

The Time for Words :

An Exploration of the Sensible and the Imagined in Sino-Taiwanese Relations

The project *The Time for Words* originated from an enquiry into differences in perception between young Chinese and Taiwanese students. In the early 2000s, in the course of my teaching at Inalco and later at the Universities of Créteil and Nanterre, I encountered students from both societies. They seemed to share a fairly solid knowledge of the history of the Republic of China (1910–1949), although they often offered different, and sometimes completely opposing, interpretations.

These divergences did not merely concern interpretations of historical events or figures ; they also involved affects and particular ways of inhabiting the past. While Chinese students spontaneously expressed a sense of proximity with Taiwan—often articulated through phrases such as “we are members of the same family” or “blood is thicker than water” (我们是一家人, 血浓于水)—their Taiwanese counterparts more frequently evoked a sense of distance, even a divide (隔阂).

A first survey conducted between 2006 and 2008 among around sixty students in France, Taiwan and China allowed me to explore this question further. Although interpretations of the past diverged, the emotions elicited by certain events—anger (氣憤), hatred (仇恨) and shame (恥辱)—appeared remarkably similar. Beyond institutional discourses, what emerged was a shared space of sensibility, a common ground in which positions of belonging and conviction, while not disappearing, could nonetheless be questioned, displaced or reconfigured.

It was from this hypothesis that the workshop “Sino-Taiwanese Dialogue through Cinema” (2009–2010) was conceived. Ten students agreed to take part in this experimental workshop, structured around the viewing of films addressing the continental and insular history of the Republic of China. The intention was not to organise a face-to-face debate, but rather to open a space of exchange—an “in-between”, in François Jullien’s sense—where divergences could be openly expressed and become the fertile ground for encounter and dialogue.

Within this framework, my role was that of a mediator. I sought to maintain a space of attentive listening that would safeguard particular sensitivity to the participants’ perceptions and emotions, allowing speech to circulate without becoming trapped in confrontational dynamics.

The idea of producing a documentary emerged at a later stage. The film was not shot during the workshop sessions themselves, but afterwards, once the students expressed a desire to reflect upon the experience they had just lived through. The documentary thus became a space both of reappropriation and of critical distance, enabling each participant to consider the dynamics of resistance, blockage or, conversely, openness and exchange. It also offered a way of approaching questions that had remained unresolved.

The film was organised around two narrative threads : the history of Sino-Taiwanese relations since 1945, and the students' own journey as they sought to understand the identity and memory dynamics specific to their respective societies—dynamics that inevitably shaped the nature of their encounter. These threads allowed the students' testimonies to be situated within a broader historical depth, without confining them within the political and identity frameworks that structure their present.

The documentary should therefore not be seen as a synthesis of the workshop sessions, nor as an attempt at a reconciliatory conclusion. Rather, it constitutes a work of elucidation. Through their words, the young Chinese and Taiwanese participants make visible the points of friction and turning points, as well as the hesitations and questions that emerged from their exchanges.

The making of the film did not bring the research to a close ; on the contrary, it opened a new stage of inquiry. Between 2011 and 2021, I conducted individual interviews with the members of the workshop, during which family memory gradually came to occupy a central place. Analysing these narratives soon appeared both necessary and particularly fruitful. It became clear that the positions expressed during the workshop sessions could only be fully understood when considered in light of individual and family trajectories unfolding over the long term : migrations, wars, political ruptures, silences and traumas that continue to shape collective understandings of the past.

Adopting a perspective grounded in the sociology of memory, the analysis of these interviews sought—following Maurice Halbwachs—to identify the social frameworks of memory as well as the processes through which narratives are formed, particularly through their affective inflections and modes of intergenerational transmission. Family memories, sometimes extending across three or four generations and revealed in the narratives of these young participants, thus shed light on some of the deeper foundations of contemporary positions.

The analysis of these interviews led to the publication of two books. The first, *The Time of Words : A Sino-Taiwanese Dialogue (Memory & Transmission)* (You Feng Editions, 2023), offers an in-depth study of the narratives collected over more than a decade. It highlights the ways in which the generation born in the 1980s constructs its relationship to the past, oscillating between the search for historical and memorial continuity and the assertion of a memorial perspective shaped by familial, temporal and spatial individuations.

The second volume, *Taiwan–China : Crossed Imaginaries* 海峽兩岸—想像交織的記憶 (You Feng Editions, 2023), presents these narratives in an illustrated form by L.H., accompanied by historical commentaries written by specialists of China and Taiwan. The aim of this format was to articulate subjective fragments of memory with a scholarly effort of contextualisation, both contributing jointly to a deeper understanding of the imaginaries and sensibilities of the past.

Taken together, these different productions form a composite whole. The workshop constituted a space of dialogical experimentation ; the documentary provided a reflexive exploration of this experience ; and the books allowed memorial representations to be examined more deeply as narrative sources whose plasticity and sensitive dimension may contribute to the emergence of a shared space.

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