

Introduction: Imagining Subject

Situated precariously between Taiwan and China, the Matsu archipelago is even more diminutive than the Trobriand Islands. From the islands, which belong to Taiwan, one can see cargo vessels sailing along the Chinese coastline during the day and watch the city lights glimmering across the water after dark—China is but a stone’s throw away. In fact, to go from Beigan, one of the northern islands, to the mainland city of Huangqi, takes only half an hour by ferry, while a trip to Taiwan involves traversing the tempestuous “dark trench” (*hei shuigou*) of the Taiwan Strait. Taking nine hours over rough seas, the journey can sometimes seem longer than flying across the Pacific to American shores.

At first glance, one’s eyes are immediately drawn to the stone houses that dot the islands’ mountainous landscape. Unlike the residential courtyards found in southern Fujian province, most of these homes are stand-alone two-story structures, tucked attractively into the folds of the mountains. Their unique name, *huang ngiang nah* (F. foreign shelters), points to the fact that they display some Western architectural elements (Fig. 0.1). It is said that they were designed both as a response to and an improvement on the Western architecture built in China after the signing of the 1842 Treaty of Nanking and the opening up of the Fuzhou harbors (Zheng 2003). Walking through the villages, one occasionally still comes across slogans attached to the exterior walls—“Take back the mainland” (*guangfu dahu*); “Eliminate the traitors Zhu De and Mao Zedong” (*xiaomie zhu mao hanjian*); and “Cooperation between soldiers and civilians” (*junmin yijia*)—a reminder of the archipelago’s history as a military front-line. After refurbishment done as part of village preservation projects,

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Fig. 0.1 Strolling along the alleyways of Matsu

many of these stone dwellings have been turned into lodgings for visitors. These former “foreign shelters” have taken up fashionable European-sounding names such as “Mediterranean Villa,” “Santorini Inn,” or “Aegean Sea of Love Bed & Breakfast.” Walking in the circuitous alleyways is like entering the galleries of history.

Towering above the simple stone houses on the peak of a southern island stands a finely wrought, recently finished giant statue of the Goddess Mazu. Since the islands are named after her, in recent years many places have developed according to the catchphrase “Goddess Mazu in Matsu.” This enormous image was built in imitation of the Mazu statue on Meizhou Island, China. Now, she not only looks out over the vast ocean, summoning the fishermen home, but the angle of the statue has been carefully adjusted so that the Goddess faces her birthplace in China: Meizhou Island in Putian. The direction of her gaze reveals the ardent hope and imagination entertained by Matsu residents today of reconnecting with Taiwan and China.

Imagination, Media, and Contemporary Society

Social imaginary is the way in which the members of a community imagine their existence. It forms the common understanding of how to carry out the collective practices that constitute social life (Taylor 2004: 23–4). In contemporary times, imagination has taken on increasing significance. Whether in anthropology or in cultural studies, imaginary has tended to take on weight comparable to culture, belief, or meaning (Strauss 2006: 322), if not replace them. Why is this the case?

It is undeniable that the flourishing of modern media technologies has created new possibilities for imagination to develop. But the uncertainty that people confront in the contemporary world also impels various kinds of imagination to appear, as is seen widely in many fields.¹ Arjun Appadurai (1996) in the early 1990s initiated a series of papers exploring the importance of modern imagination. He posits that the world we inhabit today is characterized by a new role in social life for imagination, which is a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity (31). Since the 1980s, the rising popularity of electronic media, as well as mass migration, has loosened the intimate bonds between people and territories in traditional society: the world has undergone a process of de-territorialization and re-territorialization (49; see also Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 50). In other words, electronic media marks the coming of a new era: it intervenes in public life and reshapes society by virtue of its wide reach and speed of transmission. So, indeed, does mass migration. Although mobility has always existed in history, when modern migration was accompanied by the rapid flows of mass-mediated messages, images, and sensations, cultural reproduction could not continue as before. Imagination has thus acquired a new power in contemporary society (53).

Appadurai, however, does not deny the importance of imagination in traditional societies; rather, he discusses how mass media brought about new kinds of imagination and results: imagination has become a part of everyday life, a way for individuals to negotiate with the wider, globalized world, and to constitute modern self and subjectivity (3). By juxtaposing previous works with contemporary global transformations, Appadurai contributed important insights to many later studies. Below, I scrutinize

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the important issues relating to imagination in the literature both before and after him, since the varied workings of imagination in society is one of the central concerns of this book.

Humans are born with an innate ability to imagine, but in reality only some imaginations are able to develop from one or more individuals into the collective and become shared social imaginaries, that is, common images or representations held by most people that influence society significantly. The role of the mediating mechanism in this process is pivotal. Benedict Anderson (1991[1983]), for instance, in his seminal book *Imagined Community*, depicts how print-capitalism brought about a fundamental transformation in how people “think” the world (22). Taking novels and newspapers as examples, he explicates how these media create homogeneous, empty time and comparable social space (24). These temporal and spatial constructions generate a commonality among people and lay the basis for nationalism.

The significance of collective imagining in the formation of modern Europe is explored more systematically by Charles Taylor (2004). He argues that revolutionary social imaginaries usually come from elites’ or prophets’ original theories of moral order, which over the long march of history gradually infiltrate into ordinary people’s minds. In Europe, it was through three kinds of social forms—market economy, public sphere, and self-governed people—that social imaginary was finally transfigured. It is worth noting that Taylor greatly expands the discussion of social imaginary from print media to broader social institutions. But his analysis, as Crapanzano (2004: 7) suggests, does not delve into “how this infiltration works, nor does he discuss the potential contradictions, tensions, and disjunctions in it.” It is not surprising that subsequent research focused on “the technologies of imagination” (Sneath, Holbraad, and Pedersen 2006: 11), that is, the concrete processes by which imaginative effects are engendered. In ensuing works, the function of medium has also received more attention. Belting (2011[2001]: 20) calls it “an act of animation,” triggering the transference of the individual imagination into a collective perception, as an appropriate medium can open the door to knowledge, enabling the personal mental image to be apprehended and become the collective “picture” in the public space (15). Meyer (2015) develops this idea in her study of Ghana, discussing

how movies function as a “synchronizing actor” to transform individual imaginations into a shared collective imaginary.

In the contemporary era, however, we increasingly engage with, and live in, multiple imagined worlds. Unconstrained by territorial bounds, our connections with others are far more complex and fragmentary than before. Many new elements, such as ethnicity, media, technology, finance, and ideology, have arisen to generate larger imaginaries, or “scapes,” as Appadurai (1996: 33) termed them. These scapes are usually unfixed, irregular, and able to contest with each other or even subvert the official regulations. To sum up, the imagined worlds in contemporary time are spaces of contestation in continual flux (4); their relations can no longer be explicated in terms of the traditional political economy or the central/peripheral dichotomy. How should we understand the emergence and interplay of these different imaginaries?

The Invisible Subject

Although many of the aforementioned scholars have raised important points about social imaginary, most of their works are premised on the collective or social without delving into individual imaginations (Crapazano 2004: 1; Rapport 2015: 8; Robbins 2010: 306), or more precisely, the imagining subjects. What their works crucially miss is the active agent who initiates the imaginings. I consider that the imagining subject has been rendered invisible largely for two distinct reasons.

First is a tendency among scholars to adopt a top-down perspective. Anderson, for example, explores the formation of an imagined community in terms of print capitalism, yet his work rarely treats the imagining subject and the process of imagination (Axel 2003: 121). Similarly, Appadurai’s research emphasizes how people in the present age can use electronic media to achieve previously unimagined imaginaries. But he mainly focuses on the influence of media and technology without considering the individual imagination. This is shown in how he distinguishes two forms of imagination (1996: 7): fantasy, which is private, personal, and often emancipatory; and collective imagination, which is the force behind the formation of neighborhoods, societies, and nation-states, and which could become the fuel for social action. It is clear that

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he places greater importance on the latter. Although Taylor touches upon individuals—particularly elites—and how their thinking spreads to the larger community via economics, politics, and the public sphere, he rarely explicates how exactly they communicate with each other, and the process by which ideas are negotiated and reconciled.

The second reason that the imagining subject is invisible is probably historical, and specific to the society under study. In a given society or historical era, there may be a larger institution existing that prevents us from readily seeing the individual imagination. The Matsu archipelago, the fieldsite of this book, is a case in point of how imagination can be obscured for various distinct reasons. Until the eighteenth century, the Matsu Islands were considered by the central Chinese government as a “forbidden outpost,” to which officials could exile people at will. The inhabitants consisted of a largely transient population who survived by fishing. Social relations on the islands were based on kinship and ties to their original hometowns in the coastal regions of southeast China (see Chapter 1). Relying on the mainland to fulfill many of their basic needs, the residents’ lives were only partially conducted on the islands. Some particularly daring individuals rose to become feared pirates who dominated the sea, but their reigns mostly proved to be short-lived. During the early period, life on the islands was transitory and intermittent. Given the extremely limited data, it is all the more difficult for us to know how individuals’ imaginations developed during that time.

The conflict between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party in China, as well as the US–Soviet Cold War, drastically changed the fate of Matsu. Overnight, Matsu was sealed off from Taiwan and China and turned into a frontline in Taiwan’s defensive strategy against China. The archipelago was ruled by the army for more than forty years (1949–92). In order to transform the barren fishing islands into a solid base for the army, the military government during this period carried out large-scale modernization projects, including improving infrastructure, building schools, and even implementing a guaranteed admission program to send Matsu students to Taiwan for advanced education. All of this brought about tremendous changes in the previously desolate islands. However, the dark side of this seemingly bright picture is that local

fishermen were greatly restricted in their access to the water and their movements at sea. The fishing economy—the lifeblood of the islands—gradually waned. More than two-thirds of the inhabitants left the islands in the 1970s for jobs in Taiwan. Although some commerce based on army supplies did emerge, and the government also offered some jobs, most of these vocations were at the bottom rungs of the military-ruled society; that the government exerted strict control on the bodies and thoughts of locals goes without saying.

In the face of military rule, the individual imagination was largely concealed and expressed privately. For example, Matsu fishermen knew of places on the sea which were beyond military detection, and where they could snatch brief moments of enjoyment outside state control to meet with fishermen friends from China, but those interludes were mostly secret (see Chapter 3). The islanders also elaborated their gambling habits into a kind of imaginative practice in which they could mock, evade, or even contend with the state; but their gambling had to be clandestinely conducted in out-of-the-way places, such as the dark corners of offices, storehouses, tunnels, or even graveyards, as Chapter 4 will show.

Undoubtedly, the pervasive suppression encouraged many Matsu people, especially the early wave of youngsters who were sent to Taiwan to study and who absorbed ideas of liberty there, to rise up in tandem with the Taiwan democratic movement and take to the streets to demand freedom. After two major demonstrations and peaceful sit-ins to protest the military rule, martial law was lifted in 1992, and Matsu finally won its freedom. Subsequent improvements in aviation and naval transport brought Matsu people in touch with the wider world, and the islands were no longer isolated. The advent of internet technologies offered more possibilities for imagination to develop. When the new social media spread to the whole archipelago in the form of a popular website, *Matsu Online*, which was set up in 2001, the residents were afforded greater freedom to express their opinions, connect with each other in the virtual world, and enthusiastically engage in public issues. The individual imagination has gained a larger space to express itself and explore in the online world.

Subjectification and the Ethical Imagination

It is important to take a closer look at the question of how long-oppressed and confined individuals could become imagining subjects. How does their subjectivity take shape, and what is the process of their subjectification? Many anthropological studies of subjectivity have looked at these issues; I benefit particularly from the works of Henrietta Moore (1994, 2007, 2011) who notes that subjectivity and subjectification have not been defined in a rigorous way in anthropology. Subjectivity in general denotes “inner states or perceptions that engage with affect, cognition, morality and agency” (Biehl et al. 2007: 1; Ortner 2005: 31; see also Holland and Leander 2004: 127; Luhmann 2006: 345). Of these, agency—that is, how people act in the world—is underscored by most of the scholars.

Among these broad definitions, Moore (2011: 72) identifies two perspectives. The first one is cultural, proposed by Ortner (2005) who reinterprets Geertz and highlights the aspects of how “the cultural and social formations shape, organize, and provoke ... modes of affect and thought” (2005: 31). This standpoint is clearly based on culturally constituted feelings, desires and intentions (34). The second perspective is experiential, postulated by Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007). They discuss the variability, heterogeneity, and contingency of subjectivities taking shape in the realm of experiences that are usually intersubjective, involving practices, negotiations, and contestations when interacting with others. Experience for them is thus the medium within which collective and subjective processes fuse and condition each other. Although they do not deny that subjectivity is also constrained by culture, symbols, and meanings as Ortner posits, they argue that experience can reconfigure and repattern cultural contents (53).

Moore, however, indicates that experience in this approach is formulated in a rather loose way: what it entails is not really explored. Intersubjectivity and the process of subjectification are also undertheorized. Above all, these discussions are limited to the frame of subjects, without exploring “the specific grounds for transformations in subjectivities and in the forms and mechanism of subjection” (73). The factors which affect on individuals are usually generalized as “exterior”

elements: “interior” self and “exterior” influences are separated. Even when they interact, the consequence is usually termed as “hybridity” of modernization or globalization.

Moore suggests that this interior/exterior dichotomy has to be transcended to reach an understanding of how the process of subjectification, or becoming a subject, evolves. In her earlier works (1994: 55; 2007: 17), she differentiated self and subject, showing that the self is constituted by multiple subject positions. Her later work (2011) develops how various kinds of mediums, or “the forms of the possible” (18) in her own words, can reshape self. She takes new media as an example to show how it can magnify “interior” meanings and feelings, supplementing and extending individual sensations and emotions (Moore 2011: 116), and engendering new agency and social connections. This is the process of subjectification which not only creates new subjects, but also reconstitutes self–other relations. She thus advocates that we should break the interior/exterior division and see new media technologies as second nature to humans, with which individuals are able to create new worlds and become “relational” subjects (78). For her, modern computer-mediated technologies are only one of the possible mediums. People also deploy objects (Latour 1993, 2005) and art forms (Gell 1998) to create new social ties and cultural contents. As she writes:

Humans use objects and technologies to extend our reach across space and time, to create new forms of self, of social relations and social ontologies. ... New technologies enhance our capacities for virtuality and for making social relations. They not only make new ways of seeing possible, but they are productive of new relays of affect and intensity which in turn produces new cultural forms and cultural capacities. (Moore 2011: 127)

This way of discussing self is undoubtedly much indebted to Foucault’s concept of “the ethical subject” (1985; 1998), which concerns the mode of subjectification, technologies of the self, and the mode of being that the subject aspires to achieve. However, she proceeds to elaborate it into the idea of “the ethical imagination” (Moore 2011: 15–21; Long and Moore 2013) in which she delves further into self–other relations, in particular, the forms and means through which individuals imagine relationships to themselves and to others, and the unconscious affects, emotions, and fantasies which are thereby generated. This

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analytical framework is helpful in investigating the emergence of imagining subjects after the demilitarization of Matsu, the major concern of this book. Going further, I will discuss how their rich imaginations, as developed through different media technologies, enhance our understanding of *the formation of the social imaginary*. The online creation of wartime memory, discussed in Chapter 6, provides a vital clue to this process.

From Deserted Islands to an Enchanted Place

The weblog series *The Wartime Childhood of Leimengdi* appeared on *Matsu Online*, a popular website reporting on Matsu. It began in 2005 and was published over the course of three years. The posts were copiously illustrated by Chen Tianshun, a Taiwan-based emigrant from Matsu, and the text was written by his Taiwanese wife, Xia Shuhua. Their collaborative project was widely read and much beloved during its serialization; when later published in book form, residents voted to designate it a “Book of Matsu.” The series records the childhood memories of Chen Tianshun, who grew up in Matsu during military rule. The rich culture and ecology of the islands marked him profoundly, but the trauma of military rule also left permanent psychological scars. Owing to the decline of the fishing economy, his entire family left the islands when he was fifteen. He attended a vocational school of art and design in Taiwan and worked there as an illustrator. He and his family lived a relatively secluded life in Taipei, and for nearly three decades he never set foot on Matsu. He hardly spoke about his childhood even to his wife, and his past was seemingly a painful secret that he tried to forget or hide.

Only when *Matsu Online* appeared as a forum for him to unburden himself by exercising his talent, was he moved to draw upon his deeply buried memories. Throughout the process, he was buoyed by his wife’s engaging writing and an outpouring of emotional support from netizens. The co-active structure of internet technology (Web 2.0) quickly engendered intersubjective communication and mutual empathy between him and a growing group of netizens (Dijck 2007; Cappelletto 2005a, 2005b). A shared image of wartime Matsu emerged, and it consoled his displaced