The Cyber-reception for Three Hakka Tulou Construction Projects in Taiwan

From the Event to a Critique of Representative Democracy

FIORELLA BOURGEOS

ABSTRACT: In the early 2010s, under the second mandate of Ma Ying-jeou (KMT), plans to construct three Hakka tulou in western Taiwan aroused considerable discontent amongst a section of the Taiwanese population. Their disapproval manifested itself in the eruption of small-scale demonstrations and in the expression of differences of opinion and individual experiences in the cybersphere. As actors, internet users took on the role of citizen’s watch and people’s judge and revealed, through a critique of the three projects, the failings and tensions present in representative democracy both in terms of cultural identity and procedural mechanisms, highlighting opposed values of the various social agents.

KEYWORDS: Taiwan, representative democracy, local election, Miaoli, tulou, Liu Cheng-hung, new media, actor, value, process.

In Taiwan, in the early 2010s, the leaders of the Miaoli and Hsinchu districts and the mayor of Taichung – all three affiliated to the Kuomintang (KMT) – drew up a plan for the construction of Hakka tulou (kejia tulou 客家土樓) in each of these areas. Of the three projects, only the Miaoli plan came to fruition: the tulou known as the Hakka Roundhouse (Kejia yuanlou 客家圓樓) was inaugurated on 25 October 2014 in the town of Houlong 后龍. Officially, the aim of these three initiatives was the development of tourism through the valuation of “Hakka culture.”

From the time they were proposed until their realisation or abandonment, these three projects engendered lively criticism on the part of local residents, the media, and Taiwanese intellectuals. The fiercest polemic centred on the Miaoli tulou. In 2010, the building of the Hakka Roundhouse led to the demolition of two clay structures built by the Hakkas of Taiwan in the early 1950s: the “eight-trigram kiln” (bagua yao 八卦窯) and the “tetragonal kiln” (sifang yao 四方窯). In an interview conducted by Liberty Times in July 2013, Ho Chuan-kun 何傳坤, a Taiwanese anthropologist from the National Tsing Hua University, expressed his disapproval of the destruction of a part of Taiwanese Hakka culture, seeing in it the renunciation of a cultural heritage.

The value of historic monuments lies in the place where they have their roots. When the government of the district of Miaoli imitates a tulou, is it to attract Taiwanese tourists or Chinese tourists? Why would Chinese tourists come to Taiwan to visit these mountain fortresses, the tulou? [...] If we are not saving the cultural heritage
of the Hakka of Taiwan, could it be because we do not have confidence in our own heritage? (4)

On 21 September 2013, the Taiwan Hakka Think Tank (Taiwan Kejia zhiku 台灣客家智庫) organised a press conference to call upon the Head of the Miaoli district, Liu Cheng-hung 劉政鴻, to “immediately stop the building of a Chinese Hakka tulou that has no connection with Taiwan,” to broaden his knowledge of Hakka culture, and to enhance the cultural heritage of Miaoli District. (5)

Alongside small-scale demonstrations against the destruction of the kilns and the building of a tulou, (6) the protesters exploited the virtual sphere, a privileged forum for the “critical sovereignty of opinion,” (7) which was increasingly becoming a zone and a tool for citizen-based surveillance in Taiwan. (8) This exercise of citizen activity in a democratic context (evaluation, judgement, prevention, etc.) is part of the communication society, structured by social media (Facebook, Wechat, Line, etc.), microblogs (Twitter, Weibo), Bulletin Board Systems (PTT), and other virtual interfaces that transmit information and enable dialogue between internet users. (9) These new online communication platforms have led researchers to investigate the observations of internet users in order to have a better understanding of their engagement and of the politico-social dimension. (10)

This article analyses certain online controversies (11) concerning the reception of the three tulou building projects through a qualitative survey on new media and through the exchange of comments between internet users published between July 2013 and July 2015. The aim of studying these comments is to reproduce the social mood of a section of the Taiwanese population under the second mandate of President Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 (KMT) from May 2012 to May 2016, and at the same time to enable researchers to understand more clearly the censorship role played by internet users, who are often only partially anonymous, and to consider the dynamics of the comments and virtual dialogue of internet users.

Although the question of identity is well and truly present in the online posts, internet users reveal a varied range of concerns that contribute to a common dynamic: the creation of an indictment against the government in power and the elaboration of a common horizon of expectation. Virtually or physically, the players (militants, internet users, and politicians) mobilise in the name of certain values to initiate, stop, or change the direction of a process of reform. This article studies the reception of three tulou construction projects in Taiwan from the perspective of the processual change that led to the realisation or abandonment of the project rather than from the perspective of the result. (12)

Empirical materials, choice of corpus, and methodology

Most of the online articles on building tulou in the Miaoli and Hsinchu districts and in the Taichung municipality were published between 2013 and 2015 in the two biggest Taiwanese daily papers, the liberal democratic Liberty Times (Ziyou shibao 自由時報), in favour of Taiwanese independence, and Apple Daily (Pingguo ribao 蘋果日報), considered to be a moderate daily. (13) Five of the articles are followed by Facebook comments (four in Apple Daily and one in Liberty Times), (14) so a total of 129 Facebook comments were collected. This data base was expanded by 23 Facebook comments posted after an article in the online ETtoday 東森新聞雲, and 15 Facebook comments published on the page of the Taiwanese forum Mesotw (Taiwan xiaozhan 台灣小站), entitled “Miaoli District Head Liu Cheng-hung demolishes Taiwanese Hakka kilns to build a Chinese tulou” (Miaoli xian-zhang Liu Zhenghong chi Taiwan Kejia yao gai Zhongguo tulou) 蘇榮(台灣客家業坊 盖中國土樓). Moreover, the survey resulted in the collection of 172 other posts on three articles published on one of the main Taiwanese platforms, PTT Bulletin Board System (Pittiti shiyie fang 批踢踢實業坊), mainly used by students. In all, a sample of 367 comments from internet users, of variable quality and length, were analysed. It should be pointed out that the pages of the PTT forum and Mesotw are systematically linked to Liberty Times and Apple Daily.

Online, the context is provided by many elements: the subject of the page on which the comment is posted, its place in a virtual dialogue between internet users, the social network used to publish the comment, etc.
In the case of the Facebook posts, for example, a survey was conducted on the profile of the internet user in question in order to understand the place of the comment in the news thread. Nonetheless, internet users enjoy partial anonymity, which acts as a definite curb to a comprehensive understanding of the identity of the internet user as a player in the social network. Digital identity also depends as much on the virtual platform (that establishes a normative framework of variable flexibility) as on the internet user. [13]

A chronological analysis of the posts revealed two broad time spans, each relating to a specific subject: the comments from 2013 relate mainly to the question of identity, whilst those from 2014 and 2015 reveal a critique of the local political system. These two issues should be placed against the background of a more general consideration of the uncertainties of representational democracy in the Taiwanese context.

(De) legitimising the representation of identities: Authority figure and political fiction

Miaoli District head Liu Cheng-hung announced in a press release in July 2013:

The construction of the tulou represents the local culture of 65% of the Miaoli Hakka and should enable us to attract tourists. We hope that everyone will be able to assimilate the tulou as an integral part of local culture and benefit from this ancestral wisdom. [16]

This declaration drew numerous comments from both sympathisers and detractors of Liu Cheng-hung’s position, all raising the same question: can the tulou embody the Hakka of Taiwan? Two major fundamental questions emerged from the analysis of internet users’ comments: is the culture and identity of the Taiwanese Hakka distinct from that of the Chinese Hakka? Are local officials justified in representing a hypostatised Hakka community? Over and above previous analyses of the lack of consensus between Chinese culture and Taiwanese identity, these issues may be understood in the light of the tension between the construction of a political issue as an abstract political principle relating to a form of totality, or unity (“the People,” “the Hakka ethnic group”), [17] and the liberal principle whereby each individualised subject has the right to self-determination. [18] Although a comment is a form of individual expression, its rhetoric is characterised by reference to collective forms of designation, synecdoches that use / as an expression of the collective. [19] By using these collective designations as a screen for the /, the internet user tends to set himself up as an authority figure, the legitimate spokesperson for a community.

Chinese Hakka vs Taiwanese Hakka: Aporia of the essentialisation of an identity dualism

Following an article in Apple Daily published on 21 July 2013, entitled “Miaoli district is building a small mountain fortress, a ‘Fujian tulou’,” an internet user with a higher education diploma, Nan Xiang Chu, distinguished between two Hakka communities (see figure 1):

In the case of the Facebook posts, for example, a survey was conducted on the profile of the internet user in question in order to understand the place of the comment in the news thread. Nonetheless, internet users enjoy partial anonymity, which acts as a definite curb to a comprehensive understanding of the identity of the internet user as a player in the social network. Digital identity also depends as much on the virtual platform (that establishes a normative framework of variable flexibility) as on the internet user. [13]

A chronological analysis of the posts revealed two broad time spans, each relating to a specific subject: the comments from 2013 relate mainly to the question of identity, whilst those from 2014 and 2015 reveal a critique of the local political system. These two issues should be placed against the background of a more general consideration of the uncertainties of representational democracy in the Taiwanese context.

(De) legitimising the representation of identities: Authority figure and political fiction

Miaoli District head Liu Cheng-hung announced in a press release in July 2013:

The construction of the tulou represents the local culture of 65% of the Miaoli Hakka and should enable us to attract tourists. We hope that everyone will be able to assimilate the tulou as an integral part of local culture and benefit from this ancestral wisdom. [16]

This declaration drew numerous comments from both sympathisers and detractors of Liu Cheng-hung’s position, all raising the same question: can the tulou embody the Hakka of Taiwan? Two major fundamental questions emerged from the analysis of internet users’ comments: is the culture and identity of the Taiwanese Hakka distinct from that of the Chinese Hakka? Are local officials justified in representing a hypostatised Hakka community? Over and above previous analyses of the lack of consensus between Chinese culture and Taiwanese identity, these issues may be understood in the light of the tension between the construction of a political issue as an abstract political principle relating to a form of totality, or unity (“the People,” “the Hakka ethnic group”), [17] and the liberal principle whereby each individualised subject has the right to self-determination. [18] Although a comment is a form of individual expression, its rhetoric is characterised by reference to collective forms of designation, synecdoches that use / as an expression of the collective. [19] By using these collective designations as a screen for the /, the internet user tends to set himself up as an authority figure, the legitimate spokesperson for a community.

Chinese Hakka vs Taiwanese Hakka: Aporia of the essentialisation of an identity dualism

Following an article in Apple Daily published on 21 July 2013, entitled “Miaoli district is building a small mountain fortress, a ‘Fujian tulou’,” an internet user with a higher education diploma, Nan Xiang Chu, distinguished between two Hakka communities (see figure 1):

In the case of the Facebook posts, for example, a survey was conducted on the profile of the internet user in question in order to understand the place of the comment in the news thread. Nonetheless, internet users enjoy partial anonymity, which acts as a definite curb to a comprehensive understanding of the identity of the internet user as a player in the social network. Digital identity also depends as much on the virtual platform (that establishes a normative framework of variable flexibility) as on the internet user. [13]

A chronological analysis of the posts revealed two broad time spans, each relating to a specific subject: the comments from 2013 relate mainly to the question of identity, whilst those from 2014 and 2015 reveal a critique of the local political system. These two issues should be placed against the background of a more general consideration of the uncertainties of representational democracy in the Taiwanese context.

(De) legitimising the representation of identities: Authority figure and political fiction

Miaoli District head Liu Cheng-hung announced in a press release in July 2013:

The construction of the tulou represents the local culture of 65% of the Miaoli Hakka and should enable us to attract tourists. We hope that everyone will be able to assimilate the tulou as an integral part of local culture and benefit from this ancestral wisdom. [16]

This declaration drew numerous comments from both sympathisers and detractors of Liu Cheng-hung’s position, all raising the same question: can the tulou embody the Hakka of Taiwan? Two major fundamental questions emerged from the analysis of internet users’ comments: is the culture and identity of the Taiwanese Hakka distinct from that of the Chinese Hakka? Are local officials justified in representing a hypostatised Hakka community? Over and above previous analyses of the lack of consensus between Chinese culture and Taiwanese identity, these issues may be understood in the light of the tension between the construction of a political issue as an abstract political principle relating to a form of totality, or unity (“the People,” “the Hakka ethnic group”), [17] and the liberal principle whereby each individualised subject has the right to self-determination. [18] Although a comment is a form of individual expression, its rhetoric is characterised by reference to collective forms of designation, synecdoches that use / as an expression of the collective. [19] By using these collective designations as a screen for the /, the internet user tends to set himself up as an authority figure, the legitimate spokesperson for a community.

Chinese Hakka vs Taiwanese Hakka: Aporia of the essentialisation of an identity dualism

Following an article in Apple Daily published on 21 July 2013, entitled “Miaoli district is building a small mountain fortress, a ‘Fujian tulou’,” an internet user with a higher education diploma, Nan Xiang Chu, distinguished between two Hakka communities (see figure 1):

In the case of the Facebook posts, for example, a survey was conducted on the profile of the internet user in question in order to understand the place of the comment in the news thread. Nonetheless, internet users enjoy partial anonymity, which acts as a definite curb to a comprehensive understanding of the identity of the internet user as a player in the social network. Digital identity also depends as much on the virtual platform (that establishes a normative framework of variable flexibility) as on the internet user. [13]

A chronological analysis of the posts revealed two broad time spans, each relating to a specific subject: the comments from 2013 relate mainly to the question of identity, whilst those from 2014 and 2015 reveal a critique of the local political system. These two issues should be placed against the background of a more general consideration of the uncertainties of representational democracy in the Taiwanese context.

(De) legitimising the representation of identities: Authority figure and political fiction

Miaoli District head Liu Cheng-hung announced in a press release in July 2013:

The construction of the tulou represents the local culture of 65% of the Miaoli Hakka and should enable us to attract tourists. We hope that everyone will be able to assimilate the tulou as an integral part of local culture and benefit from this ancestral wisdom. [16]

This declaration drew numerous comments from both sympathisers and detractors of Liu Cheng-hung’s position, all raising the same question: can the tulou embody the Hakka of Taiwan? Two major fundamental questions emerged from the analysis of internet users’ comments: is the culture and identity of the Taiwanese Hakka distinct from that of the Chinese Hakka? Are local officials justified in representing a hypostatised Hakka community? Over and above previous analyses of the lack of consensus between Chinese culture and Taiwanese identity, these issues may be understood in the light of the tension between the construction of a political issue as an abstract political principle relating to a form of totality, or unity (“the People,” “the Hakka ethnic group”), [17] and the liberal principle whereby each individualised subject has the right to self-determination. [18] Although a comment is a form of individual expression, its rhetoric is characterised by reference to collective forms of designation, synecdoches that use / as an expression of the collective. [19] By using these collective designations as a screen for the /, the internet user tends to set himself up as an authority figure, the legitimate spokesperson for a community.

Chinese Hakka vs Taiwanese Hakka: Aporia of the essentialisation of an identity dualism

Following an article in Apple Daily published on 21 July 2013, entitled “Miaoli district is building a small mountain fortress, a ‘Fujian tulou’,” an internet user with a higher education diploma, Nan Xiang Chu, distinguished between two Hakka communities (see figure 1):

In the case of the Facebook posts, for example, a survey was conducted on the profile of the internet user in question in order to understand the place of the comment in the news thread. Nonetheless, internet users enjoy partial anonymity, which acts as a definite curb to a comprehensive understanding of the identity of the internet user as a player in the social network. Digital identity also depends as much on the virtual platform (that establishes a normative framework of variable flexibility) as on the internet user. [13]

A chronological analysis of the posts revealed two broad time spans, each relating to a specific subject: the comments from 2013 relate mainly to the question of identity, whilst those from 2014 and 2015 reveal a critique of the local political system. These two issues should be placed against the background of a more general consideration of the uncertainties of representational democracy in the Taiwanese context.
of a homogenous Hakka community whose culture is Chinese. In a comment on Facebook published following the article in Apple Daily, internet user Jimmy Chen declares that the Hakkas are migrants originating from the mainland and consequently, this historical fact is enough to legitimise the construction of a tulou in Miaoli. Similarly, Ma Shan 滅山, a Hakka from Miaoli who supports the Pan-Blue Coalition and is combating what he considers Minnan chauvinism in Taiwan, frequently underlines the Taiwanese Hakkas' Chinese origin. In a comment dated 21 July 2013, he adds:

The construction of Hakka tulou in Fujian also bears historic witness to what the Hakkas have experienced. [...] Many Hakka friends automatically associate the tulou with a Hakka dwelling place. This does indeed mean that this type of architectural heritage can also represent Hakka culture. (22)

In the same exchange of comments, Wu Mengru 吳孟儒 uses a sarcastic sophism in order to discredit the rhetoric on origins that justifies the idea that Chinese Hakka culture is representative of the Taiwanese Hakkas’ history:

If we want to see the heritage of the Hakkas from over the Strait, we only need to go there; why come to see what the Taiwanese have done? Should we, since human origins lie in Africa, transform all the Taiwanese buildings into African buildings? Though all are related to each other, in the end, all societies, all over the world, develop a local culture [that is their own] [...]. (24)

Nevertheless, although the history of the migration of Hakkas to Taiwan remains an authoritative argument put forward by many internet users, the cultural rhetoric that emanates from it is skilfully treated by those who support Taiwanese self-determination regarding their identity, culture, collective memory, and history. Those who believe that there is a cultural difference between a Taiwanese Hakka community and a Mainland Hakka group concede that the Hakkas who immigrated to Taiwan produced a culture that is all their own since they assimilated part of the native culture. (25) The Taiwan Hakka Think Tank therefore affirmed that “the construction of a round tulou goes against the historical process of the Hakkas of Taiwan.” (26) In a Facebook comment dated 22 July 2013, a student from the National University of Tainan, Wayne Chen, argues that the ancestors of the Hakkas who immigrated to Taiwan never built tulou, so the tulou cannot embody the Taiwanese Hakka community.

Detractors and zealots approach the historical narrative from two distinct, opposing angles. The first group base their arguments on a retrospective deterministic historical path to legitimise the Chinese identity of the Hakkas invoked by the tulou monument. The second group, on the other hand, invoke a prospective deterministic historical dynamic by which the historic force that moves Taiwan inevitably leads to the formation of a Hakka culture that has Taiwanese foundations. Therefore, those who oppose the tulou construction project condemn the semiotic dimension of the architecture as part of a politically-imposed narrative that conflicts with a historic process of self-determination unique to Taiwan.

From one collective to another: An attack on Taiwanese sovereignty

In an attempt to discredit the erection of the Miaoli tulou and to reinforce a feeling of “misrepresentation,” internet user Tsen Wei Lun quotes the introduction to an article in Liberty Times:

Chen Ban 陳板, ex-president of the Hakka television channel and a guest professor affiliated with the Department of Architecture Art Conservation of the National University of the Arts in Taiwan, strongly criticised Liu Cheng-hung by affirming that he had deceived the Taiwanese people by creating a meaningless style of architecture. (27)

This extract sees the “people” as a form of collective interiority with its own character, whose expectations have not been fulfilled. The use of the topic “Taiwanese people” rather than “Hakka” is more evident in the PTT comments than in those of Liberty Times and Apple Daily. On 22 July 2013, an internet user introduced a topic on an article in Liberty Times entitled “Miaoli District Head Liu Cheng-hung demolishes Taiwanese Hakka kilns to build a Chinese tulou.” (28) In a series of three comments, internet user Chungrew makes no mention of the Hakkas and concentrates his arguments on the fragile construction of Taiwan as a nation (see figure 2):

Of course this [the destruction of the kilns and building of the tulou] is inappropriate; this type of procedure will destroy traditional Taiwanese culture and damage its history. But if, however, we are convinced that Taiwanese roots are in China, then this sort of thing is fair and right. A nation without roots is a terribly frightening thing.

22. The Pan-Blue Coalition is an alliance between several Taiwanese parties – including the KMT, the People First Party, the New Party, and the MinKuoTang – who support, amongst other things, the promotion of Chinese nationalism in Taiwan.
23. Huang Yangming and Yang Yongsheng, “Miaoli xian gai shanzhai ‘Fujian tulou’” (Miaoli District is demolishing a mountain fortress “a Fujian tulou”), op. cit.
24. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Huang Yangming and Yang Yongsheng, “Miaoli xian gai shanzhai ‘Fujian tulou’” (Miaoli District is building a mountain fortress “a Fujian tulou”), op. cit.
How should we interpret the effort of internet user Chungrew to rationalise the situation? In his view, it is above all a question of a conflict over the interpretation of the “roots of the identity” of the Taiwanese population. Moreover, he does not hesitate to warn against the risks inherent in the indetermination of these roots for the “Taiwanese nation.”

Whether it is a question of the defenders of the tulou or of its opponents, the question of the balance between the instituted (the Hakka and secondly the Taiwanese) and the instituting (the tulou) reveals the tension created by the inclusion of the autonomous individual (the internet user) in a personified affective community (“the Taiwanese” people and “the Hakkas”) whose substance has been called into question. This conflict seems unsurpassable in that internet users and the media have not reflected upon the category of “Hakka” as an institutionalised political entity. Moreover, the media have not encouraged the rationalisation of the pluralism underlying this standardising designation.

The “foreigner,” between exemplariness and defiance: A critique of inter-Strait cultural exchange policies

On 22 July 2013, Liberty Times published an article entitled “Miaoli District Head Liu Cheng-hung demolishes Taiwanese Hakka kilns to build a Chinese tulou.” The article reproduces the dialogue between public intellectuals and members of the government:

The Miaoli government responded to the unsolicited criticism expressed by Wu Yi-chen [PDP and Legislative Yuan member] in the previous day’s paper, which accused the government of putting pressure on the culture of Taiwanese Hakka. She [Wu Yi-chen] had not understood that cultures can be exchanged and combined [ronghe jiaoliu 融合交流] and do not take account of territorial boundaries. They cannot be neatly compartmentalised. Although public figures use this topic as a pretext for satisfying their own objectives, the government of the district will protest strongly and will not give in. (29)

Although these official statements would seem to maintain a distinction between the Hakkas of China and the Hakkas of Taiwan, the topic of the exchange and mixing of cultures annoyed many internet users. In a comment published on 22 July 2013 on the Mesotw platform, internet user Kcm quoted the above passage and denounced the cultural exchange policies this standardising designation.

In this comment, internet user Chen Hongling, an interior architect living in Kaohsiung and who previously lived in Miaoli, does not hesitate to question Liu Cheng-hung’s relationship with China and call his competency into question. Similarly, internet user Zeng Huimei, an inhabitant of the district of Changhua 彰化 and supporter of the Pan-Green Coalition, disapproves of the Taichung tulou project in the Hakka district of Tungshih 東勢區, calling it a “circular Chinese dream of Hu Chih-chiang [胡志強],” mayor of Taichung and affiliated with the KMT. The expression “Chinese dream” (Zhongguo meng 中国梦) used by the internet user is a direct reference to the political slogan of Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and President of the People’s Republic of China since 2013, for whom “the Chinese dream” is the dream of the Chinese nation, but also that of every Chinese person. (34)

So over and above the debate on the politicised representation of Hakka and Taiwanese identities, the indictment made up of the comments of internet users targets heritage management in Taiwan by local officials.

Revealing wrongs: Vices and virtues of the government

Whilst the comments from 2013 are mainly focused on questions of identity, those from 2014 and 2015 reveal new concerns linked to three major events. On the one hand, the precursor of the Miaoli tulou project is seen as a failure by the media and the majority of the inhabitants of Miaoli, Hsinchu, and Taichung. Indeed, the Miaoli tulou, inaugurated in October 2014, contributed to an increase in the budget deficit of Miaoli District, al-
ready deep in debt. The low level of attendance for the site did not succeed in boosting tourism in the region. The media added it ipso facto to the long list of “Mosquito halls” (white elephant buildings) (wenzi guan蚊子館) in Miaoli, just like the Ma village (Mafen guan馬奮館 or Majia zhuang馬家庄) [35] and Yingtsai Academy (Yingcai shuyuan英才書院). [36] On the other hand, the comments published between June 2014 and July 2015 must be analysed in the light of a socio-political context punctuated by numerous demonstrations that resulted in, amongst others, the Sunflower Movement (18 March – 10 April 2014), [37] a time of civil disobedience and delegitimisation of the then central government that marked a weakening of the presidential function as well as a loss of authority for the KMT. Lastly, the local general election on 29 November 2014 led to the victory of the DPP in most municipalities, districts, and towns. Six localities, however, remained under the domination of the KMT, including the districts of Miaoli and Hsinchu. [38]

Against this background of upheaval in which internet users denounced the wrongs of the system of representation, certain comments opened up a horizon of expectation and formulated the prerequisites for the establishment of a fair and moral government attentive to the demands of the population and which would be unable to govern without its consent.

An act of accusation against local officials: Personifying corruption

The internet users took on a censorship role towards the officials they were assessing. As judges, they condemned the acts of these politicians if they did not measure up to an implicit moral and politico-judicial ethic. Liu Cheng-hung, for example, was accused of land speculation. On the Mesotw forum, the internet user NorthStar protested:

Liu Cheng-hung is the biggest bandit in Miaoli. He has taken the people’s land by force and destroyed their heritage. He connives with the entrepreneurs who speculate on building land […]. [39]

For Chen Dongfu 陳東甫, Liu’s aim was to increase land prices in order to gentrify the district in which he lived:

First, Liu Cheng-hung built, next to his home, a high-speed train station. Then he had a bilingual school built. The land next to his home was originally agricultural land. Suddenly, land prices increased and now he is building a tulou there. He is continually developing the place […]. [40]

Land speculation incited certain internet users to play on the Chinese character tu 土 meaning here “the earth, the ground, the dust,” coupling it with other Chinese characters to create insults. Liu Cheng-hung is called a tufei 土匪, meaning “bandit,” from tu bawang 土霸王, a term meaning a “land despot,” and tu huangdi 土皇帝, an expression that might be translated as “land emperor” (see figure 3):

Liu Cheng-hung is “dust,” he has become land emperor in Miaoli, isn’t it wonderful? The magazines have elected him “chief of the five-star district.” Building an “edifice of earth” for “the land emperor” is the next criteria for becoming chief of a five-star district. [41]

Jay Fang, a young man of 35 living in Taipei, called into question the relative credibility of the system for rating districts. Indeed, in 2012, Liu Cheng-hung was designated chief of a five-star district following a “poll measuring the level of satisfaction [of the population] with the officials at the head of the districts and municipalities” (xiānzhìzhèng shìzhèng 順利中央街紙街, published annually by the magazine Yuanjian 远見雜誌). The nomination of Liu was interpreted as an act of complicity between the Miaoli district chief and the media. In his exchange with Jay Fang, Lin Zuguang 林祖光, a young Taiwanese from Kaohsiung and supporter of the Black Island Nation Youth Front (Heise daoguo qingnian zhènxiàn 黑色島國青年陣線), added, “925,000 NT$ to buy the magazines and get yourself elected chief of a five-star district.” [42] Comments, as a form of protest, and more generally, those in the virtual sphere, have come to compensate for a lack of surveillance institutions and consequently, a failing of the democratic government to

37. At the start of the Sunflower Movement, the students demanded the cessation of all trade negotiations with China and transparency of information relating to the Trade Agreement on services between the two shores.
38. The local elections on 29 November 2014 consisted of nine ballots and a consultation. At stake in these elections was “the renewal of 11,130 mandates: that of the mayors of the special municipalities and towns […] country magistrates […] municipal and county councillors […] mayors […] village and district chiefs […] and the mandates of native district chiefs and their councillors […]” Cf. Frank Muyard, “Voting Shift in the November 2014 Local Elections in Taiwan: Strong rebuke to Ma Ying-jeou’s government and policies and landslide victory for the DPP,” China Perspectives, 2015/1, p. 55.
40. Su Fanghe and Fu Chaobiao, “Miaoli xian zhengfu biancheng feng sheng diao jian zhi ‘Fujian tulou’” (Miaoli District Chief Cheng-hung is destroying Taiwanese Hakka kilns to build a Chinese tulou), op. cit.
41. Huang Yangming and Yang Yongsheng, “Miaoli xian gai shanzhai ‘Fujian tulou’” (Miaoli District is building a mountain fortress ‘a Fujian tulou’), op. cit.
42. Ibid.
regulate itself. Therefore, for internet user Chen Hongmou 許洪謀, if the government is not competent in the exercise of the power bestowed on it, it is up to the sovereign people to make themselves known and defend their rights. [49]

The role of the internet user-censors was to reveal abuses in a system. They associated the demolition of the Hakka kilns in Miaoli in 2013 and the mobilisation solicited by the forced buying by the state of land belonging to the peasant farmers of Zhudong in 2015 for the construction of a tulou, with the destruction set in motion by Liu Cheng-hung. Many internet users reminded their readers that since 2010, Liu had been behind a wave of expulsions and the demolition of homes that had led to several suicides in the village of Dabu 大埔, in the district of Miaoli. Subsequently, the population of the district organised several demonstrations in order to denounce the expropriation of land by the local government. For example, the demands of the big protest movement of 18 August 2013, whose slogan was “Today Dabu has been demolished, tomorrow the government will be destroyed” (Jintian chai Dabu, mingtian chai zhengfu 今天拆大埔, 明天拆政府), included the revision of the Law on the Expropriation of Land (Tudi zhi gaodu 法律), if the power of the government is not competent in the exercise of the power bestowed on it, it is up to the sovereign people to make themselves known and defend their rights. Although local officials such as Liu Cheng-hung in Miaoli and Chiu Ching-chun in Hsinchu obtained procedural legitimacy through the elections (also called “legitimacy of establishment”), [48] they did not acquire the social legitimacy granted by those they governed. Indeed, the relationship of trust between the governing and the governed is established in the course of the mandate and not through the electoral procedure.

How dare you! The Hakka of Taiwan have never lived in a tulou... [...] Can someone tell me where the value and meaning of all that is? If that isn’t liquidating the budget, what is? Don’t lie to me, there are no talented men [rencai 人才] in Hsinchu. Just how competent [gaodu 高度] are our leaders? In which direction is the region developing? I implore these incompetent leaders [mei gaodu de ren 沒高度的人] not to stand for election again [...] [49]

In this comment, Alan Hsieh underlines the lack of perspective in the budgetary policies applied in Hsinchu, which he associates with the incompetence of the local officials in administrative matters. As a result, the electoral procedure does not allow “men of talent” and experts to be chosen. Concern over the management of expenses by the local executive branch is frequent in the comments of internet users. The deficit in Miaoli District, an example not to be repeated, is used as an authoritative argument by internet users to rationalise their corresponding rejection of the Hsinchu and Taichung projects.

The internet users expressed their anxiety over the local general elections in November 2014; some of them evoked the possibility of a KMT victory in their locality and thought that the tulou construction projects in Hsinchu...
and Taichung were a means for the KMT candidates already in office to rally the Hakka electorate, which is well represented in these regions.\(^{59}\) Moreover, many internet users questioned the reasons that incited the inhabitants of Miaoli to give free rein to Liu Cheng-hung, this “local tyrant” (\textit{tuohao 土豪}), \(^{50}\) this thug (\textit{liujiang 流氓}) \(^{50}\) who “tramples on the people.” \(^{59}\) Indeed, although the civil servant Liu has a supporting social role, the choice of a representative is the responsibility of the citizens of Miaoli. Huang Zhengyu 黄正羽 expressed the shame Liu Cheng-hung caused him and other inhabitants of Miaoli:

> When I see the King of Miaoli [Liu Cheng-hung], I don’t dare say that’s where I come from. As they say, it’s the choice of the Miaoli electorare. We have to accept all their choices. In any case, on the day of the elections, everyone will swallow their tears and vote for the shadow state party [KMT]. This is Taiwan Ej4. \(^{54}\)

What does this prophetic fatalism mean, and on what implicit argument is it based? Does it amount to recognition of the importance of the role of the local factions in Miaoli, the majority of whose electoral candidates are affiliated with the KMT? \(^{53}\)

\section*{The construction of a horizon of expectation at the heart of a crisis of representative democracy}

In this context, qualified by Frank Muyard as “political autism,” \(^{56}\) internet users, who are not simply critical spectators of a negative policy, are participating in a reflexive dynamic of wrongs that they heap upon the local leaders. The comments open up a horizon of expectation resulting in a process, initiated by internet users, of giving meaning to the political events linked to three \textit{tulou} construction projects. To create this prospective horizon, the internet users offer alternative solutions to the bad management of budgetary expenditure. For internet user Jeffrey Bai, the sum invested in the building of the Hsinchu \textit{tulou} could have been used to finance the army for several years. \(^{57}\) In another commentary dated 17 July 2015, Frank Tien excludes:

> It’s not enough that the neighbouring district already has one great “earthen” white elephant, but they have to go and build another “earth” building! Is it part of Zhudong’s history? If there really is land available for building and a budget, why not build some social facilities for the people of the district? \(^{58}\)

Many internet users were demanding more effective management of local expenditure. Moreover, they sought the application of fairer policies founded on the dual identity of the Hakka electorate, which is well represented in these regions. \(^{59}\) In another commentary dated 17 July 2015, Frank Tien exclams:

> Over and above the particular nature of the events analysed, the comments seem firstly to shed light on the uncertainties inherent in representa-

demic both from the point of view of identity (conflicts in the collective memory and recognition of pluralism in the formation of a national identity) and in its procedural mechanisms (representativeness of the policies and whether the elected officials are competent to govern). Most of the comments question the quality of this representativeness and at the same time, its legitimacy. These fundamental problems are discussed through a certain number of issues such as the dual identity of the Hakka of China and the Hakka of Taiwan, the right to self-determination of national identity, the corruption of local elected officials, and the disfunctions of the electoral system at local level. Against this background of democratic uncertainty, the virtual sphere, a public arena where individual opinions are debated and where “social worlds” \(^{81}\) confront each other, affords communities the opportunity to participate in the formation and strengthening of a common framework through which to understand the event under scrutiny.

Through this reflexive, collective undertaking, the event is not only seen as a unique occurrence or as the epiphanic symptom of the social machine; the controversies brought to life by the comments of internet users also reveal the existence of value conflicts between several players attempting to influence the direction of the current process of reform.

\section*{Conclusion}

Over and above the particular nature of the events analysed, the comments seem firstly to shed light on the uncertainties inherent in representa-

\section*{Translated by Elizabeth Guill.}

\section*{Biographies}

\textbf{Fiorella Bourgeois} is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the \textit{École des Hautes Études en sciences sociales (EHESS)}; UMR 8173 China, Korea, Japan; Research Centre on Modern and Contemporary China (CECMC). \textit{École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 54 boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris, France (fiorella.bourgeois@ehess.fr).}

\textit{Manuscript received on 24 January 2017. Accepted on 5 May 2017.}

50. Several internet users affirm that the Taiwanese Hakka “traditionally” vote in favour of the KMT. To combat this widespread idea that emphasizes the Chinese identity of the Taiwanese Hakka, representatives of Hakka organisations and associations issued a press release several months before the 2008 presidential elections to “clarify the position of the Hakka of Taiwan.” Cf. Ping Xing-anjun, “Taiwan Kejia ren shengming: women bu shi Zhongguo ren” (Declaration of the Hakkas of Taiwan: We are not Chinese), Liberty Times, 11 October 2007, \url{http://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/paper/160147} (consulted on 19 December 2016).

51. Comment by Alan Hsu, published on 30 October 2014. Cf. Su Fanghui and Fu Chaobiao, “Miaoli xianzhang Liu Zhenghong chu Taiwan kejia yao gai zhongguo tulou” (Miaoli District Chief Cheng-hung is destroying Taiwanese Hakka kilns to build a Chinese tulou), op. cit.


55. Kao Yuang-kuang, “Ershiyi shiji Taiwan difang paixi de fazhan” (The development of local factions in Taiwan in the twenty first century), \textit{Zhongguo difang zizhi (Local autonomy in China)}, vol. 55, No. 6, 2002, pp. 4-17.


57. Huang Xianzhang, “Zhudong ni jian kejia tulou: minzhong kangyi bai chongtu” (Zhudong plans to build a Hakka tulou: Conflicts emerge following popular protests), op. cit.

58. Ibid.


60. Ibid.

61. “Public discourse creates […] social worlds. It does this because the concepts used are not purely cognitive and descriptive but also carry a moral and evaluative weight that affects those to whom they are applied and leads to people seeing themselves and behaving differently […]” Cf. Louis Quéré, “Construction of Public Problems and Collective Action,” \textit{Colloquium. Una tensão entre o global e o local}, 2001, p. 112.