based on over ten years of ethnographic research on the reconstruction of ethnic Qiang villages after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in southwestern China, the article argues that the villagers lost their sense of home when they were forced to abandon local knowledges, customs, and rituals related to *renqing* 人情 (human feelings) and *qi* 气 (geomantic force). Despite the “miraculous reconstruction” that transformed previously marginalized settlements into “scenic gardens” as part of state-led housing reconstruction alongside the promotion of local tourism, place making involves more than the physical rebuilding of individual houses, requiring the restoration of communal ties rooted in local histories and practices of everyday life.

Reminiscent of James Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998), the article underscores the stark difference between *space* and *place*; state planners’ conception of space as empty and homogeneous is a far cry from the experiential site of living sociocultural practices. While state housing reconstruction is

deterritorialized, disembodied, distant, and disconnected, driven by the tourist industry, place making builds on generational wisdom to build homes in the mountains away from waterways, and interconnected with other homes for more durable structures that can withstand earthquakes. The rebuilding could take several years but relies on reciprocal communal labor, which is also the basis for local food production and child care. Economic efficiency may be the paradigm for state governance, but there is no true sense of home without relationality, reciprocity, intimacy, and mutual benefit, including symbiosis with the environment. The authors remind us why modernization projects and development schemes so often fail, and why the relational process of place making must be part of any social movement that hopes to build political power and lasting solidarity, especially in the face of disasters.

Disasters we all increasingly face are ecological, as Chang-Min Yu poignantly details in “Zhao Liang’s *Behemoth* (2015) and the Apocalypse of Ecological Visibility.” Dissecting the various layers of Zhao Liang’s 2015 film, much like an archaeologist carefully unearths old ruins, Yu reveals the film’s strategy “to pixelate, splice open, abstract as well as scale up and down natural and artificial landscapes that are equally under siege in China’s industrialization.” These strategies, he argues, combine to form a kind of “scalar narratology,” a tactic of representing the unrepresentable, whether that is the hardly discernable dust that ultimately leads to black lung disease or the extensive power of the state that so pervades to make its ubiquity indiscernible. Zhao’s use of cinematic techniques precisely parallels such “obfuscating forms of visibility” to raise questions about what is seen and unseen.

Yu pointedly asks, “In confronting environmental catastrophes, how can we find a medium that can augment the view of these burning issues? How can we unfold the circularity that the seeming insignificance of particles at the micro level is inextricably, in sedimented spatiotemporal layers, linked to the pattern at the macro level? What if our media are found wanting for this task?” Yu answers these questions with a *pedagogy of visibility*, which he explains “is not just a redistribution of the seen and the unseen or an attempt to teach the audience to look at the neglected corners of the living world. It is a matter of politics.” As a form of political practice then,

Zhao's oeuvre of white noises and fractured images for Yu constitutes "unruly acts of resistance," in which "incoherence serves as a cover for the director's irreverence and insubordination." By juxtaposing drastically different scales of landscapes and human figures in the space of the same screen, Yu imbues Zhao's films with a "scalar ecology, the living environment as woven through the differentiated but interconnected edifices of natural, social, and cultural forces that are fundamental to the understanding of how our lives are organized." Indeed, I was reminded of the political stakes of on-sitedness, or *hyŏnjangsŏng* in the Korean context, through Yu's reference to *xianchang*; whereas the term in filmic language could mean "on-the-spot" or "location shooting," he aptly notes that "more than making use of real locations, it designates a practice that highlights embodiment."

The final article in this issue dovetails provocatively to offer one potential way to deal with our ecological apocalypse by envisioning alternative "afterlives." In "Pema Tsenden's *Balloon*," Yuqing Yang examines the auteur and his 2019 film, featuring Amdo-Tibetan stories that draw on the Tibetan Buddhist concept of *bardo* བར་དོ་, literally meaning "between two," to refer to the transitional state between sleeping and waking, or death and rebirth. Evoking this transitional state, the surrealist narrative structures of Pema Tsenden's films portray characters who are often torn between their religious commitments and "traditional" values, and the more contemporary dictates and imperatives. In *Balloon*, a reference to a condom that has failed to serve its function, such conflict comes to a head when an Amdo woman must choose between continuing her unexpected pregnancy to enable the prophesied rebirth of a family member or having an abortion to comply with China's birth control policy.

Ultimately, the semitransparent condom-turned-balloon reinforces the Buddhist principle of material impermanence and the futile attachments to materiality as obstacles to enlightenment. The solution is self-negation, or a letting go of oneself that gives rise to compassion, which Yang reads as "a certain utopian anticipation in the midst of depicting alienated cultural experiences." While this may seem entirely counter to historical materialism and working-class struggles in the face of infrastructural capitalism as outlined by Pun Ngai, the nature of crises and the conditions of struggle come into view by being on-site. In that sense, each of the articles demonstrate a



sense of on-sitedness, not only in their own approach to their subject matters but also, perhaps more importantly, in their attention to the on-sited praxes as resources in the continued struggle.

## References

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