

## Chang Wen-Hsuan, *The Compendium of Autobiographies*

Chang Wen-Hsuan



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The *Compendium of Autobiographies* is an expansive project that includes installations, a long narrative poem, and a novel. Both an artist and a writer, Chang Wen-Hsuan tests the limits of historical knowledge through explorations of narrative structure and voice.

The artist's research into the history of the Taiwanese Communist Party was the catalyst for her project, the focus of which is Siā Soat-hông, a woman born into poverty at the start of the twentieth century, first sold as a child bride and then as a concubine, earned a living as a seamstress, and emerged as an influential political activist in Taiwan's independence movement.

One part of the project, 'S Autobiography (2016), consists of a museum-like installation of labelled objects associated with the life of Siā Soat-hông. The installation includes an audio guide with two narrations, one in English and one in Taiwanese, juxtaposing two very different attitudes toward material culture. As the artist discusses in this interview, the English narrator treats the objects as "definite and illustrative evidence" while the Taiwanese narrator sees the objects as obscure and open. As Chang Wen-Hsuan puts it, "The former is a tunnel, and the latter is a labyrinth."

Likewise, *The Compendium of Autobiographies* might be characterized as a labyrinth of fictional devices and rhetorical strategies. The title installation represents a publisher's office with desks at which nine editors must each edit a poem according to their own ideological perspectives. The eccentric book-length poem, titled *Autobiography*, speaks in the voice of objects rather than characters.

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Another of the project's parts is 'S Diary, a novel that layers storytelling and interpretation. The key narrator is an illiterate woman, of the same generation as Siā Soat-hông, who cuts up a museum catalogue to create a diary-like collage.

When later discovered by her granddaughter, the collage diary is then interpreted politically, and the granddaughter's interpretation is appended to the collage work. This document (collage and interpretation) is then discovered by the artist Chang Wen-Hsuan, and she commissions real scholars to write responses to the fictional document.

In this interview, Chang Wen-Hsuan discusses her research-based creative process, and the importance of not dichotomizing fiction and history.

–Eva Heisler

**'S Autobiography (2016)—a part of your larger project *The Compendium of Autobiographies*—consists of a museum-like installation of labelled objects and an audio guide with two narrations, one in English and one in Taiwanese. The objects refer to the life of the political activist Siā Soat-hông, who advocated for Taiwan's right to self-determination. What is the significance of pairing the two languages (and two different tones) in your audio guide?**

The audio guide provided a method to reexamine given historical narratives. The difference between the Taiwanese and English versions lies not only in the difference between “I” and “she,” between the personal and the authoritative, but also in basic attitudes toward the object. The English narration sees the object as definite and illustrative evidence while the Taiwanese narration sees the evidence as an obscure and dialectical object. The former is a tunnel, and the latter is a labyrinth. People or countries equipped with a shitty past should trust in the labyrinth. And I will always love Jorge Luis Borges.

In answering your question, I think it's also important to address Siā Soat-hông's life and the conditions of the Taiwanese Communist Party. Siā Soat-hông was born into a poor family and was sold by her family to a rather rich family as a child bride. Her life as a commodity didn't end there: After escaping from the first buyer, she then was sold to another man as a concubine. This businessman took her to Japan because of his work and Siā, after learning to read and write and encountering several uprisings in Kōbe, Japan, and Shanghai, China, began her political life. At that time, Taiwan was under Japanese colonization. Under the principle of the Comintern, each nation could have only one Community Party; thus, the original name of the Taiwanese Communist Party (1928–1931) is “Japanese Communist Party, Taiwanese National Branch.” When I was a student, this part of history was not included in our textbooks. So, most of the Taiwanese either don't know the existence of the Taiwanese Communist Party or misunderstand it as a branch of the Chinese Communist Party.

In regards to the current situation between Taiwan and China, the ambiguity of the past is a battleground for people holding different ideologies and who are eager to define the future. In Siā's case, her later reputation is polarized: She is either a heroine or a traitor. Let's take the People's Republic of China's attitude toward this historical figure as an example. The moment she left Taiwan and joined CPP in the late 1940s, she was a heroine. Later, she was targeted during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and dismissed for CPP party membership in the late 1950s because of her insistence on Taiwan's right to self-determination. In 1986, she was posthumously rehabilitated by the CPP because of her “devotion on the unification of Taiwan and its motherland.” Yes, heroine again.

Redefining the past in order to define the future: This reversal not only relocates the disposition of cause and effect, but it also reinterprets the meaning of “possession” because it is now the living one who possesses the corpse of the dead. It's pretty clear that the case of Siā Soat-hông and the Taiwanese Communist Party is not special. For those countries once under colonization or those countries-yet-to-come, history belongs to the one who plays chess in the present tense. How can we notice that histories labeled as facts are competing with one another? How can we stop dichotomizing fact and fiction while avoiding uniting them naïvely? How can we truly understand the motif of seeing hero/ine and traitor as doppelgänger? If we want to answer these questions, simply addressing the differences between micro- and macro-narratives is not sufficient.

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**'S Diary (2016) is an installation that includes a novel by (do not have) written. The novel has three imaginary authors. One author is an illiterate woman, born in 1912, who has collaged a diary. Where are her images coming from?**

All images come from the collection catalogue of Taipei Fine Arts Museum.



The second author is her grandchild who finds the collage-diary and writes a political interpretation of it, projecting her own political views onto her grandmother's collages.

The third author discovers the pamphlet with the second author's interpretation appended to the collage diary and then republishes it with commentary by actual scholars.

### **All these different layers of authorship are invented by you, am I right?**

This piece is a commissioned work of Experimental Projects from the TFAM (Taipei Fine Arts Museum) Collection. Those invited artists were encouraged to select one work in the museum's collection and make an artwork reflecting on it. Instead of picking a single work, I chose the collection catalogue as the starting point. Since my interest centers on conflicts of power residing in the writing of history, I decided, after reading through the captions, to reflect on the interpretations of objects rather than on the object itself.

In the novel, I created three authors. The first author's early life was similar to Siā's. She was born the same year, 1901, into a poor family, was illiterate, and was sold by her parents. But this old woman didn't have the chance to devote herself to politics. This woman found the TFAM catalogue for unknown reasons and she used those pretty pictures to make collages relating to her own life.

The second author, who is the granddaughter, provides most of the texts in this book. In contrast to her grandmother, she is passionate about politics and wants to do something to change the injustices of society. But Taiwan, when she was growing up, was under martial law and it was impossible to participate in political activities of any kind. When she found those collages left by her grandmother, she then decided to interpret her grandmother's life by deciphering her collage images in order to create a doppelgänger of her: A character who grew up in the same condition but became an activist by the end of the story. By doing so, the second author—whose pen name means Clear History—finds a way to align herself politically while, in reality, she can do nothing.

The third author, under my real name, acts as an editor in this game. I provided a preface to explain how I encountered this book and invited two scholars to write feedback on this biography. Those scholars are actual; one is a prominent professor teaching history, and he wrote one of the most revered biographies of Siā; another scholar, using a pen name, is an art critic and theorist in real life. I asked them to reflect on the contents, based on their own backgrounds, as if the novel itself is real.

***The Compendium of Autobiographies*, an installation, is a fascinating staging of dilemmas faced by publishers today: How to avoid all possible charges of bias. The premise of this installation is that a long poem, titled *Autobiography*, must be edited by nine editors according to their specific gender and political leanings. The installation represents a publisher's office with desks at which the manuscript is undergoing editorial transformation. Can you tell me more about this project?**

*Autobiography* is a long narrative poem divided into seven chapters. The publisher asks their editors to divide into several groups based on their sex and ideology. Each desk has three editors so there are nine editors in total. Those editors are based on historical figures of Siā Soat-hông's generation who either wrote a biography about her, mentioned her in their own autobiographies, or encountered Siā personally.

### **The poetry is wonderful and has been translated into English. Who did the translation?**

I did. Actually, the Mandarin version is not written fluently. This was deliberate, so I didn't want a perfect English translation either. That's why I decided to pick words on the basis of my preference for the sounds while reading it out loud, rather than for precise words. (https://www.asymptotejournal.com/donate)

### **Pulp is a main character. Who is Pulp?**

Actually, it is fruit pulp. Slimy, muddy, and sticky, you can't help but think about the oncoming rotten smell of this shapeless entity. The characters are objects, and they do not reference a particular historical figure. Only the plot does.



**Sometimes absurd and funny, at times ominous, the voices remind me of characters in a Samuel Beckett play, such as this:**

(What did Pulp want me to see?)  
What lives in the empty room of 20 square meters?  
What is lightened under T5 tube?  
What is wrapped in white tiles?  
What is enclosed in the walls without window from floor to ceiling?

**How would you describe the voice of *Autobiography*? It's not autobiographical. Where is the voice coming from? Is it inspired by other historical sources?**


The complexity of Siā's life story perfectly illustrates the interplay between collective history and personal story. When I categorized how people from different sexes/ideologies/generations described her, I found that the more I read, the vaguer she became. The accumulation of words doesn't make the historical figure solid but duplicates its shadow. The reason why I adapted the space-in-space—an editorial office inside an art space—is to visualize and spatialize the power dynamics residing in the gesture of writing. When the audience walks in, s/he sees one original copy of the narrative poetry and a harshly edited version of it. Apart from that are those editors' personal information, references, notes, and reasoning behind their decisions. So, for the whole procedure making this piece, first came the structure—or the “game rule”—of the artwork, then came the writing of the poem and other material extracted from my research.

At the very beginning, I was wondering which format shall I take: Short story? Prose? Essay? Later, I chose poetry. First of all, this form always invites the reader to take part in never-ending interpretation and welcomes dialectic analysis. And this is exactly what happens to one person in the river of history. Second, I needed a form bearing the trait of bildungsroman which signifies the importance of the protagonist's outer confrontation and inner change. Last but not least, the form must be flexible, which means that, no matter to what extent the content is modified or deleted, the rest will remain coherent. All those concerns brought me to narrative poetry and verse novel, in the form of an epic.

As I was writing the poem, I thought, of course, it must be based on the life of Siā, but how can I make it a prototype, not a single case? In my opinion, metaphor is the most powerful invention of humans. Despite all references originating from the autobiography of Siā Soat-hông and records of social movements in the 1920s–1930s in Taiwan, I decided to use objects rather than a historical figure as the subject.

I'm flattered that the writing reminds you of Samuel Beckett. Maybe this reference can even push your question concerning the voice of *Autobiography* to a new level that I'm unable to answer. I adapted a compound form of narrative poetry and verse novel, i.e. a form emphasizing the persistent existence and extension of the flow of time. In contrast, the way Beckett molds the world is by folding the lineal time of humans into a particle. This particle thus has a large mass that becomes the ultimate vehicle in metaphor. So, what's that voice? The spirit of time and history? Or an opposition spirit ceasing the flow? Hence the reason why it's fundamental to bring the original text into a certain reading condition—in this case, an editorial office.

**Your fictions take place as installations or performances. What is important about installation art or performance as a means of testing the limits of authorship?**

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Both fiction and historical narrative bear truth to a certain degree. But those truths are two racing cars driving in different directions. We need one in order to remind us of the other. In “Funes The Memorious,” Borges created a character who has an overdeveloped memory; he can barely recognize dogs as “dog” since every single dog is too different from all other dog to

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be categorized under one term. At the end of this short story, the first-person narrator states, “To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their surface.” Compared to the incessant details Funes perceives, the text we are reading is merely a process toward homogenization, generalization, and abstraction. We discern this in the very first sentence:

I remember him (I have no right to utter this sacred verb, only one man on earth had that right and he is dead) with a dark passionflower in his hand, seeing it as no one has ever seen It, he might look at it from the twilight of dawn till that of evening, a whole lifetime.

Let’s see Funes as science, the narrator as literature, and the text—or the written record—as history. The narrator tried his best to record the encounter with Funes, while the verb “remember” puts all his efforts in vain. When the incompetence of one’s memory meets insufficient documentation, we call the certainty that arises at that moment “history”—this is another core idea unpacked by Julian Barnes in his novel *The Noise of Time*. The trilateral play in between thus makes it impossible to distinguish historical narrative from fictional narrative. I think what fictional narratives can do, but historical narrative can’t, does not lie in the disclosure of truth but in the exposure of power conflicts among science, literature, and history. In order to emphasize tensions of power, it is vital to adapt the form of theater—it appears as installation when there are no participants and as performance when there are—in which the actors are not historical figures but narratives.

About testing the limits of authorship: My point is not the replacement of one author and his/her readers but the redeployment of the relation of authors and their narratives in the form of mise en abyme. This is a task that art can take, for it warmly embraces necessary shortcuts.

***The Structure of Taiwanese Histories (2016–2017) was inspired by your great-uncle who is a spirit medium. Can you explain what tsioh-miá is? Is it a way of telling the future? Or is it a way of contacting the dead? I understand that 借名 = “borrow,” but how is it a methodology? How are you using 借名 to explain, or to reinterpret, Taiwanese history?***

Well, I don’t know if this is a general method for every spirit medium, but this is what he told me: When one is possessed by a spirit, not knowing whether it is good or evil, s/he will be taken to see a spirit medium. The first question asked by the spirit medium will be “what’s your name?” If the possessed person replies with a name, no matter Guanyin (觀音), Wang Ye (王爺), or Nezha (太子爺), the spirit medium can determine if this person has been selected as a medium servicing the god/dess.

In contrast, if the spirit can’t answer a name, it then belongs to the “nameless spirit.” I think this is a very beautiful and merciful way of saying, since it is just nameless, it is not necessarily an evil spirit. The god/dess has a name and the normal spirit does not. Name indicates a class structure of the unseen world. But there’s a built-in escape route in this seemingly rigorous system, which is tsioh-miá.

When taken to confront the spirit medium and the nameless spirit perceives that the spirit medium’s power is less than itself, it can borrow a god/dess’s name in order to fool the spirit medium. If the spirit medium falls into the trap and the nameless spirit successfully disguises itself with a borrowed name, it can gain extra power due to that name.

The name becomes the basis of the constitution of law and the abuse of law. The nameless spirit thus has a twofold reputation: It is a revolutionary fighting for agency or it is a traitor longing for its own interests. Here, we run across the motif of traitor again. Although we have taught ourselves that the question “Is this person a good or bad guy?” is not appropriate to ask when facing the real world, we often forget about this. It takes time to digest information from all perspectives in order to reject binary oppositions, but in a world operating like this, we don’t have time. That’s why, for me, tsioh-miá is an important hint. How we discriminate one person determines how we narrate history. Tsioh-miá provides us an anchor to redirect our trajectory.


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**Chang Wen-Hsuan** was born in Taiwan in 1991. Her work questions the narrative structure of institutionalized history with re-readings, personal stories, and suggestions of fictional alternatives. Through versatile platforms including installations, videos, and lectures, she often navigates skewed documentations and first-person accounts to trigger reflections on how the understanding of history affects the purport of the present and thrust of the future. Her projects have been shown at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, and the Taiwan Biennial, Taichung City, Taiwan (2018); Inside-Out Art Museum, Beijing, China (2017); Musrara Mix Festival 17, Jerusalem, Israel (2017); inToAsia: Time-based Art Festival, Queens Museum, New York, United States (2015). In 2018, she launched Writing FACTory, a long-term project, a non-site space and a virtual factory producing discourse, research, and printed matter concerning writing/publishing as artistic and political practice.

**Eva Heisler** is a poet and art historian. She has published two books of poetry, *Reading Emily Dickinson in Icelandic* (Kore Press) and *Drawing Water* (Noctuary Press). Recent honors include fellowships at the Millay Colony for the Arts and the MacDowell Colony.

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