

The Secrets of the South: An Interview with Nobuo Takamori

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In 2020, Takamori Nobuo and Ping Lin — then-director of the Taipei Fine Art Museum (TFAM) — co-curated ‘The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection’ (25 July–25 October 2020) at TFAM. ‘The Secret South’ was a broad research based exhibition grounded in history, which primarily drew from works collected by TFAM, as well as artworks sourced from over sixteen museum collections in Taiwan and elsewhere.¹ Exhibited alongside the art from the collections were multiple archives and documents, as well as new and re-commissioned projects. A number of interlinked themes were explored throughout the exhibition, primarily centering on Taiwan’s relationships with other countries and regions in the Global South — including Southeast Asia (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore), Latin America (Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala) and Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo) — during the fraught geopolitical context of the Cold War. The exhibition was thematically separated into six sections, with certain galleries focusing on specific regions and time frames wherein these South-South relations took place.

The curator Kevin Murray identified the South as a “direction as well as a place” (Murray 2008, 26) as it is not simply a set of geographical regions that are post-colonial, experiencing lack or situated outside what is hegemonically conceived as the North. ‘If anything, the South is itself a mode of questioning,’ art historian Anthony Gardner writes. “As it

sparks new links between artists and audiences from different regions, it provokes new ways of thinking about global cultural currents. It is thus a question always open to debate and discussion.”(Gardener 2013, 3-4). The South encompasses multiple countries, their cultures, histories and languages, and these diverse threads are not easily mapped. Leora Joy Jones and Christopher Whitfield sat down with Takamori Nobuo to discuss ‘The Secret South’ and how an exhibition like this reflected upon Taiwan’s political self imagination and sense of identity, as well as these South-South relations.



Liu Kang, *River Flowing through Mountains* 1983, National Museum of History Collection. Image courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Can you explain why you chose the title ‘The Secret South’ for this exhibition?

There are several different elements to the term ‘secret’. Firstly, it alludes to the sense of secret collections in the storehouses of museums. Many museums had sections of their collections that weren’t exhibited so often, so we tried to find out why, and realised this was quite meaningful. During the process of

researching for this show we found evidence in hidden works and documents that added perspective to and changed Taiwanese art history narratives. There was an imbalance in many collections - mainly in relation to southern countries that were less noticed, less researched, and poorly represented in the past — that may reveal power structures in the motivations behind the collection. Another element of secrecy is evident in multiple archival documents that were not included in mainstream historical narratives. During the Cold War there were a lot of intensive military, economic, and political exchanges between southern countries and Taiwan. But this hasn't been incorporated into history or the memories of everyday people. So for most people who live in Taiwan, this kind of history remains a secret, and reminds them of secrets. The secret in the title is not only about what wasn't exhibited before, but what wasn't really discussed in textbooks, or covered by Taiwan's educational systems. There is no formal history of these exchanges written in academic textbooks.



Installation view of Ishihara Shisan, *Refugees in Tarla*, 1943, in 'The Secret South' held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, 2020. Image courtesy of TFAM.

The exhibition opens with *Refugees in Tarla* (1943) by Ishihara Shisan. In this large painting, a group of refugees stand together with their belongings and small children. In the center of the painting, a woman suckles a child, looking directly out at the viewer. Tropical plants and lush greenery surround them. There are mangoes, blooming flowers and a cacao tree heavy with ripe fruit. Can you discuss the significance of choosing *Refugees in Tarla* as the opening artwork?

This work acts more like an overture, to use a musical term. World War II serves as the background to that painting, especially if you think about the involvement of countries in the Pacific. For me, Taiwan's engagement in World War II was both the beginning and end of eras — the beginning of the exchange with Southeast Asia and the South Pacific for Taiwanese, but also the end of the colonial period. Many Taiwanese people had their first experience traveling to the South or to somewhere tropical, because their work was linked to the military during World War II. But this was also the end of colonial exchange. Both the painting and the Pacific War itself evoke the beginning of the Cold War. When we talk about the Cold War, I think we need to trace it back to the end of World War II, and so this painting by Shisan provides a conceptual background to the exhibition. I felt it was a fitting opening work.

Like *Refugees in Tarla*, there are a number of artworks in 'The Secret South' that touch on historical events and allude to political alliances. I'm interested in understanding how you feel 'The Secret South' further contributes to this discussion around Taiwan's identity, as a post-colonial nation?

When we talk about a Taiwanese identity we need to trace back this concept back to identities formed under colonial regimes. You just mentioned the tropical imagery in Shisan's painting. This type of painting was used to celebrate the political alliances made between Taiwan and other countries, often also hailing

from the South. In fact, during colonial times, this kind of tropical iconography was an integral part of Taiwan's colonial fine art. It was a methodology that a lot of local artists here used no matter if they were of Japanese descent or not. They employed the tropical landscape and its flora as a tool to depict Taiwan. This type of painting typically stems from the cultural exchanges between Japan and Taiwan, and was intended for audiences of salon style exhibitions in Taipei and Tokyo. After World War II, at the beginning of the 1950s, this kind of methodology became evident in Taiwanese art, thus becoming a part of the art history of the Global South. Taiwanese painters began to use the same methods to depict various landscapes across Southeast Asia. Different generations of Taiwanese artists then adopted this approach of framing Taiwan as an exotic place to present the intensive cooperation between Taiwan and other nations. Often, artists in colonised countries used subjects that were formed and popularised during colonial times as a method of depicting their self-identity. This influence remained strong in post-colonial periods. So, in this exhibition you will notice that before the nineties there was a disparity in how different generations used comparisons to identify the location of the self and the other.

The majority of the works shown in 'The Secret South' are from TFAM's collection. Despite it being a municipal museum, and not national, it is the oldest and most established art museum in Taiwan.² It organises the Taiwan pavilion at the Venice Biennale as well as the Taipei Biennial. TFAM's collection is seen as a window to Taiwanese art. According to the museum's mission statement, it aims to build a collection that encompasses the development of Taiwanese art history. In light of this, how does TFAM's collection – and by extension, the works chosen for this exhibition – reflect upon Taiwan's political self imagination and sense of identity?

TFAM's collection is quite unique because it's the first modern art museum in Taiwan. Even now, its budget is greater than the

National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (NTMoFA) in Taichung, so TFAM still sees itself as the leading institution in this category. Another reason TFAM's collection is important is because TFAM was established in 1983, four years before the lifting of Martial law and Taiwan's move to democracy. In the nineties, a lot of Taiwanese art collections were also established, reflecting a then burgeoning Taiwanese identity. The nineties was the golden age of Taiwanese economic development so there was more buying power during that period.



Installation view of 'The Secret South' held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei. 2020. Image courtesy of TFAM.

The Bandung Conference of 1955 was pivotal during the Cold War era in establishing dynamics between post-colonial nations that we understand to be foundational to the South-South cooperation and exchange explored within the exhibition. Taiwan did not participate in this conference and it was also largely unmentioned in the exhibition. Could you speak more about this?

The Bandung Conference was not officially attended by the Republic of China in Taipei, but during the 1950s there was a kind of refugee government of the Republic of Taiwan in Tokyo,³ and indeed they did send representatives to the Bandung Conference, as they were in support of South-South cooperation (this is the mutual cooperation between countries in the Global South). I think when we talk about the third world and the beginning of South-South cooperation, the Bandung Conference is kind of a historic landmark, but the problem is that from a Taiwanese perspective, Bandung represented left wing South-South cooperation which went against Taipei's extremely Chinese-nationalist right wing perspective. The Taiwanese government, and the majority of Taiwanese people had never been part of the political and cultural structure of the Third World, based on the fundamentals of the Bandung Conference. Besides this, the Bandung Conference references the beginning of Third World cooperation. After the Bandung Conference there were the Afro-Asian Writers Conferences that were directly related to post-colonial writing and film, which Taiwan also never participated in. Maybe this was because independent overseas institutions were interested in participating in political circles, and the refugee government was never internationally recognised. This was one reason why the Republic of China government in Taipei had more of an oppositional position to these South-South cooperations. However, Taiwan developed its own South-South operations in other ways. It sent agricultural teams and techniques to Africa. That kind of cooperation with the African continent was financially supported by the US.

Can you tell me how you see this exhibition expanding discourse on the South, especially in relation to other exhibitions that have explored South-South artistic exchanges?

I think what differentiates 'The Secret South' from other exhibitions that have touched on these exchanges, is that previous projects are more focused on contemporary art, and

'The Secret South' is focused on a historical and research based approach. Previous exhibitions or exchange projects that already existed in Taiwan were hosted by independent spaces. From an institutional perspective this is the first time many official institutions are working together to make decisions related to the subject of South-South relations. So this exhibition also highlights how in the past, institutions had already recognised and collected work focused on the South.

Were there any precedent exhibitions that you found yourself referring to or working away from?

To make a comparison, the National Gallery of Singapore is constantly rotating and exhibiting their permanent collection, but they aim to use a more historical narrative to show that Southeast Asia has a singular historical narrative.

Another kind of methodology can be used to show this process of exchange, instead of showing a singular historical narrative. The curatorial process itself can show the shifting of history. Of course the problem is that for an everyday audience, this kind of perspective may be more difficult for them to comprehend, because they haven't already participated in this kind of discussion. It's easier if we have a singular narrative in high school textbooks, and then from that we can develop dynamic directions, but for many, 'The Secret South' exhibition is their first experience of artistic exchanges between Taiwan and other countries, and it already weaves together more complex narratives, so it may also be a challenge for regular audiences to grasp this.

I also thought about the Jogja Biennale's 'Equator Project' (Indonesia). The Jogja Biennale has a really long history, but they started the Equator Project two decades ago and continue to facilitate exchanges between Indonesia and other countries such as India, Nigeria, Brazil, and a number of Arabic countries. I think the next edition will focus on Indonesia's artistic exchanges with Pacific Island nations. The methodology used in the Jogja Biennale informed this exhibition far more than the

curatorial models used at documenta for example. For me, the Jogja Biennale informs my work much more than other biennials. The Jogja Biennale has the spirit of The Bandung Conference. I'm not specifically referencing any one edition, I'm more inspired by their methodology. The Jogja Biennale also holds a conference for each edition to reflect on art history — for example at the conference that discussed Indonesian/Indian exchanges, they mentioned that during the Cold War period there were also some art students from Indonesia who decided to study in India. For most Asian students, the only possible place to study abroad was in the West, and sometimes in Japan. So to study in India shows there were alternative paths of knowledge sharing, instead of just knowledge introduced directly from the Western world. So through these kinds of discussions they are trying to evoke existing historical exchanges that reflect on contemporary exchanges, and to find other comparative platforms that could be compared with Western exchange.

What do you think about the exhibition?

Leora: I had this feeling that the exhibition could quite neatly be separated into two parts. It began with a more historical section — as it was displayed both chronologically and geographically, with documents, preliminary sketches, and archival materials — and then shifted into a more contemporary exhibition that included installations, video work and newly commissioned projects.

Personally I am more interested in imagining it as one exhibition, as one way to open a discussion on cross-generation artistic exchange, because for me, in an Asian context contemporary art practices are always divided into modern or traditional art. I think that is kind of a problem, for art practitioners and also for academics. From my personal perspective, this exhibition provides a platform, or a metaphorical library of artistic exchanges between Taiwan and the South. That is why I have provided this resource.

For this exhibition you collaborated with a lot of different researchers working on various archives, can you talk about integrating these archives into the show?

Yes, in fact the focus of the Taiwan/Philippines archive was not the researcher's main research topic. Huang Yi Hsiung was more interested in researching post-war pioneering modern artists but when he was working on his own research, I asked him to concentrate on certain lines of inquiry that would integrated neatly into this exhibition For the Singaporean Art Archive Project (SAAP) the researcher Koh Nguang How had been concentrating on a Singaporean archive, because he has been working on a project about how Singaporean artists engage with Cambodian art. So, for this exhibition, he selected certain materials or artworks from his own archive that related to Cambodian, Singaporean, and Taiwanese artists that have made sketches at Angkor Wat. I thought I could follow this same methodology to cooperate with him, so he spent almost half a year finding materials from his own archive that related to a Taiwanese Singaporean relationship. He found even more materials which he borrowed from other artists. So it's the first time we have tried to reconstruct artistic relationships between Taiwan and Singapore.



Installation view of 'The Secret South' 2020, held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei. Image courtesy of TFAM.

You've spent eight years researching the subject of the Global South, and how art has reflected on and factored into Taiwan's political positioning and relationships therein, and you have travelled extensively to interview artists and museum directors, curators, historians and other art practitioners in your research. What do you hope that the exhibition will provide to future discourse and scholarship on Taiwan's relationship to the South? Do you feel this exhibition is a final culmination of this research, or where do you see this research progressing to?

My personal research about the Global South began earlier but I was focused more on researching contemporary art. What dissatisfied me was that, since 2013, I felt like I needed to provide a more historical or academic review about what Taiwan had achieved before in relation to South-South exchange. This would make my project not only focused on contemporary discussions. It would also have a strong historical base.

I have also compiled research on the history of a Taiwanese/African relationship as well as the history of Taiwanese/Latin American exchange, so maybe those research projects can continue in the future.

Have you considered having another exhibition further down the line to examine Taiwan's relationship with Africa?

In fact I am planning one at the moment, but I am not really sure whether we have enough material regarding Taiwan's side of this relationship, so I will use more commissioned projects to discuss, for example, the migration of biological specimens. There are certain fish or snails that are originally from Africa, but because of colonialism they were brought to Taiwan and have become part of our natural biological systems. Also I wish to expand the topic to discuss Asian/African relationships, because a Taiwanese/African relationship is just a small part of this. Even when we talk about Asian/African relationships there is still a lot of research that we need to do.

You mentioned before that you hope there will be more historical reviews or academic research into what Taiwan has done in the past, regarding South-South exchange, and this would reflect on your research as well. Do you feel like this is an angle of discourse and research that will benefit Taiwan’s artistic exchanges in the future?

I want to use this chance to evoke an interest in Taiwan because scholars from Southeast Asia didn’t really have a strong interest in Taiwanese engagement in Southeast Asian history. I think this is a lens that can be used to invoke their interest. To build structurally sound academic research it needs to not be one sided. You need to build interest from both sides.

Just before ‘The Secret South’ closed in October 2020, local elected officials criticised the inclusion of Mei Dean-E’s installation *I-DEN-TI-TY* (1996, 2020) as it satirically addresses Taiwan’s search for international recognition. In the installation, cloths embroidered with ‘disgrace’ or ‘shame’ cover several golden plates that represent the various countries that have broken diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Despite having been exhibited several times in the past and winning multiple accolades, it was perceived within the context of the exhibition as levelling criticism at current Taiwanese politics, especially in light of the island’s relationship with China. In a now-deleted Facebook post, a politician called for the installation to be removed as it was “an incitation of xenophobia, or a pure rage out of resentment.” (Wong 2021 n.p) What was your response to the controversy regarding *I-DEN-TI-TY*?

These essential questions evoke the memories of this farce-like political event. However, this event is indeed key to entering the psyche of contemporary Taiwanese culture and politics.

I-DEN-TI-TY is not only a landmark of Taiwanese contemporary art, it also plays an important key role in discussing and negotiating the concept of a museum collection.

The artist's manifesto declares it to be an ongoing work which will only be finished when the R.O.C. vanishes, or has cut off official relationships with every country in the world. So, besides the political arguments carried by *I-DEN-TI-TY*, it has also created a kind of paradoxical circumstance that challenges the nature of museum collections. That's also the reason why each exhibited version of *I-DEN-TI-TY* is different.



Installation view of Mei Deam-E, *I-DEN-TI-TY*, 1996, 2020 in 'The Secret South' at TFAM. Courtesy of TFAM.

Words play important roles in *I-DEN-TI-TY*. In fact, although the words embroidered on the cloths covering the ceremonial plates translate to “disgrace” or “shame on you”, these words are classical idioms mainly used in Confucianism scriptures; meaning they are not words people use in ordinary conversation (similar

to if someone today used the Latin term “dedectus” instead of “shame”). Another reason why the usage of words matter is that they reflect how government-controlled newspapers before the twenty-first century described the event of cutting-off diplomatic relationships. For a local audience, these words remind us of the ridiculous official wording used during the dictatorship regime, more than a sense of xenophobia. I assume the strong irony of *I-DEN-TI-TY* is the core reason that it aroused negative feelings in politicians aligned with the Kuomintang (KMT) — often referred to in English as the Chinese Nationalist Party — because it reminds the audience of the irony of the KMT’s dictatorship.

How do you think the backlash to the inclusion of *I-DEN-TI-TY* and the perceived consequences reflect on your curatorial themes and the intention of this exhibition?

The strategy of the KMT now is to try to find any way to rally against the pro-independence parties. It is important to note that the KMT is currently at their weakest moment in post-war history, and they will do everything possible to re-take power. To be frank, the actions of these politicians didn’t have too much of an effect, academically. Aside from their poor knowledge of art (for example, they insisted that art should be beautiful and reflect goodness), one factor we should not ignore is that they raised this issue when the city council’s scheduled budget was up for review. As TFAM is a municipal museum, the budget included the museum’s allocated funding.

The Taipei mayor Ko Wen-Je publicly advised “we should give the director Ping Lin a demerit” (Pamela Wong 2021, n.p) should any of the countries who broke diplomatic ties with Taiwan complain about the work. However, after public outcry to this, he retracted his statement. What do you think responses like this mean for the future of South-South exchange both within and outside of the arts?

There are two possible reasons why no country which has

broken diplomatic relationships with Taiwan has registered any complaints about this work. Firstly, the countries which have broken diplomatic relations with Taiwan — usually developing Southern countries — closed the diplomatic posts they had established here when official ties were severed. In contrast, many Western countries who don't officially recognise Taiwan and thus don't have embassies here, still retain diplomatic 'offices' on the island. Another reason why no complaint has been registered is due to the fact that South-South cooperation in a Taiwanese context rarely enters the domain of the art world. Personally, I would be happy if Senegal or the Solomon Islands made official accusations regarding this matter. It's better than the current situation in which Taiwan is isolated and ignored.

Generally speaking, the response to the inclusion of Mei's *I-DEN-TI-TY* in 'The Secret South' shows how a work can still affect and interact with contemporary society, even after two and a half decades.

Endnotes:

1. The artworks in ‘The Secret South’ were sourced from over sixteen museum collections in Taiwan: AP Archive , Ang Kiukok’s Family, British Pathé, Central News Agency, Chen Wen Hsi’s Family, Cheong Soo Pieng’s Family, Eye Filmmuseum, Liu Kang’s Family, INDIGENOUS Peoples Cultural Foundation, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Kuo Hsueh Hu Foundation, National Archives Administration, National Development Council, National Museum of History, National Museum of Natural Science, National Museum of Taiwan History, National Taiwan Museum, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, National Taiwan Library , Shiy De Jinn Foundation, Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute, Taipei Public Library, Yuyu Yang Art Education Foundation.
2. This museum is directly funded by the municipal government, and the collection and the building belong to the city. Since it is municipal, the directors reflect the political parties, so when directors were appointed while the KMT was in power, this is reflected in the choices made regarding works in the collection.
3. Taiwan had a second provisional government in exile in Japan from 1956–1977 which advocated for Taiwan’s independence remotely, while the Taipei government (ROC Taiwan) fought against any Taiwanese independence movements.

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Pamela Wong “Taipei Fine Arts Museum Director To Step Down”.

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