

Modern Monsters / Death and Life of Fiction

# MARSHAL FIE JIA



Hsu Chia-Wei

Hsu Chia-Wei's new video installation *Marshal Tie Jia* engages with the history of a tiny island off the coast of Matsu Island, situated in the Taiwan Strait. During the Qing Dynasty, the island was the site of a tiny temple that was removed when Chiang Kai-Shek retreated to Taiwan. The island is also under the commandment of a local god called "Ironclad Marshal," or "Marshal Tie Jia," a frog deity originating from a temple located in the Wuyi Mountains in China. The temple was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, at which point Marshal Tie Jia migrated to Matsu. In Hsu Chia-Wei's work, the island is used as a stage. Employing the cinematographic device of the "green screen"—a generic background that is replaced in the post-production process with any other background image—Hsu places a fictional version of the original tiny temple on the island. Slowly, the camera zooms out and reveals that it is a montage, now showing the green screen on the island as a local senior citizen sings a form of folk opera—found only in the south of Fujian Province—recounting the experience of World War II. He is the last person capable of performing the opera.

Dear Marshal Tie Jia,

May 2011, my family and I toured around the Chinbe Village of Matsu Island. We could see another beautiful island from Chinbe—Turtle Island—that we were unable to reach, though we were separated by only a few hundred meters of sea. I was determined to make an artwork about this. I originally planned to create a work about the era of the Japanese occupation and thought that I needed to prepare documents to apply to the county government. The villagers later informed me that the island does not fall under the county government's jurisdiction, but is rather under your jurisdiction. I heard about your accomplishments from the Chinbe Village and Goddess Temple elders, and found them amazing. From that moment, the concept of my work became entirely different from the original plan. In filming together with you that same day on Turtle Island, our group learned that nearly twenty years had passed since you first set foot on Turtle Island. Thank you for your assistance and for leading me into a period of history.

It is said that you were born at the beginning of the Tang Dynasty in a mountain stream pool in the Jingsi Village of Jiangxi Province. You set off for the spiritual Mount Longhu with Lord Laozi's reverence, finally

following the immortals into the clouds after a thousand years of spirituality. However, during the years of Dayun learning, you wandered to the Wuyi Mountains without permission and angered the heavens. You were sent to the Nine-Bend River in the Wuyi Mountains, where residents built a temple by the Golden Rooster Hall to honor and worship you. During the Matsu Goddess election at the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, you were selected to be located in Chinbe Village. You were crowned the Marshal Tie Jia and appointed as the patron saint of the village. During your time administering Chinbe Village, Taiwan entered a period of Japanese occupation. Matsu Island has produced varying identities as a result of its staggering history and geographical location; it seems that the histories of Matsu and Taiwan were unrelated until the end of World War II in 1945 when the Kuomintang took over the country. When Chiang Kai-Shek came to Taiwan in 1949, Matsu became a frontline base and the armed forces took Chinbe Village from you. Then everything changed; during the Qing Dynasty, there was a temple and an enormous banyan tree on Turtle Island, but the army moved the temple and covered the island in bunkers. The roots of the banyan tree gradually eroded into one of these bunkers and were cut off by the army. Across the water in China, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution that began in 1966 led to the disentanglement of everything; your ancestral temple on the Wuyi Mountains was burned and people were forced to erase their memory of you. These massive changes are similar to the way you were expelled to the Wuyi Mountains thousands of years ago, unable to return to heaven.

I tried to piece together the past from listening to residents' broken memories and from the appearance of the temple on Turtle Island. However, its size and form, combined with the fact that everything in the past is not lost, provide the only means of remembering the temple on the desolate island aside from a bit of foundation and bricks. However, the wreckage and your return to the island beneath the banyan trees more than twenty years ago are not sufficient to clearly recount the original story beneath what has accumulated over the past 100 years. I can only imagine by means of trying to rebuild this

vanished temple. In this work, I invited the elderly Huang Yanyan to sing the *pai gow* limerick to you, your favorite Min opera recounted and set to the melody of “Eight Years of War Against Japan.” The *pai gow* is currently prohibited in China on the other side of the water, and I am afraid that this old gentleman is the only person capable of singing the limerick of *pai gow*. This scene differs greatly from your past days on the Wuyi Mountains. History has always been very thought-provoking. Taiwan was ceded to Japan during the Qing Dynasty, thus Japan actually sent troops from Taiwan to occupy Matsu during World War II. Compared with Taiwan, the term “eight-year war” is more suitable for Matsu. I think you have experienced this piece of history during your time in Chinbe Village. After such a long period of transition and after Turtle Island was relieved of its strategic position, it was finally returned to your jurisdiction in recent years, although nothing has remained the same.

I must admit that this letter is not merely written for you. I am trying to compile complex fragments of a creative process through this letter. Because of this work, I wandered into a world that I don't completely understand. I am unable to distinguish between the boundaries of the real and the imagined. The complexity of hidden, unidentified politics and identities increasingly blur all of reality and fiction. I'm afraid I used this impetuous work to plan a kind of interference that cannot be reversed. I only wrote this letter to sincerely express my work and my experience.