

***Notes of a Desolate Man* as an Act of Mourning**

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Abstract

Chu T'ien-wen's (朱天文) *Notes of a Desolate Man* is a montage of vastly different cultural references, where the authenticity of the floating, west-originated signifier repeatedly comes into question in its oriental context of Taiwan. The novel repeatedly includes names such as Eliot, Goethe, Montaigne, Foucault, Fellini, Levi-Strauss, Satyajit Ray, Ozu Yasujiro, the Bible, and references to Mao's poetry. In my essay, I aim to answer the question: amidst the litter of references and quotes, where do we locate the author in the text, who seems to have created an inscrutable work of pastiche, and in which the different elements don't seem to unify? Many scholars interpret the book in a Barthesian framework—the kaleidoscopic cultural references as the promiscuous expression of the main character's homosexuality. Some of Chu's textual practice is political, aiming to “negotiate Taiwan's cultural identity through the aesthetics of hybridity,” giving the postcolonial Taiwan its vitality with the erotic potential of the clashing signifiers.

However, I disagree with this reading, for Chu T'ien-wen's conservative politics does not coincide with the vision of a utopia of hybridity. For her, the identity of Taiwan is not fluid but broken. Rather than advocating a concrete political vision or practice, this paper argues that *Notes* is about nostalgia and mourning Taiwan's nationalistic past, as she emphasizes the importance of Walter Benjamin's “Angel of History” in the epilogue of the Chinese version. With writing, Chu T'ien-wen attempts to not only

metaphorically reconstitute Taiwan's past through fragments, but also laments that futility of her attempt.

1. Introduction

In the novel, the narrator's partner "sprinkled salt on the back of his hand, bit into a slice of lemon, licked the salt and drank the tequila." English readers who have tried the drink know that the order is wrong, that the lemon should come last, not first. Again, what should a translator do? Should we have changed the order in the text and inserted the correct way of drinking tequila? But, what if the Taiwanese drink tequila in the sequence described in Chu's novel? Should we, following Nabakov's insistence that a translator's task is to bring the readers to the text, translate without alteration and hope that readers will tolerate an alternative way of drinking tequila?¹

I open with a quote from Sylvia Li's essay on her translation of Chu Tien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man*, a book in which the authenticity of the floating, west-originated signifier repeatedly comes into question in its oriental context of Taiwan. The novel repeatedly includes names such as Eliot, Goethe, Montaigne, Foucault, Fellini, Levi-Strauss, Satyajit Ray, Ozu Yasujiro,² and references to Mao's poetry.³ In translating this work, the translators were presented with the difficulty of choosing between the western original and Chu's own translation of the works in her book. Not only did she adapt western mannerisms, such as that of drinking tequila, she also incorporated her own twists on biblical myths,⁴ as well as translated parts of Levi-Strauss's *Triste Tropiques* into Chinese herself. The translation here reveals the central concern of the text: amidst the litter of references and quotes, where do we locate the author in the text, who seems to have created an inscrutable work of pastiche, and in which the different elements don't seem to unify? Describing the process of translating passages from

1 Sylvia Li-Chun Lin, "Poetic License Vs. Translator's Responsibility: Translating Notes of a Desolate Man," *Translation Review*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2000): 37.

2 Chih-Wei Chang, "Bringing Out 'Roland Barthes' from Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man* (*Huangren shouji*)," *Comparative Literature*, vol. 63, no. 4 (2011): 423.

3 Lin, "Poetic License Vs. Translator's Responsibility," 38.

4 Ibid.

Triste Tropiques that was already translated back into English, Li writes:

In the novel, the narrator relates a passage from the book [*Triste Tropiques*] to his childhood friend over the phone. We could rather easily translate directly from the Chinese, but, as I indicated, we wanted to use a more authoritative version. When comparing the Chinese and the English versions, we found that Levi-Strauss' Chinese translator had, probably, inadvertently altered the meaning somewhat...for me, a personal emphasis on close reading told us that we should translate from the Chinese, not using the English translation of the French text, because that is supposedly how the characters in the novel understand Levi-Strauss. Although it may not have been the accurate understanding of the original, it was, after all, the fictional characters' (and perhaps the author's) experience and intellectual life we are translating here...we decided to use the English "original" rather than translating directly from the Chinese. To this day, however, we remain somewhat uneasy about the decision, feeling as if we had violated the sanctity of the Chinese text.⁵

Given the numerous intertextualities, it is very easy to assume a Barthesian reading, which Chih-Wei Chang has ventured. In his essay "Bringing out 'Roland Barthes' from Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man* (*Huangren shouji*)," he dismisses the tensions in queer studies readings,⁶ as well as new-historical readings based on Taiwanese history, proposing to read the intertextualities in a Barthesian frame—the kaleidoscopic cultural references as an expression of the main character's "concern with promiscuous homosexuality."⁷ Endorsing Ling-chei Letty Chen's similar view⁸ that Chu's textual practice aims to "negotiate Taiwan's cultural identity through the aesthetics of hybridity,"⁹ he suggests that Chu T'ien-wen is trying to negotiate a new identity for Taiwan through assembling "floating signifiers," such that Taiwan resembles a hybrid text open to many interpretations. Instead of gaining a stable identity, the hybridity of the text, symbolizing Taiwan's postcolonial identity, gains traction in its

5 Ibid., 37.

6 Chu T'ien-wen is a heterosexual woman who wrote in the perspective of a gay man in *Notes*.

7 Chang, "Bringing out," 423.

8 He also cites Chen-Chi Hsu's essay, which puts forth a similar but different view.

9 Chang, "Bringing Out," 426.

“promiscuous play of signifiers.”¹⁰ It is the possibility of meanings of the floating signifiers that gives the postcolonial Taiwan its vitality, just as how Roland Barthes feels liberated in traveling to exotic cities like Tokyo and India, immersing himself in the kaleidoscopic worlds of images and sounds which he cannot pin linguistic or cultural meaning to—they are “signifiers” liberated from their “signified.”¹¹ It is the tension and ambiguity that makes the text so seductive. In the text, Xiao Shao’s musings of the city recalls Barthes’ experience of India. For Xiao Shao, the city is a map of secret signs and entrances. He says, “I tried to imagine their secret entrances, which led to places where many tribes and rituals were scattered like the constellations. A country of many scents, like the multiple rulers of India, three thousand kaleidoscopic worlds.”¹² Barthes muses similarly as he dissolves into a city in India:

This day, I decide to go to one neighborhood or another, without any goal but a kind of prolonged perception of its name... All these districts produce different races, distinct bodies, a familiarity new each time. To cross the city (or to penetrate its depth, for underground there are whole networks of bars, shops to which you sometimes gain access by a simple entry way, so that, once through this narrow door, you discover, dense and sumptuous, the black India of commerce and pleasure)¹³

In *Notes of a Desolate Man*, the reader is entranced by the signifier, trying to find and enter its “secret entrance”¹⁴—the meanings of its symbols. Like Barthes’ description of his experience, it is pleasurable to become utterly lost in the “dense and sumptuous, the black India of commerce and pleasure” of mysterious, seductive images.¹⁵ Indeed, the text as an erotic object has also been interrogated in phenomenological literary theory.

10 The narrative “I” of Chu’s novel does not belong to anybody. Far from being a vehicle in which Chu can “express herself,” it is an echo chamber inviting Hu Lancheng, Barthes, and many others to indulge in an anonymous and promiscuous play of signifiers.” See Chang, “Bringing Out,” 434.

11 For Barthes cruising through Tokyo, see Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 30-42.

12 Qtd. in Chang, “Bring Out,” 432.

13 Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 39.

14 T’ien-wen Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 121.

15 Ibid.

Michael Fisher has remarked that, in Cavell's writing, interpretation is often seen as a masculine act, "because [interpretation] is often expressed as a desire to penetrate the object."¹⁶ Describing the act of reading, he writes, "[the book] asks nothing better than to exist outside itself, or to let you exist in it. In short, the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside."¹⁷

However, I disagree with his reading and presents a different perspective in this essay. How is it possible to hinge the identity of a place based on fluidity? In my opinion, Chang does not fully acknowledge Chu's emphasis on the utopian nature of her postcolonial vision of Taiwan. Rather than advocating a concrete political vision or practice, I will argue that *Notes* is about nostalgia and mourning a lost time, as according to the scene envisioned by Walter Benjamin with his image of *Angelus Novus* in his *Ninth Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Chu cites her inspiration from *Angelus Novus* in the epilogue of the Chinese version but not the English, which may have caused this critical angle to be overlooked. Facing historical change and trauma, the gaze of the narrator is likened to that of angel, who from an elevated position gazes down upon the carnage and ruins of history.¹⁸ For Benjamin, history is not as a series of constructive acts that have built up over time, but a series of destructive acts over time, where "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage."¹⁹ Unable to restore the carnage of past disasters, the angel is haunted by its traumatic images and forced to move on helplessly and unwillingly, pushed forth into the future "to which his back is turned."²⁰ With writing, Chu T'ien-wen attempts to reconstitute the past through fragments, but also laments that futility of her attempt. In her book, she also acknowledges and the irreversible passing away of time and youth, which writing cannot reverse.

16 Michael Fisher, "Reading the Human Figure: Literary Theory and Other-Minds Skepticism," in Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 32.

17 Ibid., 39.

18 Walter Benjamin, Harry Zohn, Hannah Arendt, and Leon Wieseltier, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2013), 12.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

2. Chu T'ienwen's Idea of History

Before I explain my ideas further, I would like to introduce one of the images in the book which has touched me deeply, and for which I believe is key to illustrating Chu's mourning and nostalgia.

In the beginning of the book, the narrator Xiao Shao was in Japan, spending the last five years of life he will have with his lover Ah Yao, who is dying from AIDS. Supporting the sickly Ah Yao, he writes, "amid cherry blossoms fluttering down like a rain shower, waiting for the wind to die down, I felt like the wife of Lot, who, thousands of years ago, could not resist the temptation to look back at the burning city and was turned into a pillar of salt."²¹ Later, he is reminded of "the pillar of salt" again when he was tempted to cheat on him:

I heard Ah Yao calling out to me from behind, a place of fire and brimstone, whether it was called Sodom or Gomorrah. It could be an international phone call or some Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee he'd ask someone to bring me; I couldn't help but turn around to take a look, and the instant I saw the smoke rising about the place like a blazing kiln, I too turned into a pillar of salt.²²

The image of the pillar of salt is unmistakably taken from the Old Testament of the Bible. In the story, God sent angels to tell Lot that he was going to destroy the city of Sodom, which they were in, as many of its inhabitants were sinners. He was to move to the nearby city of Gomorrah with his wife. When Lot was fleeing, he was delayed. So, the angels took he and his family's hands and helped them flee from the city. Paralleling the image of *Angelus Novus*, who is swept forward unwillingly by the storm, Lot and his family are prohibited from looking back, "Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away."²³ Traveling behind her husband, Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Like *Angelus Novus* and Lot, Ah Yao is tempted to look back, seduced by the erotic utopia of "Sodom."²⁴ In the context of *Notes*, the pillar of salt symbolizes the desire to embrace a

21 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 8.

22 Ibid., 36.

23 Genesis 19:17.

24 "Sodom" is similar to the word sodomy, which means homosexual sexual intercourse.

sensuous and promiscuous life, despite its ephemerality. It is an image that is shadowed by death. At Ah Yao's funeral, he describes Ah Yao's ashes as "a burned-out stick of incense that had been laid flat on the floor. Just a line of ashes."²⁵ One can't help but be reminded of the pillar of salt. By embracing a promiscuous life, Ah Yao has realized the metaphor of looking back at Sodom with its promiscuous life and becoming a line of ashes, similar to the image of the pillar of salt. Like the pillar of salt, the image of the burned-out incense also shows the irreversibility of time, as with *Angelus Novus*, who is helpless to restore the past and forced to move on.

2.1 Strings of the Past

Like Lot's wife, Ah Yao, and *Angelus Novus*, Chu also mourns the irreversibility of time. In Hsu's opinion, Chu's decision to write in the perspective of a gay man anxious of his identity is mainly to mourn the "Patricide" of Nationalist Government (KMT), who invented all sorts of "grand narratives" to control the Taiwanese when they took power in 1949.²⁶ Ideologically conservative, this period is a time which Chu was nostalgic for. After KMT lost the civil war with the CCP (Communist Party of China), they moved to Taiwan, exerting authoritarian control over the island. After the lifting of martial law in 1987, the civil freedoms the Taiwanese enjoyed dampened the nationalist myths that they were told.²⁷ Because the ban for travel between Taiwan and mainland China was lifted, the Taiwanese were able to travel to their long-abandoned homeland. After the lifting of the travel ban, images of the Taiwanese' imagined homeland of China were shattered, as China was no longer the China which they were nostalgic for.²⁸

Compared to Yao's promiscuity, Xiao Shao is a coward. Shao describes Yao, "he was the photograph of a street demonstration. And me? I was nothing more than the negative, representing hypocrisy, as I hid in a dark closet like a coward."²⁹ As Hsu notes, Xiao Shao's preoccupation with

25 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 165.

26 For discussions of *Notes of a Desolate Man* as discussed in the context of Taiwan's queer community, read the beginning of Chang's "Bringing Out" paper.

27 Chen-Chi Hsu, "The Ambivalence of Postmodern Taiwanese Existence: Reading Chu T'ien-Wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man*," *Exit 9: The Rutgers Journal of Comparative Literature*, vol. 4 (January 1, 2002): 22.

28 See her other work "Take Me Away, Moonlight" as described in Chen, "The Ambivalence of Postmodern Taiwanese Existence," 106.

29 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 3.

skincare products reflect his, the desolate man's, psychological insecurity. He fears death to the most extreme degree and is obsessed with self-preservation, while Ah Yao is still "fighting the good fight" for activism, although he is dying from AIDS.³⁰ He also laments the expected extinction of his "homosexual race."³¹

Shao's attitude towards homosexuality is, however, ambiguous. Quoting Foucault, he is strongly aware society's control of sexuality and Foucault's call for resistance. He writes, "foucault, in a word, refused to be accommodated into the systems."³² Rather than reading Foucault's theory as having implications to all oppressed sexualities, his focus is on the race of male homosexuality, which, according to him, is dying out. He acknowledges Fairy Slave and Tang's theory of the "Age of Aquarius" in which "feminine ecology" will soon replace "masculine materialism,"³³ and identifies with Beibei's remark: "Women are like full sails waiting for the winds of history, while men are a bunch of idiots standing against the wind."³⁴ Because females are taking the lead, "our consciousness needs to be transformed."³⁵

Chu's longing for the past parallels Shao's mourning of society reaching a stage of decadence,³⁶ where men, due to "male effeminacy or a loss of 'virility,'"³⁷ indulge in sex rather than reproduce to propagate the next generation. Like Chu's longing for the past, Ah Yao yearns too for a world where he could systematically propagate his race like Levi-Strauss' kinship system. Contrary to Yao's blithe ignorance for self-preservation and preference for chaos, he yearns for an ordered, idealistic life:

Those were happier times, when we believed in everything and doubted nothing. There was no identity issue, for God was in his heaven, all was right with the world. It was orderly, mathematical,

30 Ibid., 32.

31 Hsu, "The Ambivalence of Postmodern Taiwanese Existence," 21.

32 Ibid.

33 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 89.

34 Ibid., 117.

35 Ibid., 89.

36 Yao takes the idea from Foucault. Shao thinks that they are at a stage of decadence where sex is carried out for the sake of pleasure, but not for the sake of reproduction, and Foucault himself is aware of this when he wrote *The History of Sexuality*, despite critiquing the regime's encouragement for the ideal of virility that is conducive to reproduction (thus increase in economic productivity). He thinks Foucault had experienced the "erotic utopia" at the price of being the "terminator of the kinship system." See Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 46.

37 Hsu, "The Ambivalence of Postmodern Taiwanese Existence," 22.

the world of Bach, with the golden structure that Levi-Strauss had pursued all his life. A world I longed for, one I thought might exist only in the collective dream of the human race.³⁸

The old utopia which Chu yearns to attain is in mainland China, which is shattered by the lifting of the martial law. This is symbolized by the world ordered by Levi-Strauss' golden structure, which Shao yearns for. As a second-generation mainland Chinese, Shao also mourns the loss of the imagined China, as he writes, "it was there, like the sloughed-off skin of my youth, like the remains of a love, cast into a heap. I walked by it indifferently, sensing it to be more alien than all the distant countries of the world. I had no intention of going there."³⁹

2.2 A Written Utopia

Battling the "epistemological uncertainty" of Taiwan, from which a new order is "expected to arise from the ruins and ghosts of the past," Shao chooses to write.⁴⁰ The novel ends in such a way: "As time passed, I would see one after another off to be cremated... Time cannot be turned back, nor can life. However, in the process of writing, I am able to turn back everything that otherwise couldn't be. So my writing, it continues."⁴¹

Writing, for Xiao Shao, is an attempt preserve the past. Facing Yao's death and regarding those of his "race," he writes, "I feel as if I should do something for people like me, for those who have died. But I can't do anything for anyone. I must do it for myself. I must write. Write in order not to forget."⁴² For him, writing has a personal significance but not a public one. He is aware that he "can't do anything for anyone" and that writing is as a psychological space that he can return to, when forced to face a fearful, unknown future.⁴³

As Chang has noted, Chen and Hsu are similar in their new-historical approach to *Notes*. While they are similar in this respect, their analyses differ in the role of "writing" in *Notes*. Hsu's interpretation is closer to

38 Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 23.

39 *Ibid.*, 24.

40 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 32.

41 *Ibid.*, 166.

42 *Ibid.*, 24.

43 *Ibid.*

the analysis in this essay, suggesting that his writing, for Shao, is a self-defeating act. On the other hand, Chen's view is more sanguine, suggesting that Chu's aesthetic hybridity, like Chang's analysis, is an attempt to give rise to a hybrid Taiwanese identity. I will now compare and contrast their views and show that their views lead to a Benjaminian interpretation of *Notes*, which seems to be intended by the author.

2.2.1 Chen's view

The idea of utopia is crucial in understanding Chen's perspective on "writing" in *Notes of a Desolate Man*. Like Hsu, Chen believes that finding salvation in reality for Xiao Shao is futile.⁴⁴ Trapped in a debilitating fear of the extinction of his race and the desperation to consummate his passion, Chen writes that "if he catches a glimpse of utopia, it would be when he gets temporarily lost in the brief moment of orgasm or when his senses are dulled by incessant sexual encounters."⁴⁵ Utopia for Chen is when he can consummate his sexual desires without fearing for his death. As the word *utopia* denotes, it is idealistic. Xiao Shao's desire to unify his "external chaotic state and the inner desire for order"⁴⁶ is represented by his preoccupations with Foucault's deconstructionism and Levi-Strauss' structuralism,⁴⁷ which contradict each other. The two states are represented by Xiao Shao and Ah Yao respectively—Xiao Shao representing the desire for order and Ah Yao chaos. The physical realization of this utopia is impossible, as shown by Ah Yao's death. Fearing to fulfill his sexual desires as a homosexual, he establishes a "material" utopia through language as a replacement.

For Chen, Chu's written utopia has a political function. In her essay, Chen claims that Xiao Shao's preoccupation with Levi-Strauss' studies of the kinship system suggests a wish to preserve his dying "homosexual tribe."⁴⁸ After examining Levi-Strauss' study of the Caduveo tribe, who preserve their culture through body painting, Xiao realizes that "members of his

44 Letty Ling-chei Chen, "Rising from the Ashes: Identity and The Aesthetics of Hybridity in Zhu Tianwen's *Notes of a Desolate Man*," *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, vol. 4, no. 1 (July & Aug., 2000): 118.

45 Ibid.

46 "For order in the narrative both point to a common goal: an affirmation of identity based on a utopian unification of the two contradicting tendencies as demonstrated by Ah Yao and the narrator." See Chen, "Rising from the Ashes," 120.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 115.

“homosexual tribe” does not have its own language to record its own unique existence.”⁴⁹ Chen writes, “members of the ‘homosexual tribe’ may have to borrow others’ languages, but then, as the narrator contends, at least they have their own body. Thus, his search leads to a focus on language and the body.”⁵⁰ Believing that there is a connection between body and the language, Xiao starts to believe that words can convey the textures and dimensions of materiality. Chen quotes Xiao, who believes that the “materiality of words... can raise him to a higher ground of perception”⁵¹ with its capacity to record and convey material reality, seen and felt. Chen is not clear in her explanation, but I assume that her idea of the “materiality of words” is similar to Chang’s Barthesian interpretation of *Notes*—that language has a seductive power in evoking the senses, especially when they are “floating signifiers,” when no meaning is fixed to them and when they are purely sensual. Therefore, Chu’s technique of borrowing words and references to other languages and literatures can serve to build an imagined utopia. As Chen quotes Xiao Shao, “my supernatural was words, writing.”⁵² Believing that he can find utopia in the “magical realm of words – words that record mysterious sounds, names, phrases, found in sutras,” Xiao Shao summons a utopia through his words.⁵³

Chen further parallels Xiao Shao’s desire for utopia to the possibility of establishing a new Taiwanese identity based on an aesthetic hybridity. Remarking on her excessive references, Chen writes:

Zhu Tianwen’s⁵⁴ hybridization is undoubtedly intentional as her attempt to cross cultural and ideological boundaries is clearly the drive behind her practice. Throughout the novel, there are many passages which are superfluous, not connected to the main thrust of the narrative...on the surface they seem to reflect the author’s uncontrollable urge to display her knowledge of historical places and anecdotes of well-known figures, as well as her enthusiasm about describing the trends of material subcultures. But this urge or enthusiasm actually reflects her attempt to re-negotiate a new cultural position by validating cultural hybridity, which is precisely

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 116.

52 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 124.

53 Ibid.

54 Pinyin of Chu T’ienwen.

what Werbner proclaims in the quoted passage above, “[an] aesthetic challenge to an implicit social order and identity.”⁵⁵

Chen suggests that Chu T’ienwen’s technique of hybridization is political, hoping to establish a new cultural position by redefining and reassembling the cultural products of the west, as she herself had done in her book through translation and a montage of references. And yet, the cultural identity she envisions cannot be national. It is, rather, individualistic. Chen writes, “Zhu Tianwen envisions this globalized world with a center that is the self... Zhu Tianwen’s vision is one in which identity – whether gender identity [as in the case of her gay narrator] or cultural identity [as in the case of herself] – does not exist outside of the self because the self can be more stable than its Other which is constantly changing.”⁵⁶ For Chu, the individual is not defined geographically by a place or a group of people. Rather, the individual and his belonging is defined on how he chooses to define oneself in his choice and consumption of culture. However, viewed in the lens of Taiwanese history, her resolution is problematic. Chen writes: “She is able to achieve a new sense of cultural identity, one that is not based on ethnicity or nationhood, but is built upon a sense of belonging to the community of cultures around the globe. The question is, can she, a writer who carries the colonial legacy of Taiwan, afford to be so apolitical and ahistorical?”

2.2.2 Hsu’s view

In my opinion, Hsu’s view resolves the contradictory aspect of Chu’s establishment of a cultural identity as individual by highlighting that “writing” in *Notes* is a self-defeating act. In *Notes of a Desolate Man*, Shao replaces Descartes’ motto by writing, “I write, therefore I am.”⁵⁷ In Descartes’ motto “I think, therefore I am,” he suggests that identity is based on thought. This conception of the self has been criticized in the postmodern age as identity can also be influenced by somatic factors and can be performative.⁵⁸ With the postmodern critique of the Cartesian subject as the foundation and source of

55 Chen, “Rising from the Ashes,” 131.

56 Ibid., 133.

57 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 25.

58 Such as Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity.

knowledge, Hsu writes that Shao's use of writing "to counter the erosion of time" and to build his identity is doubtful.⁵⁹ The fact that writing is counter to the establishment of identity is further shown by the fact that the book is written as a series as notes, which are fragmentary. For Hsu, the fragmented form of "notes" baffles the intention of "unifying" something. Hsu evokes Derrida to explain his point. For Derrida, writing as a concept is closely related to *différance*—that is, in writing, "the signified is continuously differed and deferred; any arrival of final termination is impossible."⁶⁰ In writing, some unoriginal signification will always intrude into the process of writing, deferring the reaching of ideals of "authenticity" or becoming a "transcendental signifier." For Hsu, the ending sentence of the book, "so my writing, it continues" is resonant with Derrida's idea of *différance*, the endless deferral and difference of reaching the concluding "transcendental signifier."⁶¹ To end the book by claiming that Shao continues to write seems to suggest the definition of the new Taiwan, like the interpretation of *Notes*, should be deferred. The impossibility of giving Taiwan an identity through writing is shown when Shao navigates Taipei. Navigating Taipei, Xiao Shao describes how the urban signifiers seem to float, unhinged from their assigned places on the map; "then I started reading the map of the city, made up of numerous shop names, interpreting them with no clear understanding, mixing and matching them at will."⁶² For him, the existence of the city depended on language, but language itself is unreliable, depending on his subjectivity; "the city appearing under my pen existed only in words, and when the words disappeared, so would the city."⁶³

3. Conclusion

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Chu T'ienwen may be tempted to construct a utopia. For example, the references to Foucault's erotic utopia,⁶⁴ connections with her past work,⁶⁵ and the influence of Hu

59 Hsu, "The Ambivalence of Postmodern Taiwanese Existence," 24-5.

60 Ibid., 25.

61 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 165.

62 Ibid., 121.

63 Ibid., 122.

64 See footnote 36.

65 Chen suggests that the need for an erotica in her former work is replaced with the need for a utopia. See Chen, "Rising from the Ashes," 110.

Lancheng, her mentor.⁶⁶ And yet, the act of writing or words as the “bricks” for this utopia are contradictory, because meaning as constructed by writing endlessly propagates and defers, just as the passing of time and our deeds in our lives cannot be reversed. It is not language that is at stake in the establishment of Taiwanese identity, as Hsu’s analysis of Chu’s use of writing show. Language is insufficient to stabilize or define an individual identity, much less a national identity. Rather, the irreversibility of time is more crucial to understanding *Notes*. *Notes of a Desolate Man* is not an attempt to establish a utopia based on the stuff of language. Rather, the elaborate, “superfluous” words are written to mourn a time which has passed.⁶⁷

In a speech at the debut of *Notes*’ English translation in New York, as featured in the epilogue of the Chinese version, Chu affirms the influence of Benjamin’s idea of history on *Notes*. Remarking the image of *Angelus Novus*, she writes:

Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* is a painting by the expressionist painter Paul Klee. Benjamin bought the painting, taking it with him even when he was escaping from the Nazis to France. He even planned to establish a new magazine called *Angelus Novus*. *Angelus Novus* looks like this. He has glaring eyes, an open mouth and spread wings. He faces the past, witnesses how disasters have agglomerated its wreckage into piles, shattering them at his feet. *Angelus Novus* wants to stop moving on and call the dead, restoring the shattered pieces back into an integral whole again. And yet, the storm blasts forth from the sky, pushing him forth to the future, to which is back is turned. The carnage he faces piles higher and higher, peaking into the clouds.⁶⁸

The point of the baffling, encyclopedic range of references in the book is not to establish a linguistic utopia. Rather, *Notes* is written as an act of catharsis, mourning the irreversibility of time and a past that cannot be recovered. In emphasizing that the act of writing self-defeating, she is undermining the possibility of the realization of a “written utopia” in any form. Rather, in acknowledging the vulnerable nature of words, she also acknowledges the pointlessness of her writing. Writing despite its

66 See footnote of Chen’s essay “Rising from the Ashes.”

67 Chen, “Rising from the Ashes,” 131.

68 T’ienwen Chu, *Huang ren shou ji* (Taibei Shi: Xin jing dian wen hua chu ban, 2011), 223.

pointlessness, she writes out of an emotional necessity, rather than from an ambition to construct. As her description of *Angelus Novus* shows: *Angelus Novus* wishes to restore the carnage of the past to a whole again, but is prevented by the forward motion of time from doing so. Like *Angelus Novus*, she cannot restore the past with writing. Rather, writing serves as a means for emotional expression, for mourning. Chu affirms this purpose for writing *Notes of a Desolate Man* during her acceptance of the *China Times* Million Yuan Novel Prize, which it won: “To write a novel,⁶⁹ is merely to prove that my existence is not merely delusional.”⁷⁰ She comments further on the pointlessness of this form of proof, “what a pointless proof, what an extravagant practice!”⁷¹

Not only Chen and Hsu, but also many critics have pointed out the unstable nature of the narrator, as intended by the form of “notes” which the novel takes. Chang writes, “because the novel is presented as the ‘notes’ of a fictional character detailing fragments of his life experiences and his discontinuous thoughts, Tsai Yuan-hung, one of the judges for the *China Times* Million Yuan Novel Prize, did not know whether the work should be read as a novel or essay or both.”⁷² While “notes” may defy the notion that Xiao Shao has a unified psyche, human beings often do not act consistently, especially in moments of emotional disturbance. In Xiao Shao’s case, his lover Ah Yao is dying. Rather than attempting to construct a new Taiwanese identity, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, like *Angeles Novus*, shows an attempt to grapple with disaster on the personal and the collective level—both historical change in Taiwan and the passing of Ah Yao. It is ultimately not a book about constructing a utopia, but a book written as an act of mourning.

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69 *Notes of a Desolate Man* is her first novel. She had only written screenplays and short stories before *Notes*.

70 Chu, *Huang ren shou ji*, 219.

71 Ibid.

72 Chang, “Bringing Out,” 246.

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