

Fieldwork, Compilation and Curating: An Archeology of the Cultural Techniques of Place-Making in Taiwan¹

田調、編纂與策展：臺灣地方營造文化技藝的考古學

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural techniques that have mediated place-making in Taiwan since the 1990s. Cultural techniques are defined here as practices that generate both knowledge production and representation. Drawing on policy discourses, journalism, and participatory observation, the paper traces shifts in cultural techniques over the past three decades and identifies three key dimensions: fieldwork, compilation, and curating. From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, fieldwork and compilation such as collecting documents, photographs, and historical maps dominated, yielding 'realist' narratives. Since the mid-2000s, however, fieldwork has increasingly emphasized embodied experiences, while compilation has moved toward stylized narratives that highlight aesthetics. In this context, design and curating have emerged as a prominent mode of practice, producing representations that engage sensibilities through festivals and exhibitions. I argue that the discursive frame of cultural techniques has thus shifted from that of *naïve historical positivism* to one of aesthetic pragmatism, reflecting the changing role of place-making amid localized nationalism, the cultural economy, and efforts to rebalance urban-rural disparities. A case study of Changhua City is presented to substantiate this argument. The paper concludes by raising concerns that under the current trend, place-making may become overly preoccupied with professionalized aesthetics at the expense of meaningful knowledge production.

Keywords

Community building, regional revitalization, Taiwan identity, cultural governance, aesthetic movement

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Introduction

Over the past three decades in Taiwan, 地方營造 (*dì-fāng-yíng-zào*), or place-making, has become a term of significance and an explicit site of cultural governance where state institutions and civil society constantly intersect (Wang 2024). However, the "cultural techniques" working to both mediate and reproduce this field have received little attention. Such neglect is not without consequence. In a Foucauldian understanding, techniques are inherently political since they entail the constitution of subjectivity and governmentality (Lorenzini 2023). When cultural techniques are repetitively applied in place-making without critical reflection, questions of their discursive rationale and substantive outcomes can be easily obscured. This paper addresses this gap by tracing the evolving characteristics of cultural techniques in Taiwan's place-making over the past thirty years.

To do so, a brief clarification of the nature of place-making addressed here is required. While a sense of place can be produced and reproduced as people carry out their everyday life without much thinking, place-making refers to a conscious effort to create, sustain, or transform the place. Motivations behind such efforts vary. In Euro-American settings, place-making gained salience in the 1980s largely for economic reasons, when the global division of labor restructured and the relocation of manufacturing left numerous "postindustrial cities" in urgent need of industrial transformation. This so-called commencement of the era of neoliberalism compelled local states to act entrepreneurially to attract footloose capital (Harvey 1989a; Brenner 2004; Friedmann 2010). Such shift elevated the role of the cultural economy in regional development, where history, architecture, folk customs, and natural scenery—anything that could be framed as "culture"—were revalued as potential assets capable of drawing both visitors and investment (Harvey 1989b).

In East Asian developmental states such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, by contrast, problems with place stemmed less from inner-city deindustrialization than from towns and villages hollowed out by labor migration during the industrial urbanization of the 1950s to 1980s, as well as from the estranged urban settlements composed by these migrants. Here, place was framed less as an economic challenge than as an issue concerning the national population's spatial regulation. Experts tried to mobilize people to engage with their (new) hometowns and to form new social ties (Haug 2000). Evoking their identification with the land became a key "cultural" strategy toward this end.

In Taiwan, this affective evocation of the subject's identification with (home)land was closely associated with the trend of localized nationalism, or *Bentuhua* (Hsiao 2005a), alongside democratization in the 1980s. The Community Building Policy (CBP), or 社區總體營造 (*shè-qū-zǒng-tǐ-yíng-zào*), launched in 1994 by the Council for Cultural Affairs 文化建設委員會 (CCA) exemplified this. Conceived and led largely by intellectuals from anthropology and planning professionals, CBP mobilized residents to remake their home environments with the purpose of cultivating place-based identification and fostering civic subjectivity (Chen 1995). Around 2000, however, the CBP was quickly folded into the new agenda of cultural economy (Wang 2005), converging with the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) promoted in the 2002 National Development Plan and modeled after Japan's "one village, one product" initiative (see Fujimoto 1992). While this new celebration

of CCI emphasized local specialties and creativity as economic drivers, it inherited the old anchorage of local identification in CBP. The Regional Revitalization Policy (RRP)—地方創生 (*dì-fāng-chuàng-shēng*)—introduced in the mid-2010s under the National Development Council and likewise modeled on Japan, is representative of how cultural economy and place-based identification eventually come to synthesize. RRP calls on entrepreneurial youth to move into depopulated towns and villages, develop local products, enhance living environments, and forge cross-sector collaborations, thereby building communities envisioned as both livable and fulfilling (National Development Council, n.d.).

Over the past three decades, policies concerning place have advanced from the cultural sector to the level of an encompassing national strategy, underscoring the state's ambition not simply to attract capital but to summon active subjects capable of fostering localized nationalism, generating local capital, and facilitating social innovations. The *place* in Taiwan is therefore framed as a prominent field of governance, where state subsidies and expert interventions by scholars and professionals constantly reshape the know-how of place-making (Huang and Hsu 2011). Through state-sponsored workshops, briefings, and mentorship programs, a set of techniques for making place has gradually diffused into civil society. These include fieldwork and the representation of its outcomes, such as oral history, guided walking tours, community theater, and local publications. Frequently taken for granted as mere background, these practices in fact demand considerable effort from local actors, who must learn and deploy such skills for producing a place that outsiders come to recognize.

The next section reviews both domestic and international scholarship to reframe place-making as a process shaped by the cultural techniques of representation and knowledge production. It then traces historical shifts in these techniques before and after the 1990s, focusing on the practices of fieldwork, compilation, and curating. A case study of Siao-Si district in Changhua City is then presented to illustrate these transformations. Siao-Si is chosen as the example here due to the author's long fieldwork in Changhua City and her familiarity with the changes occurring in this community. Also, given its location across the train station, Siao-Si stands out with both grassroots place-making efforts as well as the incessant intervention of state resource at different phases, making it a perfect encapsulation of all the transitions in cultural techniques identified in this paper. With this case, the paper discusses the discursive shift in cultural techniques from naïve historical positivism to aesthetic pragmatism, and reflects on its effects in the place-making in Taiwan.

Cultural Techniques of Place-Making between Research and Representation

As a cultural governance arena, place-making in Taiwan has been mobilized for diverse state objectives: cultivating local identity, promoting cultural economy, regulating population distribution, improving the built environment, and shaping civic and entrepreneurial subjectivities. Its operation relies on the articulation of various techniques and technical objects, and on their entanglement with subjective cognition and affect.

Taiwanese scholarship on place-making is not unaware of the importance of this entanglement. However, they tend to focus on the community solidarity and identity elicited through specific artifacts, constructions, or events—such as local museums (Chiang 2006; Shih 2012; Tsai and Hwang 2013; Wu 2018), landmark architecture (Kao and Wang 2021), agricultural products (Fu and Cheng 2018), festivals (Chen 2017), local publications (Huang 2023), and cultural-creative goods (Hsu, Shieh, and Chen 2008) as well as the "social skills" employed by community workers to build interpersonal ties (Chang 2022). While these works explore how objects or techniques contribute to local identity formation, they do not treat these techniques and their historical shift as an issue. Moreover, a wide array of media crucial to place-making remains underexplored—such as demographic data, state subsidies, survey reports, and the digital platforms through which such results are disseminated. These elements arguably better reveal place-making as a field of cultural governance with prominent state intervention, characterized by its reliance on medium to prompt both knowledge production and its representation.

Indeed, in international scholarship, the effects of medium, technologies and more-than-human-world have come to be recognized as key loci of exploration for policy makers, scholars, planners, artists, practitioners interested in combining research efforts with place-based creative ventures (Whatmore 2006; Zitcer 2020; Hawkins 2021). A rare attempt in Taiwanese scholarship to foreground the effects of mediums in place-making is Huang's (2020) investigation of community newspapers in postwar Taiwan. He notes how this medium, first originated in the 1960s under state censorship and later partially deregulated in the late 1970s, finally ushered in a big boom after democratization in the 1990s, and turned from a top-down propaganda tool towards an expression channel from bottom-up. Unlike Huang's work, this paper does not attempt to conduct an exhaustive examination on the uses and effects of one specific medium. Instead, it explores the historical shifts in techniques that dictate how "place" is forged and recognized in society. My focus lies on practices that produce knowledge and its representation—practices defined here as cultural techniques ranging from fieldwork, guided walking tours, theater, local museums to local publications and so on, and on how their changing nature has reshaped the making of place.

This approach resonates with Foucault's notion of "archaeology." Archaeology, as Foucault ([1969] 2023) suggests, is not about tracing adjustments, evolution or change but identifying transformations within discursive fields—how new norms of formation emerge, how statements begin to follow a different logic, and how relations are reconfigured. Old rules may not disappear, but new ones gain dominance, often building on preexisting vocabularies, narratives, and strategies. In Taiwan, the cultural techniques of knowledge production and representation—oral history, local museums, walking tours, and local publishing—emerged almost simultaneously in the mid-1990s, establishing themselves as key techniques of place-making. While they remain crucial cultural techniques today, it is worth asking whether they have been operating under the same discursive normality all along. And if not, what kind of transformations in norms have occurred?

Studies not directly concerned with place-making have in fact noted the shifting

norms in techniques. Liang (2025) identifies an ethnographic turn in contemporary art, where "fieldwork" 田野調查 (*tián-yě-diào-chá*) is appropriated as a new discourse for artistic creation. While this has facilitated the introduction of anthropological attention to people, environment, and history into the art world, it also risks reducing the so-called fieldwork to aestheticized representation, sacrificing its depth of reflection (2025, 138). Similarly, Wang and Kao (2017) trace transformations in guided walking tours in postwar Taipei, from historical and ecological emphases to more stylized, consumer-oriented, and issue-based tours. They show how the same technique of guided walking tours may reassemble landscapes with different significance. For instance, increasingly after 2000, tours became both cultural commodities and activist performances, enabling diverse actors to produce assorted "places" within the same spatial terrain. In these cases, new discourses are enacted through a set of given techniques, and have increasingly appealed to visibility, bodily presence and aesthetic sensibilities; it seems that rendering place tangible through representation has become a defining trend of cultural techniques since the 2000s.

However, representation is never just about how the place is visualized but also about how it is known. Drawing upon materials ranging from local textbooks, real estate advertisements, and planning reports to maps produced by different cultural-history teams, Wang Chih-Hung (2005) shows how divergent regimes of representation—respectively those of developers, the local government, and grassroots historians—constructed overlapping as well as competing images of the 1990s Wenshan District in Taipei. These images serve to complicate local identities while also excluding perspectives such as those of non-Han ethnic groups. Representation in this light cannot be separated from knowledge production: it determines which epistemic viewpoints are reproduced, what systems of knowledge are sustained, and what kinds of subjectivities summoned. Still, in place-making, representation tends to capture the most attention while its Janus side of knowledge production is relegated to the background.

The nature of knowledge in this sense is unlike that of knowledge economy. The latter treats knowledge as reified talents/assets able to drive economic growth and as urban revitalization strategies (Yigitcanlar et al. 2018). On the contrary, place-making in the sense of "taking back the neighborhood" (Friedmann 2010) depends less on external talent and more on residents' own production of place-based know-how. In other words, locals must conduct their own research and carry out their own fieldwork. The knowledge thus produced is presumed to underpin the locals' representation of their own sense of place and of civic subjectivity, while the representation in turn constantly reshapes their knowledge of it.

Theoretically, research and representation may be distinguished; in practice, however, they are increasingly entwined, compressed and even conflated. As Liang (2025) observes, contemporary artists' enthusiasm for fieldwork often succumbs to their eagerness for immediate visual representation. It is this oscillation and entanglement of cultural techniques between research and representation in Taiwan over the past three decades that this paper aims to unveil: an archaeological inquiry so to speak.

Fieldwork, Compilation, and Curating

Before 1990: Liberating Anthropology from Enclosed Collection through Public Representation

Before the term fieldwork gained currency in Taiwan during the 1990s², the "collection" 採集 (*cǎi-jí*) of folk activities—such as opera, musical scores, ballads, and dances—was already common practice. Collection usually carried the implication of salvaging the past or preserving traditions before they disappeared. For instance, during the Japanese colonial period, a self-trained folklorist educated at Waseda University in Japan, Hsian-Chang Li 李獻璋, gathered folk songs and legends into an anthology entitled *The Collection of Taiwanese Folk Literature* 臺灣民間文學集 (1936) in response to the "Taiwanese language" preservation movement (see Shih, 2018). Such labor-intensive endeavors were often driven by strong motivations. In Li's case, it was the looming anxiety of losing not only the Taiwanese language but also cultural subjectivity itself that underpinned his commitment. Another example is the Folk Song Collection Movement 民歌採集運動 of the 1960s, during the White Terror under the Kuomintang regime. Responding to the state-led Chinese Cultural Renaissance 中華文化復興運動, academic elites entered Indigenous tribes to collect songs in the hope of constructing a canon of "authentic national music." Yet, other local intellectuals pursued the same practice with a more exploratory impulse, seeking to document ongoing social transformations (Lee 2025). Whether resisting colonial regimes or conforming to their nationalist imaginaries, given its archival desire, the practice of collection was always shadowed by the objectification and enframing of cultural *others*.

By contrast, fieldwork, though similar in practice—entering the domain of others to grasp information—emphasizes that these others live within a milieu. Rather than severing cultural elements from their context and archiving them, the researcher is called to immerse in and understand the field as a whole. In practice, however, the two terms often overlapped. For example, a 1980 newspaper report began by describing a "folk song collection team" entering a Paiwan village in Pingtung, only to characterize the same process as "arduous fieldwork" (Huang 1980). Still, one might distinguish their emphases: collection highlights the outcome or artifact (e.g., songs), whereas fieldwork stresses the process of achieving such outcomes. After the lifting of Martial Law in 1987, the surge of localization consciousness and the implementation of the CBP in 1994 further popularized the term *fieldwork*, marking a growing enthusiasm among the public for context and process that, at least momentarily, surpassed elite scholarly interest in artifact collection.

How did this shift occur? Part of the answer lies in the diversification of mediums and the spaces thus constructed. Fieldwork entails a "spatialization" of the collection practice. While the collection in the 1960s largely focused on songs and scores, or any other artefacts collected, by the mid-1980s its scope had expanded to include subjects that can be less

2 A search using the keyword 田野調查 (*tián-yě-diào-chá*, or fieldwork) on the Taiwan News Smart Web for news items between January 1, 1951, and August 8, 2025, yielded 1,078 records. Of these, only 15 were from before 1989, 333 from the 1990s, 460 from the 2000s, 240 from the 2010s, and 30 from 2020 onwards.

easily detached from their spatial context—such as theater and historic architecture. This shift in interests coincided with the cultural policy's growing emphasis on materiality (Wang 2003). Since the late 1970s, the central government launched the campaign of "national cultural construction," which aimed to establish cultural centers in every county and to eventually found a dedicated central agency. This agency, the CCA, was then established in 1981. It was tasked with "planning and implementing cultural development at both national and local levels," guiding the orientations of cultural policy and its related facilities, heritage, community building, literature, history, visual arts, performing arts, and cultural exchange (Ministry of Culture, N.D.). Under the CCA's leadership, budgets were allocated in the 1980s to support fieldwork on folk arts such as glove puppetry, shadow theater, and Nanguan/Beiguan music, alongside the construction of specialized museums in the 1990s—for instance, the Kaohsiung Museum of Shadow Puppet and the Changhua County Museum of Nan Bei Music and Theatre.

Meanwhile, with the end of Cold War, the faltering Kuomintang regime and the surging democratization movements since the late 1970s generated significant affective impacts. Young intellectuals were often engulfed by anxieties over national identity and burdened by a sense of responsibility for the nation's future. These intellectuals urged the state to see sufferings as they were and to launch reforms, and was later described as "Back-to-Reality Generation" (Hsiao 2005b). This generation cultivated an urgent desire for realism, or for being close to social reality.

Consequently, self-enclosed researchers found themselves pushed toward wider publics, with their prior work turning into potential materials for public display in newly established cultural institutions or venues. In 1979, the National Museum of History mounted an exhibition titled *Sketch of Primitive Folk Art*, featuring drawings made by anthropologist Chi-Lu Chen 陳奇祿 during his 1958 to 1968 fieldwork in Indigenous tribes, where he produced illustrations to document clothing and artifacts (Chen 1979). Similarly, Chen's student Ye-Rong Gao 高業榮, a painter and professor at National Pingtung University of Education, described his oil paintings of Indigenous tribes as a form of fieldwork documentation. His works were exhibited in 1986 at the newly established Pingtung County Cultural Center (established in 1984), which he called a "reportage-style" exhibition (Huang 1986). Another example is the annual performance of the Department of Dance at the National Institute of the Arts (founded also in 1984). Its director, Cloud Gate founder Hwai-Min Lin 林懷民, produced a dance piece in 1987 based on the fieldwork conducted by Academia Sinica's Institute of Ethnology on the Amis harvest festival. The performance was staged at the cultural centers in Banqiao and Keelung, both of which were just established a few years before (in 1983 and 1985 respectively). As Lin commented:

After collaborating with Academia Sinica to collect mountain songs and dances, I finally gained a genuine understanding [...] This performance not only recreated the essence of Amis songs and dances, but also displayed the social structure of the community; in this sense, it was scholarly (quoted in Hou 1987, emphasis added).

Here, the boundary between anthropology and art grew porous. Academic intellectuals applied artistic techniques of representation during research and released their once-

private research materials into public venues, while the artists developed pieces not unlike a research presentation. This shows that the incorporation of fieldwork by art circles was not a recent fashion; at least as early as the 1980s, visual and performing artists were already engaging with fieldwork methods. The most prominent manifestation of this trend was Taiwan's theater movement between the 1980s and 1990s, in which actors, dancers, and directors not only sought to break institutional constraints (Lin 2010; Liang 2019) but also tried to learn folk skills firsthand. Rather than relying solely on institutional research, they drew from embodied engagement with local daily life as the basis for creation. Notable examples include U-Theatre 優劇場 (Liu 1991; Yeh 2013).

When the CBP was launched in 1994, such practices of research and representation were encouraged to go beyond museums and theaters to enter the new domain of community. The audiences also expanded from intellectuals preoccupied with national identity to the public living in specific localities. Supported by CCA policy and resources, workshops and writing camps were held across the country, helping popularize techniques once confined to academic practice. Methods such as audio recording, photography, sketching and documentation of folk stories moved from background to foreground, emerging as explicit cultural techniques that intellectuals actively sought to transmit to wider publics.

The 1990s to 2000s: Fieldwork and Compilation as Means for Community Building

Throughout the 1990s, local cultural foundations sprang up across Taiwan, often established by local elites, intellectuals, or grassroots politicians. These foundations frequently organized workshops to train community members in "fieldwork." For example, the Hsin Kang Foundation of Culture and Education 新港文教基金會, founded in 1987 following Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's return to Hsin Kang at the invitation of Lin Hwai-min's uncle, subsequently launched oral history writing camps to cultivate interviewing and writing skills among locals. In Taipei, Paul Lin 林經甫, a hospital founder and puppetry enthusiast, established the Taiyuan Arts and Culture Foundation 台原藝術文化基金會 in 1990. The foundation organized "Fieldwork Camps on Folk Culture," training participants in interview and reportage writing skills, often held in remote rural areas or even offshore islands. Lin would later donate his puppet collection to the Taipei City Government, forming the Puppetry Art Center of Taipei in 2004. Another example is the Youngsun Culture & Education Foundation 仰山基金會, established in Yilan in 1990 by politician Si-Kun You 游錫堃 with unspent election campaign funds. The foundation continues to support theses, local resource surveys, and talent cultivation in Yilan today.

Such "fieldwork workshops" were influential across the society and generations. Their methods even flowed back into universities, reshaping pedagogy. In some Chinese literature courses, for instance, students were asked not to study classical texts but instead to investigate local folk culture or artifacts and write project reports (Wang 1995). Following Taiwan's lifting of Martial Law in 1987, fieldwork camps also emerged as a newly available form of "edutainment" for a society suddenly freed. Hence, while many of the workshops were held during summer vacations, targeting the students, some would unexpectedly

attract more working adults who found these training programs fun and fulfilling (Chiang 1990). In short, the 1990s marked a golden age for fieldwork in Taiwan, when what was once a scholarly technique reserved for intellectual elites gained traction in everyday community life.

Meanwhile, forms of representation cultivated in the arts—painting, dance, theater—were increasingly appropriated as methods in documentation and for identity-building. Community theatre, for instance, was often applied to motivate residents' engagement with local issues, and to encourage exploration, recognition, and identification with their community through performance (Ko 2010). Still, most of the fieldwork workshops emphasized training participants in "writing" skills, not artistic expression. This selective focus aligned with two long-lasting historical trajectories: the first is the realist reportage literature developed along with the Back-to-Reality Generation since the 1970s, and the other is the postwar academic and governmental interest in the collection of folk practices. The outcome is a quest for a "real" representation of whatever materials discovered and collected, including but not limited to narrated memories, old photos, artifacts of the old days and so on.

This pursuit for representing history as it was fostered the circulation of "compilation" 編纂 (*biān-zuǎn*) as a cultural technique, especially in the form of local histories and gazetteers. Traditionally, local gazetteers 方誌 served officials by providing information in a formal, Sinocentric style (Chang 2020). By the 1990s, with the trend of Bentuhua, official gazetteers aimed for smaller jurisdictions surged in number (Lin 1999). However, since official efforts generally extended only to the township level, there was still ample space left for grassroots writing from below (Chang 2020). Indeed, a large number of local cultural experts capable of writing local histories emerged during this period through community workshop training. In 1998, the government decided to subsidize this bottom-up effort by initiating the "Write Your Own Village History" 大家來寫村史 project—a collaboration between CCA and the Community Empowering Society, ROC 中華民國社區營造協會. The latter even published a companion manual—*Write Your Own Village History: A Manual for Participatory Community History* 大家來寫村史：民眾參與式社區史操作手冊 (Chen 1998)—to guide communities through oral history interviewing, cultural mapping, converting fieldwork into theatre, curating old photos, repurposing community spaces, building local museums, producing documentaries, and organizing editorial teams (Figure 1).

In this period, both research and representation were clearly oriented toward building local identity and fostering community solidarity. Process mattered more than product. Representation was not about producing polished books, exhibitions, or performances, but about participation. As the manual itself reminded local editors:

At the outset, keep things simple. Since most editorial members are non-professionals, assistance should be provided whenever necessary to ensure smooth progress. Do not set standards too high; otherwise, the work may appear daunting.

What matters most is that everyone is "willing" to help (Lin 1998, 91).

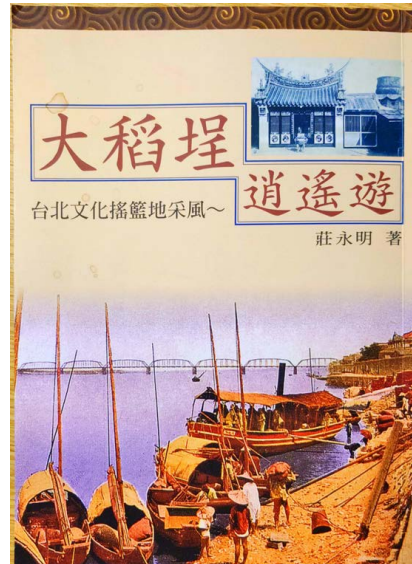
This participatory ethos produced an abundance of community publications and local histories. Information collected by locals, however unpolished, was valued as inherently

meaningful for community building. Writers were encouraged to present materials "as is," or to record their own immediate impressions. The famous local historian Yung-Ming Chuang 莊永明, for example, produced a 150-page *Da-Dao-Cheng Tour* 大稻埕逍遙遊 (2007) (Figure 2), blending historical documentation with deeply personal reflections on his home district. His preface reads less like scholarship than a nostalgic monologue, confessing his belief that "if the old do not tell stories, the young will never know their worth" (2007, 5).

Figure 1. Cover of *Write Your Own Village History: A Manual for Participatory Community History*
Source: Reproduced from the original book by the author.



Figure 2. Cover of *Da-Dao-Cheng Tour* by Yung-Ming Chuang
Source: Reproduced from the original book by the author.



A similar documentary ethos shaped exhibition practices as well. In 2002, CCA launched the "Local Museums" 地方文化館 project as a way to sustain community-building achievements through the reuse and revitalization of vacant spaces. Exhibitions in these local museums typically showcased residents' folk collections (such as puppetry in Taipei's Puppetry Art Center), artifacts from traditional industries, or items associated with specific community histories (Chiang 2006; Wu 2018; Lu 2025). The very act of contributing private collections for public display was itself the goal. Whether these artifacts connected to contemporary life was of little concern—at least initially.

Nevertheless, as the cultural economy gained momentum, this documentary technique of compilation in the sense of simply arranging and presenting information proved insufficient. Already in 2002, Chen Pan, editor of the *Write Your Own Village History* manual, observed a shift:

Despite considerable economic pressures, more than 2,000 local cultural units, which are broadly defined here to include cultural-historical studios, community

*associations and environmental groups, continue to engage in local cultural work and seem to be heedless of economic realities. From an economic and political perspective, their endeavors may seem slow and impractical. Yet in the decade since democratization, even the harsh mechanisms of commercial enterprise have begun to recognize the **latent value** of local cultural work (Chen 2002, 347–348, emphasis added).*

What Chen identified as the "latent value" of local cultural work was no longer simply the collection and faithful compilation of historical data. Instead, it pointed to the emerging agendas of cultural creativity, tourism, and regional revitalization, all of which were new demands that the earlier technique of compilation alone could not satisfy.

After the 2000s: Representation-led Design and Curating

One of the central concerns of CBP was how to improve the quality of everyday environments and to create a renewed sense of "home." Accordingly, beyond anthropology, spatial professionals such as architects and planners became key players in place-making. At a time when local history writing flourished across townships, these professionals mobilized public spaces such as parks (Huang 2000; Chuang 2004), performance venues (Liu and Chang 2002), or post-disaster housing (Wang 2000) as sites of participatory design and reconstruction, thereby invoking collective identification. Government agencies outside the cultural sector also responded with complementary policies. The Construction and Planning Agency of the Ministry of the Interior launched the Townscape Renaissance Project 城鄉風貌改善計畫 in 1999, subsidizing municipal governments to improve urban landscapes and renovate significant public spaces (Liao 2012). Likewise, the Department of Commerce of the Ministry of Economic Affairs introduced the Shopping District Image Shaping 形象商圈 program in 1995, providing funding and guidance for local businesses to enhance the visual appeal of commercial streets and establish district branding. This program was later reframed as "Value-added Aesthetic Design for Shopping District 商圈美學設計加值計畫" in 2024, and was implemented by the Taiwan Design Research Institute (TDRI), an arm's length organization of the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

The key technique underlying these spatial interventions was "design"—the conscious planning between processes and outcomes to achieve specific goals. Unlike the techniques of collection and compilation, design was not easily transferrable to lay participants. One could expect community members to compile their own village histories, but not so easily to design and construct their own parks, theatres, or streets. Control remained with governments and spatial professionals. What was more feasible for grassroots groups, however, was to redesign uses of space, or to reframe its representational function. For instance, Wang Chih-Hung (2005) notes that during the 1990s, community colleges and local history workshops in Wenshan District, Taipei, often translated their knowledge of hometowns into community maps. Unlike official administrative maps, these grassroots maps were highly selective. Different groups, even when documenting the same area, would highlight distinct features depending on their own values, sensitivities, or aesthetics. In other words, the same field materials could yield divergent representational outcomes

once filtered through design, foregrounding subjective local imagery.

Guided tours followed a similar logic. Curators typically structured itineraries around particular sites or landscapes—say, a historical monument or an ecological reserve. They were compelled to select objects of attention with an eye toward both narrative clarity and practical flow. Through such choices, a sense of place was repeatedly rehearsed, framed, and materialized by representational design—whether in maps or itineraries. Nevertheless, in these cases, design served a relatively simple mediating function; it needed only to assemble fieldwork results for external presentation. Such design approximated layout, whose main purpose is to organize messy information into legible order for the outsiders to learn. The result was often information-rich but risked overwhelming audiences through excessive detail.

After 2000, however, representation demanded more than the compilation of information and increasingly required design as an instrument of attraction. With the CCI enshrined as a national development strategy, and with the first postwar alteration of ruling party ushering in a pro-localization central government in 2000, cultural equality became highly celebrated, and symbolic events were organized across the island to decentralize culture away from Taipei. Festivals thus forged new, intimate connections with place. For example, the Taipei Lantern Festival was rebranded in 2001 as the Taiwan Lantern Festival and began rotating among different counties to strengthen local identity. Similarly, the Taiwan Design Expo, co-hosted by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and local governments since 2003, has been staged annually in different cities to showcase local industries.

The introduction of RRP after the mid-2010s further confirmed festivals as means for place rebranding. Such festivals operate beyond neighborhood confines in both production and consumption. Though the venues are locally situated, the production of these festivals often requires external logistics, construction firms, or labor far beyond local capacities, and their success is measured by their ability to attract non-local visitors. As a result, the technological and aesthetic demands of such events often far exceed earlier community exhibitions. No longer limited to object display and printed materials, festivals as such rely on elaborate graphic design, lighting and sound, visibility of venues, artistic staging, and media attention—demands that entail substantial advertising budgets and advanced professional design. Notable examples include the Taiwan East Coast Land Arts Festival 東海岸大地藝術節 (since 2015), the Green Island Human Rights Art Festival 綠島人權藝術季 (since 2019), and the Formosa North Coast Arts Festival 福爾摩沙北海岸藝術季 (since 2023), all initiated by central government. Local governments, too, may try to rebrand their region by hosting festivity featuring both domestic and international curators, as exemplified by Matsu Biennale 馬祖國際藝術節 (since 2022). They would also leverage popular intellectual properties (IP) to generate social media buzz and attract visitors, as in Kaohsiung City's 2025 Kaohsiung Wonderland, where giant inflatable characters from Japanese anime were installed along the Love River, accompanied by nightly light and music shows, reportedly drawing six million visitors in twenty days (Kaohsiung City Government 2025).

This top-down festival model privileges representation over participation. Design—

and its distilled form, *curating*—risks becoming an elite practice external to local society, departing from the spatial professionals' participatory ideal in the 1990s. Yet bottom-up initiatives also emerged, particularly among generations born after the 1980s who were adept at visual communication and social media. For them, fieldwork skills may matter less than design skills, the latter of which enables the creation of representational products tailored to their needs, such as street festivals designed to generate publicity and foot traffic, or highly stylized, self-guided maps addressing distinct tastes. Whether top-down or bottom-up, in the past two decades, place has increasingly come to exist in representation: place is defined visually rather than substantively. This is hardly unique to Taiwan; as Sel and Gurhan (2019) show, Cannes Film Festival posters after 2000 increasingly prioritized visual branding over poster content.

I argue that this obsession with sensory representation in place-making for the purpose of city rebranding, tourism, and local or regional redevelopment has given rise to a trend I term *aesthetic pragmatism*. While the construction of a sense of place continues to rely on knowledge production, the production of local knowledge are no longer primarily oriented toward understanding one's hometown or cultivating collective identity. Instead, they increasingly aim to transform place into a site from which governments and individuals alike can make a living, launch ventures, or generate profit. Under such instrumental imperatives, knowledge is easily reified into mere materials for representation.

Unlike the historical positivism embedded in place-making practices of the 1990s, where process was valued over outcome and representation served knowledge, in aesthetic pragmatism the relationship between knowledge production and representation is reversed. Knowledge now serves representation. Images, experiences, and exhibitions that can enchant audiences and attract crowds become ends in themselves. This inversion of means and ends has further compressed the temporal gap between knowledge production and its representation, as actors grow accustomed to incorporating newly acquired information almost instantaneously into materials for design and exhibition. Such highly compressed practices of cultural techniques are particularly evident in state-subsidized, event-oriented place-making, including annual festivals, markets, and promotional activities.

In the following section, I draw on the Siao-Si district in Changhua City as an empirical case to substantiate this transformation in the cultural techniques of place-making.

The Case of Siao-Si in Changhua City

Changhua City was neither among the most renowned sites of CBP in the 1990s, nor the most vibrant hub of the CCI after 2000. Although the city had been founded as early as the eighteenth century, it settled into a subordinate position within Taiwan's postwar industrial division of labor. Between the 1990s and 2025, its population even declined slightly from over 230,000 to 226,000. For many residents, this "lack of development" translated into a weak sense of local identity. Although community organizations spread across the city under the aegis of government guidance, most of them are in alignment with the official neighborhood jurisdictions, named by that jurisdiction, and under the sway of neighborhood chiefs. As such, members of these organizations are normally engaged with

holding standardized events such as dance classes and the establishment of community painted walls than with the active construction of local knowledge and identity.

Nonetheless, the grassroots spirit of historical inquiry in the 1990s left its traces in the city. In 1994, following a trend shared by many other towns across Taiwan, the descendants of Lai Ho—the "father of modern Taiwanese literature"—together with a group of local gentries established the Laiho Cultural and Educational Foundation 賴和文教基金會, which organized literary camps and promoted local education. Later, in response to the central government's Write Your Own Village History program, Changhua County joined the writing initiative since 2004 and became, remarkably, the only county that has continued publishing Write Your Own Village History series to this day (Chang 2020), producing a total of fifty-three volumes by 2025. Six of these are specifically connected to Changhua City.

Figure 3. Cover of *Siao-Si Streets in Changhua City*

Source: Reproduced from the original book by the author.



Among them is *Siao-Si Streets in Changhua City* (Ni 2008), documenting the Siao-Si district adjacent to the train station (Figure 3). Siao-Si is not a name to be found in any of the official neighborhood jurisdictions.³ However, it is how locals have long identified their neighborhoods since the Qing dynasty. When encountering residents from other districts of the city, they would always call themselves from Siao-Si, referring vaguely to the streets at the intersected area connecting both the North and the West city gates. Being a bustling district already, Siao-Si grew even more prosperous during the Japanese colonial period after the train station was established. Even after WWII up until the early 1980s before the opening of the first National Highway hit the train transportation hard, this area had flourished with inns, fine restaurants, and textile shops. The streetscape they formed

3 The official jurisdiction overlapping more or less with Siao-Si is Chang-Le neighborhood 長樂里.

offered a foundation for grassroots fieldwork and local historiography in the late 1990s and early 2000s. *Siao-Si Streets in Changhua City*, the 28th volume of the Changhua County government's *Write Your Own Village History* series, was the manifestation. It was written by Mei-Yuan Ni, a junior high school teacher who settled in Changhua after marriage and developed an interest in Siao-Si during her continuing education courses. She conducted interviews with shopkeepers, residents, and local historians while also collecting historical photographs; she then synthesized these with secondary literature into a historical account of Siao-Si spanning from the Qing dynasty to the postwar period.

Figure 4. Imagery from the film stills were put on the local museum's window grilles (on the right).
Source: Photographed by the author in 2025.



Ni did not accomplish the work alone. She was assisted by locals who felt the urge to explore, record and share their knowledge about Siao-Si's family and neighborhood histories. This group of locals were born in the 1960s. Rather than stuck to the officially-aligned neighborhood organization, in 2005, they founded another organization reflecting local identification, and named it Siao-Si Cultural Association 小西文化協會. They transformed their own homes into semi-public venues such as a children's toy market, a sewing-machine museum, and a folk toy gallery, displaying puppets and old playthings from their private collections (Ni 2008, 48). That same year, in line with the government's "Local Museum" policy, one former inn owned by a founding member of the Association was designated as a local museum. Other experiments with representation then ensued. In 2009, one graduate student, who was also a local, filmed a short movie set in the district. She later converted stills from the production into decorative imagery and attached the images to the museum's window grilles (Figure 4). Residents also began leading guided tours of the neighborhood, producing their own narratives for visitors. Meanwhile, the Association

actively advocated for the preservation of Kao-Bin Pavilion, a high-end restaurant from the Japanese colonial era with distinct architectural style. With the assistance of outside spatial professionals, the campaign succeeded: the building was listed as heritage in 2010 and restored in 2018, and later turned into a key exhibition venue for local communities (Kao and Wang 2023) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Kao-Bin Pavilion after restoration.
Source: Photographed by the author in 2019.



Although the Siao-Si residents were unfamiliar with the technical language of "CBP," their investment in local research and representation closely embodied its ethos. They would often express nostalgia for Siao-Si's old prosperity before the opening of the National Highway, and even wished for its restoration. However, since those born in the 1960s were so occupied with the collection of antique objects and photography, and were mainly invested in these activities out of passion, their engagement with place-making turned out to be less about economic success than about preserving and displaying cherished memories of childhood; they were eager to exhibit folk toys, local customs, and the district's former prosperity simply because they want to share the good old days with others. One recent example took place in October 2022, when the Association curated the exhibition "Wedding Shops of the Old Street," which displayed traditional marriage items and even staged a mock "embroidery ball throwing" 拋繡球 ritual in Kao-Bin Pavilion (Figure 6). Yet, such activities tended to attract only local enthusiasts of folk traditions, falling short of generating tourism highlights.

Figure 6. Poster for the event of "embroidery ball throwing."
Source: Siao-Si Cultural Association (2022).



As the next generation born in the 1990s came of age, some chose to return and start businesses in Siao-Si. With the aim of making Siao-Si an arena where their new ventures may prosper, the younger generation joined the Siao-Si Cultural Association in 2024. And, taking advantage of the opportunity created by the 2025 Taiwan Design Expo to be held in Changhua, they decided to transform the Association, formally registering it as a "shopping district" organization under the guidance of the Administration of Commerce, Ministry of Economic Affairs. Siao-Si was subsequently selected by the Administration as one of the seven pilot sites for the annual "Value-added Aesthetic Design for Shopping Districts" program, in preparation for and to complement the upcoming 2025 Design Expo.

The Taiwan Design Expo is a typical top-down festival jointly organized by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and a local government that secures hosting rights through a competitive process. Its origins date back to the 1980s, when the central government, facing the end of the Cold War, sought to guide small and medium-sized enterprises to rebrand their products for enhancing export competitiveness (Wong and Lin 2008). Since the 2010s, following Taipei's promotion as a World Design Capital, the Expo has shifted from an industry-oriented showcase of products to a public platform for city rebranding. Hence, when the Changhua County government obtained the right to host the 2025 Expo, a small portion of the resources from the Ministry of Economic Affairs were soon directed to the rebranding of Siao-Si—one of the most renowned districts with distinctive local identity and place-making efforts in downtown. Through the involvement of external professional teams tasked with "aesthetic guidance," the Administration of Commerce and its executive arm, the TDRI, quickly imposed a professionally designed district image and a light-blue wayfinding system onto the community (Figure 7).

Figure 7. "Rebranding of the Siao-Si streets through standardized guiding signs as instructed by the Administration of Commerce—in response to the 2025 Taiwan Design Expo in Changhua in October. Source: Photographed by the author in 2024.



At the same time, TDRI sought to train Siao-Si's design-inexperienced young residents to produce a stylized local publication. To this end, it enlisted another group based in Changhua with expertise in graphic design, which provided editorial, design, and production support through workshops and follow-up consultations. This group, however, argued that merely teaching publication editing would fall short of meaningful community empowerment and therefore proposed incorporating training in fieldwork. It was then that the author was invited to be one of the instructors in a workshop held in early June 2025. Despite targeting the young generation, this workshop however attracted more elders than the younger ones. The former volunteered to supplement information and history the latter unaware of. With their help, over the course of mere one-and-a-half days, Siao-Si's younger generation was guided through their first community-based investigation and a preliminary sorting of the raw information, so as to select materials for further editing and design.

These materials were subsequently refined under the continued guidance of the local group with graphic design expertise, and were printed as Siao-Si's first community newspaper by late September. While learning to edit, the younger generation of Siao-Si also developed a district icon of red-and-black "house shrew," which was then widely deployed during the Design Expo across printed materials, inflatable installations, photo spots, and projection-mapping displays throughout Siao-Si (Figure 8). Notably, two of the core figures among the young generation were already operating a projection-mapping business within the district, enabling the lighting installations during the Expo to be fully produced by them.

During the 2025 Taiwan Design Expo, Siao-Si thus presented two distinct design imaginaries. One was imposed by external professional teams in the form of the official district image and light blue wayfinding system, while the other was developed autonomously by local youth, embodied as the red-and-black house shrew iconography.

Although the two were stylistically incongruous, together they still generated a vibrant exhibition atmosphere (Figure 9). In particular, the projection-mapping and lighting installations attracted unprecedented crowds into the small Siao-Si district, delighting local elders and instilling a sense of pride in the achievements of the younger generation.

Figure 8. Rebranding of the Siao-Si streets through self-developed house-shrew iconography.
Source: Photographed by the author in 2025.



Figure 9. Lighting installations with house-shrew iconography. On the floor is the blue wayfinding system.
Source: Photographed by the author in 2025.



Discussion: From Naïve Historical Positivism to Aesthetic Pragmatism

The place-making practices unfolding in Siao-Si are not exceptional when compared with other communities across Taiwan. Nevertheless, in Changhua City, where community organizations are often absorbed into neighborhood-level administrative units and grassroots momentum is generally weak, Siao-Si stands out. Owing to its historical development and its proximity to the railway station, Siao-Si has maintained a distinct local identity. It is among the most pronounced sites in Changhua City where grassroots place-making cultural techniques constantly intersected with the state—through subsidies, preservation campaigns, and expert guidance. As a result, Siao-Si encapsulates the different cultural techniques identified in this paper.

Through a quick review of the Siao-Si case, it becomes evident that the contemporary application of "design" and "curation" through highly visible events is increasingly outweighing earlier commitments to historical writing, narrative documentation, artifact collection, and their "authentic" representation in books or semi-private local museums. The generation born in the 1960s devoted themselves to compiling local histories as well as documenting Siao-Si's former prosperity and their own childhood memories. With the assistance of external spatial professionals, they even successfully preserved the Kao-Bin Pavilion, which since its restoration has served as a venue for local events. These events, however, largely centered on the display of folk artifacts. Cultural techniques oriented towards historical compilation and representation proved less capable of attracting contemporary consumers seeking stylized experiences.

By contrast, the younger generation returned after 2020 approaches Siao-Si differently. Rather than treating it primarily as a site for knowledge-building and identity formation, they are more directly concerned with sustaining livelihoods and launching businesses. Under government-led expert guidance and large-scale events, stylized design appealing to sensory have become key instruments in their place-making practices.

This shift in cultural techniques is accompanied by a clear generational handover. During the workshop, a notable phenomenon was that participants from the parent generation outnumbered those from the younger cohort, despite the latter being the primary target. The elders' enthusiasm stemmed not only from their desire to support their children's revitalization efforts, but also from a belief that the younger generation lacked familiarity with local history and would require their assistance—a belief confirmed through the workshop process. Faced with the task of selecting representational materials for publications within a compressed three-month timeframe, the younger participants inevitably relied on elders' extensive historical knowledge and anecdotal accounts of local shops. At the same time, they were required to translate this material into lighter, stylized, and consumer-oriented texts and layouts, gradually learning what constituted "cool" and tasteful visual imagery. The cultural techniques through which Siao-Si is framed as a place are thus undergoing a generational transformation.

However, the emphasis on aesthetics and their tourism effects under government-led festivals tends to privilege outcomes over processes, producing design installations that remain disconnected from local lived realities. Although TDRI introduced a local group

as design consultants, it simultaneously commissioned a separate professional team to produce a wayfinding system largely devoid of local sensibility. The result was the uneasy juxtaposition of two stylistically incongruent design imaginaries. While this visual density made the Expo appear vibrant, it also underscored the event being a hurried production of surface representations, which lacks participation, integration, and sustained engagement.

Siao-Si's place-making cultural techniques have thus shifted from realist historical documentation and representation toward a mode that privileges aesthetics, spectacle, and the instrumentalization of design and curation for tourism. I argue that this case exemplifies a transition from naïve historical positivism to aesthetic pragmatism. This shift raises obvious concerns, including the compression of knowledge-production time in pursuit of short-term outcomes, and the tendency to treat crowd-attracting events as ends in themselves. At the same time, however, the younger generation has begun to explore ways of integrating cultural techniques with their own livelihoods through the mobilization of external resources—something the previous generation could scarcely achieve. For them, knowledge production and representation no longer end with identity-making or nostalgia, nor remain detached from economic life.

From this perspective, the problem lies not in aesthetic pragmatism as the new normal of place-making, but in the institutional frameworks within which it is embedded and the objectives it serves. Under annualized state funding regimes, administrative rhythms replace those of everyday life, and aesthetic practices are oriented toward political performance. Yet one can imagine otherwise: an aesthetic pragmatism genuinely oriented toward sustaining livelihoods, rather than servicing short-term governmental agendas.

Conclusion

Place-making in Taiwan has evolved into an overlapping field of population policy, spatial redevelopment, and cultural governance, and it often entangles with multiple pursuits such as national identity, quality of life, civic consciousness, and entrepreneurial spirit. The cultural techniques that oscillate between research and representation have shaped this field, functioning as epistemic mediators between people and their lived environments. By tracing how knowledge and representational practices surrounding CBP, CCI and the later RRP have, over the past three decades, shifted from state institutions and academic circles to wider society, this paper highlights how "the place" is in fact conditioned by transformations in cultural techniques. These have moved from a nostalgic and realist orientation in the 1980s and 1990s toward a pragmatic concern with present and future development. If earlier cultural techniques were geared toward shaping a sense of local identity or a "new hometown," those after the 2000s have been increasingly mobilized to summon local charm to attract consumers. Thus, place-making has gradually shifted from a realist—though naïve to some degree—unveiling of social reality to stylized branding and marketing under the cultural economy.

Fieldwork and representational practices such as guided tours, theater, exhibitions, publications and festivals were once mere mediators of public participation. Over time, however, they have come to demand deeper forms of engagement. It is no longer sufficient

to compile and display materials; they must be beautified, formatted, and paired with sensory techniques of mediation. Design and curatorship have therefore emerged as dominant cultural techniques, no longer content with ordinary, unpolished presentation but instead demanding professionalized aesthetics.

In this sense, the place-making techniques in Taiwan have undergone a discursive turn. It has shifted from the naïve historical positivism of the 1990s to the aesthetic pragmatism that has become increasingly salient after the 2000s. What does this shift entail? The case of Siao-Si in Changhua offers a glimpse. In the 1990s, residents' participation was enthusiastic, if not always professional; their know-how, however, can no longer be readily enacted in today's commercially oriented climate. Instead, implementation requires mediation by government bodies and design professionals. While a new generation may be able to shoulder this responsibility after training, and may build their own local knowledge in the process of producing stylized publications, the aesthetic demands imposed on representational outcomes have clearly raised the threshold for civic participation. Because the prioritization of visual representation often comes at the expense of knowledge production, we must critically confront how cultural techniques, under the current focus on aesthetic pragmatism, reshape the very meaning of "place." This calls for a serious re-examination of the techniques that localities truly require.

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