

# Contemporary Taiwanese women's arts: curating a movement into art

The post-1987 liberalisation of society and blossoming of feminist movements in Taiwan opened space for female artists, who spearheaded the reinterpretation of gender, class and ethnicity in a patriarchal society. Amid the ambivalence and heterogeneity induced in Taiwanese culture by its colonial history, women began to express their cultural 'in-betweenness' and modernity in curated exhibitions.

Ming-Hui Chen

In 1949 defeated Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek fled with his army and over one million civilians to Taiwan. There, on 19 May 1949, Chiang officially declared martial law. Its lifting four decades later spawned a re-examination of the Nationalist regime's dogmatism, and its social and cultural values. The lifting of martial law began a chaotic time for the Taiwanese people, as society deconstructed and criticised the old values and struggled to find its national and ethnic identity. This movement presented new challenges for Taiwanese women.

The two countries that most recently controlled Taiwan, China and Japan, were both strongly influenced by Confucianism. Confucianism's gender-based hierarchy limits women's freedom and educates them to accept this ideology. Thus Taiwanese women are facing challenges presented not only by the colonial past, but by male-centred ideology. Their struggles, however, have become a catalyst for women's art and culture.

## Third world women

Taiwan is not evenly developed. A divide exists between cities and rural areas. Travelling from a major city into the countryside means leaving behind modern technology, information and buildings, and entering places where conservatism and religious control are entrenched in people's values and poverty and gender inequality are the norm. The differences between the two realms seem to mirror those between the first and third worlds, but here they exist on the same small island. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's description, the 'Third World Woman' leads 'an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender [read: sexually constrained] and being 'third world' [read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized]' (Mohanty 2003: 53).

The number of women's movements and grassroots organisations mushroomed after martial law was suspended in 1987. Since the first group was set up in 1983, more than 46 gender study institutions and research centres have been established. They have played an important role in assisting women and have encouraged them to express themselves through art.

## A third space

Globalisation, especially its American strain, has also affected Taiwanese society. The proximity of people raised according to traditional values to those raised in modern society has created tension. A mixture of Taiwanese, Mandarin and even some Japanese rings out across a landscape dotted with traditional Taoist temples and modern western buildings. Taiwanese cultural identity emerges from this ambivalence and heterogeneity and presents the possibility of a 'third space' for women's artistic creation. In other words, the environment and its colonial history challenge female artists to hybridise their voice in order to be heard and understood.

Curatorial strategies reflect this change. Before 1996, women artists could show their works only as a group in some commercial and private galleries, without vivid themes or curatorial concepts. As a result, they were regarded more as amateurs than professionals. But the 1996 'Taipei Biennial: The Quest for Identity – Sexuality and Power' drew public attention to women's art. Curator Hsieh Tung-Shan brought the debate about 'body' and 'gender' into a public art space and was the first to show the many connections between gender and the body in current cultural discussion, including heterosexuality, homoeroticism, homosexual politics and the body's political aesthetics. Artist Lin Pey-Chwen's work, for example, challenged men's stereotyping of what female beauty should be.

In 1997, feminists and women artists switched their focus from sexual dualism to politics, society and nationality, as illus-

trated by two women's exhibitions: 'The 228 Art Exhibition' and 'On the Rim, Comfort and Relief'. 'The 228 Art Exhibition', presented at the Fine Arts Museum of Taipei (FAMT) and subtitled 'The Forgotten Women', emphasised the healing of wounds suffered under the Chinese Nationalist government as seen from female points of view. The 228 Massacre used to be commemorated solely by men, while women's suffering during that same atrocity was ignored. In this exhibition, the curator attempted to recapture what had been lost and provided the audience with a broader view by showing women's perspectives.

Ming-Hui Chen.  
Mass of Consciousness. Ink on paper.  
2000.



'On the Rim, Comfort and Relief' was held at the Hsin-Chung Cultural Centre, located in the outskirts of Taipei, a metropolis well known for a textile industry dependent on women labourers. The curator invited artists from Taiwan, Japan, Korea and America to create works about the lives and labour of local women. The show blurred the boundary between the centre (urban elites) and the margin (rural labourers) and expressed appreciation for women who worked in the textile industry most of their lives and helped spur Taiwan's 'economic miracle' beginning in the 1960s.

## Speaking subalterns

In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the term 'subaltern' to refer to the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender or in any other way (Guha 1988: 35). His 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' asserted that 'in the context of colonial production, the subaltern had no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' (Ashcroft 1995: 28).

When discussing artistic development, I intend 'speak' to mean 'having an opportunity to show one's work in public and being noticed'. Taiwanese women artists, as doubly subordinated subalterns, are in a better position to 'speak' today than those who were working before the late 1980s. Although they have had the chance to 'talk' (to show their works even though they may not be noticed by the public or press) since the early 1990s, only recently, in the exhibitions mentioned above, have they learned 'how to speak' and 'what to speak'. In 1998, for example, the exhibitions 'Women 60' (shown at three different galleries in northern, central and southern Taiwan) and 'Mind and Spirit' (shown at the FAMT) established a genealogy of Taiwanese women's art history. It was the first time that women artists from different generations showed their works together, creating a narrative art history. Since then, Taiwanese women artists have been able to 'speak' loudly.

## A new century

Since 2000, Taiwanese women's exhibitions have addressed pluralism and globalisation. The exhibition 'Journey of the Spirit', shown at the Kaohsiung Fine Arts Museum (KFAM) in 2000, showcased aboriginal women artists; their traditional handiworks were considered on the same plane as so-called 'fine arts'. 'Sweet and Sour Yeast' (shown in Taipei's Hua-Shan Arts District and Kaohsiung's Kia-A-Thau Art Village) emphasised women artists' involvement in alternative art spaces. The 2003 shows 'BuBaoFu' (at Stock 20 in Taichun) and 'Big Quilt Project' (at the KFAM) displayed appreciation for the beauty of women's fabric arts, marking the first time in Taiwanese art history that the line between high art and low art was deconstructed by curators' strategies and artists' efforts. Also in 2003, the First International Women's Art Festival at the KFAM vividly demonstrated how technology has affected our lives and how women have responded to it artistically.

The focus of Taiwanese women artists has shifted from fighting for equality to confidently celebrating their talent: now the art itself, instead of the artist's freedom to show it, commands attention. Finding their place in the art world and breaking away from the gender-based constrictions of previous colonisers have become their primary aims, and with more women emerging as administrators in the arts, women are offered more chances to show and curate their work. They are no longer silent. <

## References

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