

# Taiwan Fiction and Postwar Urban Experience

Week 17:

Thematic Explorations:  
The City and Consumption

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Instructor:

Richard Rong-bin Chen, PhD.

Adjunct Assistant Professor,

Graduate Institute of Taiwan Literature,

NTU

# The Works

- **“Fin de Siècle Splendor”** by Chu Tien-wen (1990)
- **“Breakfast at Tiffany’s”** by Chu Tien-hsin (1995)
- It might be something interesting to note that both Mia and the unnamed magazine reporter are dwellers of illegal rooftop add-on structures [ 違建 ].

# The View from Above the City



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# Illegal Rooftop Structures and the City

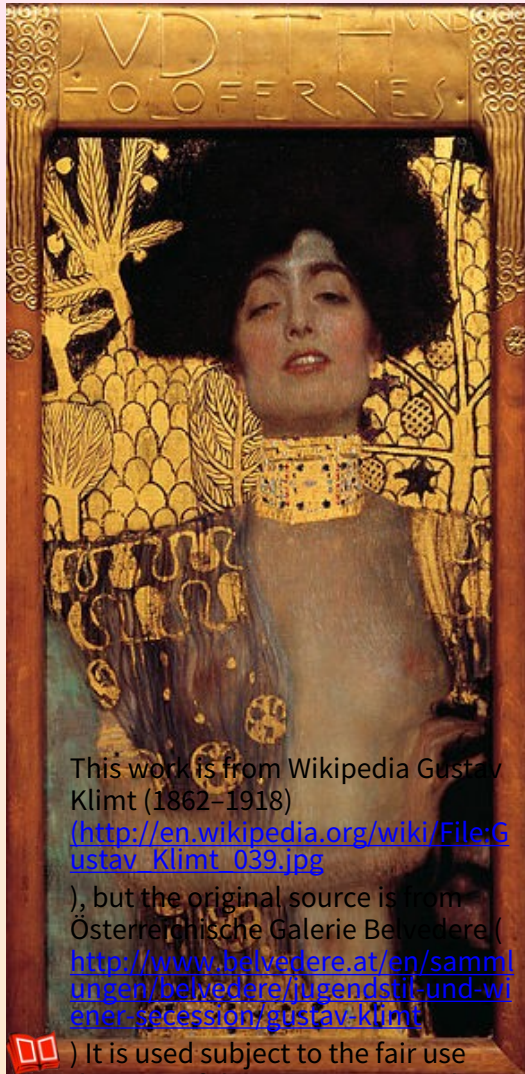
- From “**Fin de Siècle Splendor**”
- “The structures of corrugated iron bear witness to the fact that Taiwan is fighting for space with earth itself. Of course we can also see in this our predecessors’ solution to the problem of heat and leaking related to flat roofs: they invented this semi-outdoor space. . . A building style . . . Lightweight . . . Different from the West and . . . from Japan; light in form, in space, and in visuality, it provides a breathing space for the crowded, sunbaked cities of Taiwan.” (p. 389)

Source: Chu, Fien-wen. (2007). Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)

*The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature*. New York : Columbia University Press

# **“Fin de Siècle Splendor”** by Chu Tien-wen (1990)

- “Fin de siècle” means end of the century, but, more specifically, it also means end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Toward the 1890s, in Europe, there used to be an imminent feeling of apocalyptic crisis, in which the western civilization was depicted as both splendid and decayed, refined and decadent, beautiful and pessimistic.
- All the great European cities, Paris, London, Vienna, were a part of this cultural ambience.



This work is from Wikipedia Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gustav\\_Klimt\\_039.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gustav_Klimt_039.jpg)), but the original source is from Österreichische Galerie Belvedere (<http://www.belvedere.at/en/sammlungen/belvedere/jugendstil-und-wiener-sezession/gustav-klimt>)

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# Gustav Klimt



# Oscar Wilde

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dorian\\_gray\\_ver2.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dorian_gray_ver2.jpg)



## “Fin de Siècle” in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1990)

“ . . . Nowadays all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men.”

“*Fin de siècle,*” murmured Lord Henry.

“*Fin du globe,*” answered his hostess.

“I wish it were *fin du globe,*” said Dorian with a sigh. “Life is a great disappointment.”

"Ah, my dear," cried Lady Narborough, putting on her gloves, "don't tell me that you have exhausted life. When a man says that one knows that life has exhausted him."

Source: Oscar Wilde. (1990). Nicholas Frankel (Eds.).  
*The picture of Dorian Gray: an annotated, uncensored edition.*  
Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.  
<http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etext/s/owlde/bl-owilde-pic-15.htm>

- ***Cosmopolitanism.***
- Cosmos [world] + polis [city] = all cities in the world are related.
- At some point in the story, Mia traveled to rural Taichung and felt estranged. “She couldn’t wait to get back to that city of indulgence and vice—her home. If she were to live alone away from the city, she would wither like an uprooted plant.” (p. 400)

Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
*The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature.* New York : Columbia University Press

- After seeing the department store display windows, the neon lights, Mia was like a fish back in water, came life again.



# Taipei as a Cosmopolitan City

- The fashion brands, such as Galliano, Chanel, Issey Miyake, Moschino, and Armani, constitute the connection among the cities.
- “This is her homeland: a city-confederacy of Taipei, Milan, Paris, London, Tokyo, and New York. She lives here, steeped in its customs, well versed in its artistry, polished by its culture, ready to emerge as one of its preeminent representatives.” (p. 401)

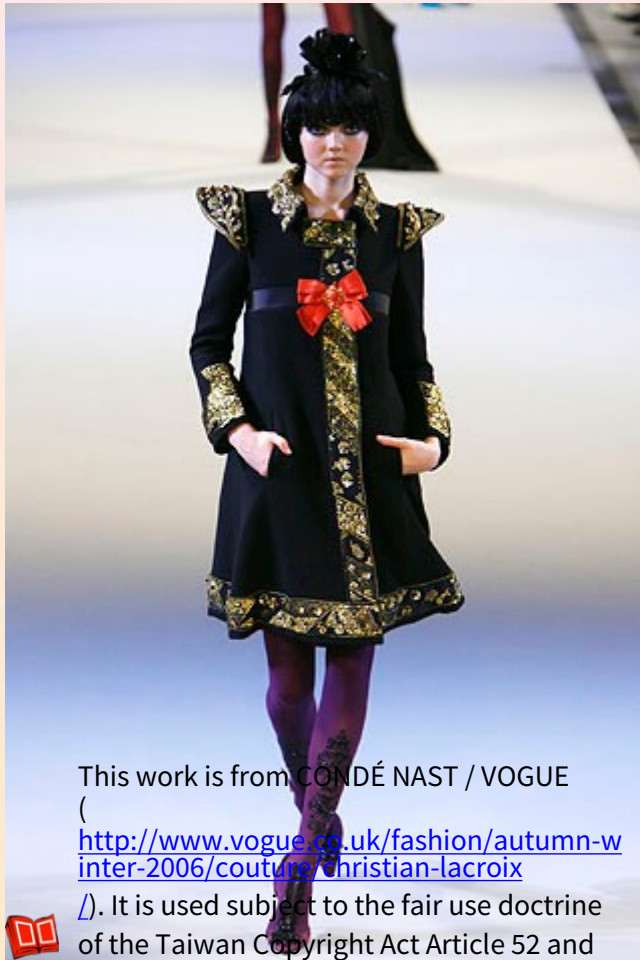
Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
*The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature*. New York : Columbia University Press



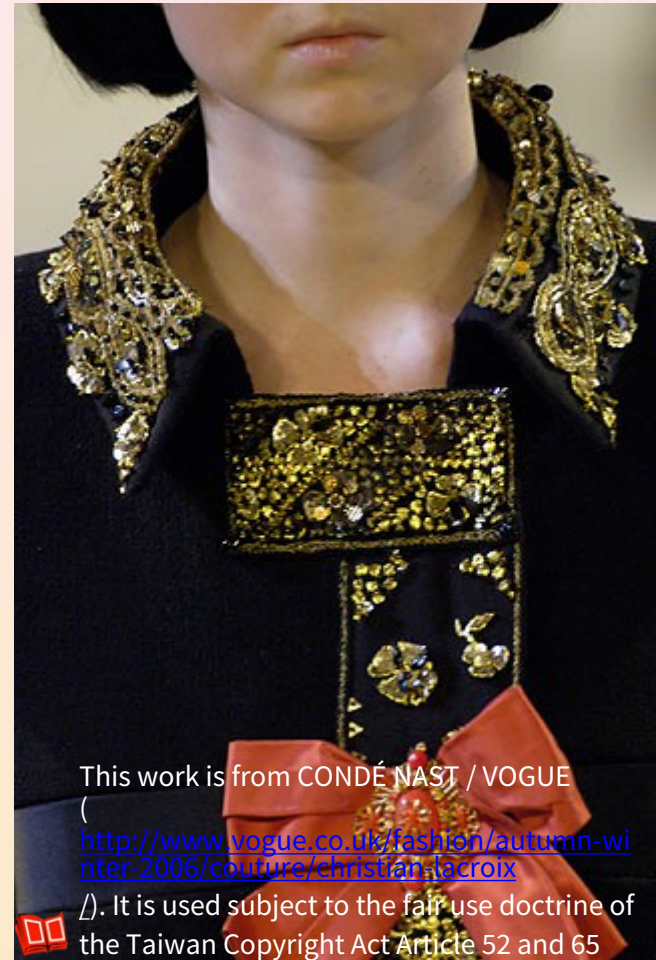
# Fashion Style and Cosmopolitanism

- In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was *chinoiserie* in Europe, and, in the 19<sup>th</sup>, *japonaiserie*. In the story we see this “Orientalism” repeats itself after a century:
- “By this spring [of 1989] the nostalgic trend had turn licentious. It was the licentiousness of the Orient, that of wearing embroidered jackets inside out. Mia had done that for years, so Paris and Milan were trailing behind her.” (p. 397)  
Source: Chiu-fien Wen (2007), Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature. New York : Columbia University Press
- **The trend of fake furs and man-made pearls is also mentioned, and it is definitely in line with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *fin-de-siècle* fashion of “artificiality.”**

# A Christian Lacroix Coat with Embroidered Trims



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# The Main Message

- When she is old and her beauty has faded, Mia will be able to support herself with her handicrafts. The abyssal blue of the lake tells her that the world men have built with theories and systems will collapse, and she with her memory of smells and colors will survive and rebuild the world from here. (p. 402)



Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007). Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)

*The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- **The strategy is using smell and taste as clues of memories which can replace reasonable knowledge. [Fragrance of sandalwood→ 1989 spring fashion show; taste of peppermint herb tea→ the pale seaside color of 1990 summer]**

# How to rebuild the urban world from colors?

When Mia and Duan are not talking, they watch the metamorphosis of the city skyline in the sunsetlike impressionist painters. Just as Monet, that great master who captured time on canvas recorded, with clocklike precision, the shimmering lights on the river at Giverny on a single day, they too are entranced by the subtle changes in their surroundings caused by the shifting hours. (p.389)

Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
*The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature*. New York : Columbia University Press

- Prawn-red, salmon-red, linen-yellow, and reed-yellow; the sky turns from peach to emerald. Before the curtain falls it suddenly lights a huge fire on the horizon, torching the metropolis. They indulge themselves aesthetically, so much so that either their energy is exhausted in the process or their spirit shattered by the overwhelming spectacle, and very often they do not even do what lovers are supposed to do. (p.389)

Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
*The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature*. New York: Columbia University Press





# “Sunset on the Seine in Winter”



<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/claude-monet/sunset-on-the-seine-in-winter>

## Claude Monet Paintings of Sunset

# “Sunset in Venice”



## “Houses of Parliament”



<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/claude-monet/houses-of-parliament>

## “Houses of Parliament, Sunset”



<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/claude-monet/houses-of-parliament-sunset>

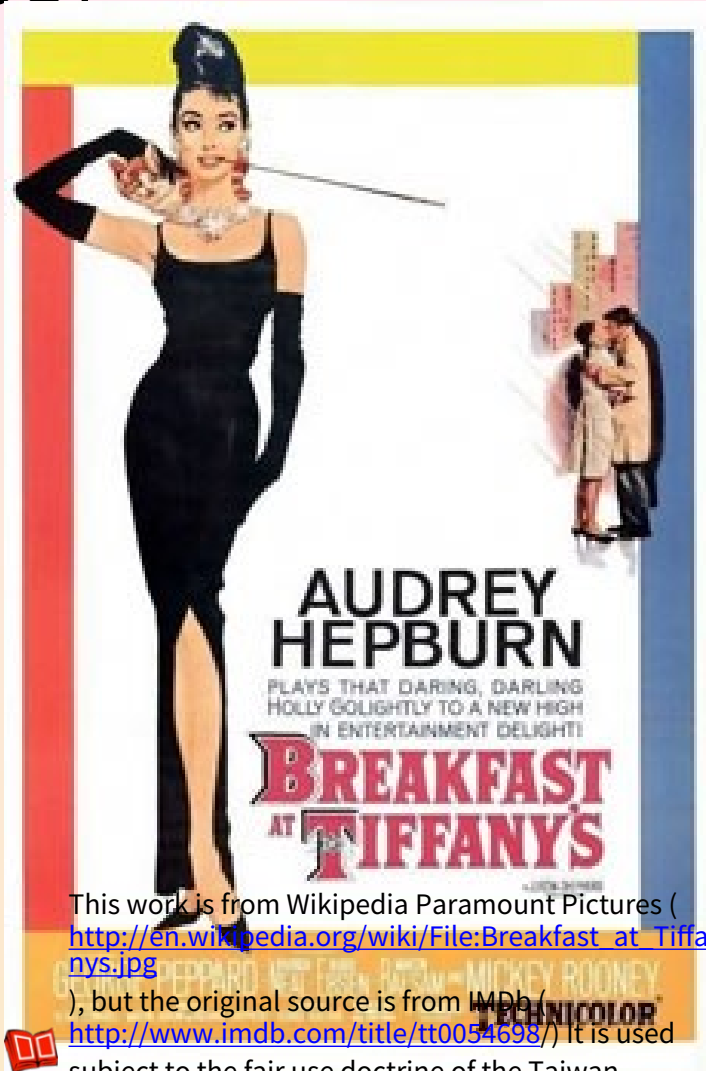
# Life of Mia: Gender Issues

- The story is mainly about the transformation of Mia. At 18, she's a “**material girl**” who worshiped things, money, and her own body. (p. 393-4)  
Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature. New York : Columbia University Press
- At 20, she became “**cruel like a queen bee**” whose only purpose was making money (p. 395)  
Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature. New York : Columbia University Press
- At 25, she left the queen bee stage behind, became a **witchlike woman** whose flat is filled with dried flowers and herbs. (p. 398)  
Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature. New York : Columbia University Press
- “**Earning money and supporting themselves is a matter of pride; spending the money of a man they love is happiness.**” (p. 391) They are totally different.  
Source: Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.)  
The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature. New York : Columbia University Press



- Traditional stories are usually framed by **a dichotomous structure of moral/immoral, men/women, and past/present.**
- Chu tried to break away from the distinctions.
- The protagonist Mia had a lover Duan, an married man who is old enough to be her father.
- Many of Mia's boyfriends became homosexuals later on.
- Mia used to be the girlfriend of several boys, but afterwards she built up quasi-homosexual relationship with Baby, a girl whom Mia became estranged from after living with Duan.

# “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” by Chu Tien-hsin (1995)



This work is from Wikipedia Paramount Pictures ( [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Breakfast\\_at\\_Tiffanys.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Breakfast_at_Tiffanys.jpg)

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Breakfast\\_at\\_Tiffanys.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Breakfast_at_Tiffanys.jpg)

- Based on the novella written by **Truman Capote** (1924-84), the movie was made in 1961 by **Blake Edwards**.
- Audrey Hepburn played the female leading role **Holly Golightly**, a female socialite living in Upper Eastside New York.

# Tiffany's and the Movie

- A few lines from Holly Golightly:
- “What I found does the most good is just to get into a taxi and go to Tiffany’s. **It calms me down right away, the quietness and the proud look of it; nothing very bad could happen to you there, not with those kind men in their nice suits, and that lovely smell of silver and alligator wallets.** If I could find a real-life place that made me feel like Tiffany's, then I'd buy some furniture and give the cat a name.”


This work is from the film “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” released by Paramount Pictures and is subject to the fair use doctrine of the Taiwan Copyright Act Article 52 and 65 by GET



# The Beginning of the Story

- The story opens in an interesting way. According to the narrator, the year in which she came up with the idea of buying a Tiffany diamond ring was “**the sixth year of CPBL [ 職棒六年 ]**.”
- That year can be unmistakably identified as 1995 or the 84<sup>th</sup> year of R.O.C.
- ***Why did Chu choose to use a different way of chronologization?*** It might be something important to be explored in the process of reading the story, and it does to some extent show the author’s political stance.

## Department Store as “Modern Museum”

In the story, the high-end department store was depicted by the narrator as a “modern museum” (p.46), an analogy which interests us  a lot. It is quite like the way Charles Baudelaire described the 19<sup>th</sup>-century version of department stores: **the Parisian arcades**.

According to Walter Benjamin's *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, among the citizens in Paris, there was a type of them named *les flâneurs*: the street strollers.



Wikipedia Clicsouris

- When they enter into the arcades in Paris, those places felt like marketplace of “phantasmagoria,” thus window shopping was nothing more than sleepwalking. This feeling of phantasmagoria refers to not only how stunning and splendid the arcades were, but also to the fact that the *flâneurs* were not buyers, but watchers.
- **They could not afford those commodities in the window. Chu’s “museum” analogy refers to the same fact: for most of the people in Taipei, the items in the department store are too expensive, so those who do window-shopping are only “visitors,” not buyers.**

# Will Diamond Regain Her Freedom?

- Star of the South, 128.8 carats, was found by a Brazilian slave in a diamond mine quite by incident. Needless to say, this happy discovery bought her her freedom.
- According to Contantin Pecqueur's *A New Theory of Social and Political Economics: A Study of the Organization of Societies*, putting your labor up for hire constitutes the beginning of your life as a slave—well, I'd been a slave for nine years already!
- **I need a diamond ring in order to regain my freedom.** (p. 46)



Source: Chu Tien-hsin, (2007). Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital: a novel of Taipei*. New York: Columbia University Press

# The Plan


- Actually buying diamond is the main event of the story, so it is quite interesting to see how it is done.
- First, she decided to carry out her plan on Valentine's day, and she even got the **credit card** in order not to make her look like a country bumpkin.
- She even prepared her wardrobe deliberately, a pair of **Mary Jane high heels**, a **D&G backpack** bought in discount, **Armani perfume** from tax-free import

shop. (p.62)


Source: Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei*. New York : Columbia University



- Also, out of caution, she assumed how hard she should push the door in previously and how many steps she would need to reach her diamond ring display case to prevent herself from making a fool of herself.
- Finally, she went back to her “**poor girl’s basement**” contentedly with her Star of the South, being joyful for owning one tiny diamond ring.
- **What did Chu try to express by writing about an OL determined to buy a diamond ring for herself?**

- Golightly: “It calms me down right away, the quietness and the proud look of it; nothing very bad could happen to you there . . .” 

This work is from the film “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” released by Paramount Pictures and used subject to the fair use doctrine of the Taiwan Copyright Act Article 52 and 65 by GET

- The Protagonist: “My Star of the South did bring **indescribable brightness into my basement room**. I picked it up with my right hand and slid it onto the ring finger of my left, slowly, the way a lover would do it, **and my heart was filled with a tranquil joy**.” (p. 66) 
- They are both escapist. We all are, to an extent.

Source: Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital: a novel of Taipei*. New York : Columbia University Press

# Diamonds equal love?

- **A Diamond Is Forever. The TV commercial slogan created by De Beers.**

Sparkling diamond, a sign of love,

美鑽傳真愛

Love that will never die,

此情永綿綿

A diamond is forever,

鑽石恆久遠

With you till the end of time.

一顆永流傳

- The protagonist-narrator finds it apparent that, in her workplace, many of her co-workers **“believed that love cannot exist without diamonds”** and an even greater number of men **“who actually believe that they cannot find love without diamonds.”** (p. 47)



Source: Chu Tien-hsin. (2007) . Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital: a novel of Taipei*. New York : Columbia University Press

- **“Why would you want to own something that will not rot or decay after you die?”** (p. 41) Although she said this early on in the story, after her interview with A, the writer wearing a Tiffany ring, she decided that, in order to regain her freedom, she needed a diamond ring. (p. 46)



Source: Chu Tien-hsin. (2007) . Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital: a novel of Taipei*. New York : Columbia University Press



Source: Chu Tien-hsin. (2007) . Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
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# Cynicism of the Generation X's Political Position

- The narrator told the writer A that she had voted a good looking candidate in the mayor election, then A asked whether she had been a supporter of the candidate's party. The narrator replied that all parties are boring. When A ask her about the suffering of some of the candidates, she replied:
- **“Prison? Isn't that a sort of investment gamble? Isn't it the risk you assume when you join an opposition movement against a third world totalitarian government?” (p. 50)**

Source: Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei*. New York : Columbia University Press

- “It’s like when we invest in a friend’s business, or when we buy stock: sometimes we make money, sometimes we lose it. Compared to members of the older generation, these people—still in the prime of life—have promptly reaped visible gains, so in my view, the returns on their investments seem reasonable.” (p.50)

**For the narrator, political activists are like entrepreneurs.**



Source: Chu Tien-hsin (2007) . Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital: a novel of Taipei*. New York : Columbia University Press

- The narrator also declared her view on identity problem: “Taiwanese? Chinese? Taiwanese and Chinese? Chinese, but in Taiwan?” (52) **She said she’d rather be Japanese.**



Source: Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei*. New York : Columbia University Press



# Consumption and Social Problems

A significant portion of the money I spend on taxis goes to pay the cabbies' rent, while property owners who pay no real estate taxes zip along in their Mercedes Benzes and BMWs ride down highways paved by income taxes I'm forced to pay, every cent of them.

At least 20 percent of what I shell out for subscriptions goes to pay the rent for **magazine offices and warehouses**, not to mention the **factory** rents for printing and typesetting, plus those paid by magazine employees and various **workers—like me.** (p.64)



Source: Chu Tien-hsin. (2007). Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital: a novel of Taipei*. New York: Columbia University Press


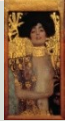



Beyond that, say we choose not to spend our money, but put it into a savings account in some financial institution, **just so the real estate speculators can get megaloans and, reaping vast earnings, continue to speculate in properties we could never afford**, no matter how long we lived, thereby forcing us and our descendants into lifelong backbreaking labor just so we can pay the rents we owe them.







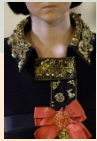



**We've already become a hereditary serf class without knowing it. (p.64)**

Source: Chu Tien-hsin. (2007). Howard Goldblatt (Trans.)  
*The Old Capital: a novel in Taipei*. New York: Columbia University Press











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17	At 20, she became ...only purpose was making money.		Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Fin de Siecle Splendor Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.) <i>The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature.</i> (p.395). New York : Columbia University Press
17	At 25, she left the queen bee stage ... dried flowers and herbs.		Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Fin de Siecle Splendor Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.) <i>The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature.</i> (p.398). New York : Columbia University Press
17	Earning money and supporting ...they love is happiness.		Chu Tien-wen. (2007) . Fin de Siecle Splendor Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (Eds.) <i>The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature.</i> (p.391). New York : Columbia University Press
19			This work is from Wikipedia Paramount Pictures ( <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Breakfast_at_Tiffanys.jpg">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Breakfast_at_Tiffanys.jpg</a> ), but the original source is from IMDb ( <a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054698/">http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054698/</a> ) It is used subject to the fair use doctrine of the Taiwan Copyright Act Article 52 and 65 by GET, and <a href="#">United States copyright law</a>
20	What I found does the most good is just ... give the cat a name.		This work is from the film “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” released by Paramount Pictures and used subject to the fair use doctrine of the Taiwan Copyright Act Article 52 and 65 by GET
22	modern museum		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany’s Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.46). New York : Columbia University Press




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25	I need a diamond ring in order to regain my freedom.		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.46). New York : Columbia University Press
26	She even prepared her wardrobe ... from tax-free import shop.		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.62). New York : Columbia University Press
28	It calms me down right away, the ...could happen to you there . .		This work is from the film “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” released by Paramount Pictures and used subject to the fair use doctrine of the Taiwan Copyright Act Article 52 and 65 by GET
28	My Star of the South did bring ... heart was filled with a tranquil joy.		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.66). New York : Columbia University Press
30	The protagonist-narrator finds it ...cannot find love without diamonds.		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.47). New York : Columbia University Press

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30	Why would you want to own ... not rot or decay after you die?		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.41). New York : Columbia University Press
30	Although she said this early on ...freedom, she needed a diamond ring.		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.46). New York : Columbia University Press
31	Prison? Isn't that a sort of ...a third world totalitarian government?		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.50). New York : Columbia University Press
32	It's like when we invest in a ... investments seem reasonable.		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.50). New York : Columbia University Press
32	"Taiwanese? Chinese? Taiwanese and Chinese? Chinese, but in Taiwan?"		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.52). New York : Columbia University Press
33	A significant portion of the money ... paid by magazine employees and various workers—like		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.64). New York : Columbia University Press

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34	Beyond that, say we choose ... hereditary serf class without knowing it.		Chu Tien-hsin.(2007) . Breakfast at Tiffany's Howard Goldblatt (Trans.) <i>The Old Capital : a novel of Taipei.</i> (p.64). New York : Columbia University Press