The Naming Logic and Imagined Cultural Identity in the “Controversy of Orthodox Guohua* during the Early Post-War Period in Taiwan (1946-1959): A Micro-analysis of Cultural Politics

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Abstract:
In the light of the 1945 regime change in Taiwan, the status of Tōyōga/Eastern Painting plunged from being the “darling” of official exhibitions to “public enemy”. At an art forum in 1951, the artists who migrated from mainland China launched the first attack. They lashed out against Tōyōga, ridiculing it with a common Chinese saying, “worshipping another family’s ancestors as one’s own”. At the “Art Movement Symposium” in 1954, it was adamantly asserted that “Guohua produced in Taiwan is an extension of the motherland” and that “paintings by Han Chinese in Taiwan constituted Guohua”. The majority of the participants at the symposium were Taiwanese artists who established themselves during the Japanese colonial era. The two art conferences appear to be unrelated, but in fact both were responses to regime change and attempts at imagining cultural identification. The theme of cultural belonging in art was brought into play dramatically on the stage of Taiwanese society during the early post-war period. It was generally known as the “controversy of orthodox Guohua”.

A macro-analysis of cultural politics determines the inter-relationships between politics, culture and institutions in the cultural policies devised by the Nationalist Party during the early post-war period. However, this analysis on the macro level may not be adequate for an exhaustive study on how the subject can engage in cultural action under the aforesaid system. This paper provides a micro-analysis of cultural politics. It argues that the subject’s cultural competence is a reflection of how cultural policies have been translated and put into practice, as well as how culture has been manifested concretely and effectively. Through an analysis on the micro level, this paper examines the issues pertaining to cultural naming and the imagination of cultural identity under the rubric of the “controversy orthodox Guohua”. The critical approach of this paper is in accord with Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “the invention of tradition,” as both are concerned with how the subject and the community negotiate through and respond to new political and cultural circumstances. Keywords: controversy of orthodox Guohua, cultural identity, cultural policy, cultural politics, Guohua, Tōyōga