

A Case of Eco-Public Art in Taiwan

The Meinung Yellow Butterfly Festival

Meiqin Wang

“Storm is coming in the afternoon, so we can only work till noon and this has been the case in the past several days,” artist Lin Yann-Lyn told me while we were looking at her husband Wang Yaw-Jun working on a massive installation artwork [Fig. 1]. Their daughter and son were helping their father with the installation. That morning, July 21, 2021, I was observing the creation of *Wind of Summer* in the famous tropical forest Yellow Butterfly Valley (YBV) of Meinung town. Located in southern Taiwan, this is a rural town inhabited by mostly Hakka people (an ethnic minority in Taiwan) who have created a distinctive agrarian culture [Fig. 2]. Summer here is the season of daily thunderstorms in the afternoon, so the artwork developed slowly.



Fig. 1: *Wind of Summer* in the middle of creation (Photo by author, 2021).

Created in the shape of a gigantic squirrel from organic materials such as vines and tree branches [Fig. 3], the work represents a forest elf and embodies Wang’s appreciation of the dynamic, poetic, and mysterious natural world in the forest. He wrote: “The innocent life exists because of the abundant water, fertile soil, and healthy forest.”¹ Both Wang and his wife are nature-loving people who live in a house situated amid farm fields bordering a foothill area in Meinung where squirrels frequent. He started in early July to construct the framework of the creature at his backyard. Then, this structure was transported to the forest where the family worked together for two more weeks until its completion.

An unpretentious artwork made of and for nature, *Wind of Summer* will stay in the forest until it disintegrates naturally, without leaving any art-induced garbage behind. This simple piece embodies a profound respect for nature – both its nourishing and destructive capabilities – and a desire to work with natural force while reducing the environmental footprints of art to a minimum. This is an ecologically conscious paradigm of thinking that has shaped much of Meinung’s community activism. As the main environmental artwork commissioned by the 23rd Meinung Yellow Butterfly Festival (MYBF) in 2021, *Wind of Summer* carries on the characteristics of artistic production promoted at MYBF: environment- and family-friendly, community-based, and simple and profound at once.

Founded in 1995, MYBF is one of the earliest ecological festivals in East Asia and

the first in Taiwan to integrate the protection of natural ecosystems with the promotion of Hakka culture. It is the lasting legacy of the legendary grassroots mobilization Meinung Anti-Dam Movement, which Meinung-born environmental and intellectual activists initiated in 1992 upon learning about the government’s plan to construct a dam in YBV to supply water for heavy industrial projects.² The forest I visited would be entirely submerged in water if the dam had been constructed. Concerned about the dam’s potential threat to the safety of the human community and permanent destruction to the rich ecosystem in YBV, activists quickly launched an anti-dam campaign. They formed organizations and made alignments with local community leaders, politicians, teachers, students, and farmers as well as international scholars and organizations to advance an anti-dam movement.

The annual MYBF was born for the purpose, and it served as a major platform facilitating people of different backgrounds to concentrate their energy, knowledge, and social resources for the anti-dam movement. With well-coordinated efforts, the movement lasted for eight years, forcing official budget for the dam to be eliminated multiple times. Eventually, it achieved a significant success in 2000 when the newly elected president Chen Shui-bian promised not to build the Dam.³ MYBF has since become the cultural symbol of a rural community dedicated to taking control of the development of their own homeland against the tide of industrialization and rural decline. Importantly, it continues to function as a community-based platform to promote environmental protection, ecological education, and sustainable development.

In the past decade, MYBF has gradually transformed into an environmental art

festival, and in 2015 it adopted the biennial format, rebranding itself as an environmental art biennial that aspires to “think globally, act locally.” “Think globally” concerns its focus on issues of agriculture, nature, and sustainability that are pertinent to rural communities across the world. “Act locally” reflects MYBF’s efforts to foreground local talents and cultivate local collaborative networks. It has striven to engage local people of different ages and various backgrounds in a wide range of reparative works that seek to re/establish a sustainable relationship between human society and the ecosystem that they are part of. It is now a multi-dimensional, multi-medium, and multi-month arts festival that combines ritual, performance art, theater, exhibition, workshops, public talks, field trips, guided tours, youth camps, volunteer training, an artist-in-residence program, sports, craft fairs, and farmers markets, among others.

One can say that MYBF has evolved into an encompassing project of socially engaged public art, the very subject of my recent edited book.⁴ Specifically, it is a case of eco-public art, given its commitment to ecological literacy and sustainable human-world interactions via public arts production and collaborative community experiences. As a long-term eco-public art project, MYBF is a product of the ongoing environmental activism in Taiwan that strives to advance the discourse of ecological protection and promote alternative (i.e., nonexploitative) imaginations about the relationship between human beings and the environment. It has in turn fostered a vibrant community culture



Fig. 2: View of Meinung town, 2021 (Photo by author, 2021).



Fig. 3: Whole view and closeup of *Wind of Summer* (Photo courtesy of Lin Yann-Lyn, 2021).



centering on ecology-friendly agricultural practices, alternative lifestyle experiments, and public arts productions in and around Meinung town. By bringing people close to nature, to farming, and to each other, MYBF has also contributed to new forms of art and cultural production, rural living, community experience, and social imagination.

Integrating ecological consciousness in collective learning and community collaboration has been the signature approach of MYBF. Back in 2019, for example, the above-mentioned Lin Yann-Lyn was one of the local artists commissioned for environmental artworks. A fiber artist skillful in weaving with plant-based materials, she led a one-week workshop that took adult and young participants (several of them were families) to explore the flora in YBV, learn about natural materials, and observe and experience nature through one's bodily immersion in it. They collected durable vines from the forest and individually weaved animal forms based on personal preferences, such as bee, butterfly, dragonfly, fish, lizard, owl, etc. All of these were then integrated into a collective environmental art piece – *We Weave a Dream in the Tree* [Fig. 4] – as the final product of their collaboration.⁵ After its showcase during the festival, the work was left to disintegrate on its own cause, and its biodegradable materials all returned back to nature.

As it has always been, the 2021 MYBF was hosted by two local non-profit organizations, the Meinung People's Association (MPA, founded in 1994) and the Yellow Butterfly Valley Indian Pitta Workshop (founded in 1993). Both organizations played crucial roles in the anti-dam movement and have remained active in Meinung. MPA in particular

has evolved into a social organization that considers itself the custodian of “a never-ending community movement.”⁶ This year, they chose a theme for MYBF that was more relevant than ever in our environmentally and socially battered world: “Relationship Repair.” The theme called out three sets of broken relationships: the human being's relationship with nature, with others, and with oneself.⁷ These troubled relationships were at once exposed and worsened by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and MYBF theme promoted reparative learning and actions to improve human-world relations.

Facing strict mobility regulations in Taiwan due to the pandemic, the 2021 MYBF mainly operated virtually and at a much-reduced scale. It officially kicked off on July 15, 2021 with a Teenager Ecological Camp. This was followed by a Youth Art Creation Camp. Both belonged to the “Training Activities” program of MYBF that spanned across art, ecology, and education, with young people as the intended participants and audience. The second program group was “Serial Activities.” It started with a publicity session on July 18 showcasing visual arts, music, and creative writings. This session was produced from a performance workshop sponsored by MYBF last year exploring the interactions of land, rivers, and people. This was followed by a public screening of a documentary that recorded a habitat walk, which explored the current ecosystem of the Meinung Creek. The walk (and documentary) shed light on the plants, insects, and wild animals who make a home in and around the creek.

The third program group was called “Thematic Activities,” and it started on July 31 with the Butterfly Ceremony, the

core component of MYBF. This is the ritual dedicated to yellow butterflies that used to appear in millions, fluttering around the valley in summer and for which the YBV was named.⁸ By extension, the ritual pays tribute to all life forms that once populated the valley. The Butterfly Ceremony has been one of the most attended activities of MYBF since its inception.⁹ This year, due to the pandemic, only the organizers and a few invited guests attended the ceremony. A recording of the ceremony was then posted to MYBF's Facebook page and other social media channels.¹⁰

The Butterfly Ceremony was followed by two other thematic activities in August: (1) an artist talk and public discussion on this year's environmental artwork *Wind of Summer*, and (2) a concert featuring songs in Hakka dialect. Both the environmental art commission and the concert have been signature components of MYBF, but this year they were smaller and presented online. The last activity was a performance art workshop that lasted for a week in September. This was the only program that was carried out in real physical space, specifically, along the creek and forest in YBV. In addition, a number of virtual talks were hosted for the public during these months, in which scholars and artists offered in-depth discussion on topics related to ecology and community-based public art.

Coming back to *Wind of Summer*, it was also the subject of a 12-minute video of the same title by Lauwei Wei, a local video artist and filmmaker who participated in an earlier edition of MYBF when he was still an undergraduate student. The video not only recorded the creative process itself, but also provided Wei's personal interpretation of the

interrelation between Wang's artwork and the natural ecology of Meinung.¹¹ This video was released online to prepare the audience before they participated in the online artist talk held by MYBF to celebrate the completion of the installation. Such multi-dimensional and creative collaborations have been a typical approach of MYBF, an approach that guides much of its operation.

Overall, MYBF is an inspiring case of eco-public art that seeks to integrate environmental activism, ecological literacy, community building, and public arts production. It is a much-needed collaborative and collective endeavor in our age of climate change, extreme weather events, and pollutions of all kinds in the air, soil, and water. Especially for people who are interested in community-oriented creative experiments aiming for sustainable, holistic, and beneficial relationships between human living, nature, and art, the 27-year-old MYBF has much to offer.¹²

Meiqin Wang is Professor of Art History at California State University, Northridge. Email: mwang@csun.edu

Notes

- 1 MYBF, “Wind of Summer,” posted August 7, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/mnybf/posts/4331549333588991/>
- 2 For an in-depth study of the anti-dam campaign, see Jeffrey Hou, “Grassroots Practice of Environmental Planning,” Doctorate Dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 2001).
- 3 Jeffrey Hou, 66.
- 4 Meiqin Wang ed., *Socially Engaged Public Art in East Asia* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022).
- 5 https://mpa.artlife.tw/mall/help-3_58_54-335.html
- 6 MPA, “Historical Origin,” <https://mpa.artlife.tw/mall/help-1-1.html>. Also see Jeffrey Hou, 69.
- 7 MYBF Facebook, posted June 26, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/mnybf/posts/4213737235370202/>
- 8 The number of butterflies as well as the biodiversity of YBV have been greatly reduced since the early 1990s due to profit-driven logging in the area prompted by the government's plan to construct the dam.
- 9 The 2010 and 2011 Butterfly Ceremonies can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQFHj0JRKcg> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vdi0yvDdFrY>
- 10 The 2021 Butterfly Ceremony can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7H8La_oWzA
- 11 Video *Wind of Summer* can be watched at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2qA7SttGgE>
- 12 For MYBF's past editions, see Meinung People's Association's website <https://mpa.artlife.tw/mall/help-3.html>. For MYBF's recent editions, see MYBF's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/mnybf/>



Fig. 4: Whole view and closeup of *We Weave a Dream in the Tree* (Photo courtesy of Lin Yann-Lyn, 2021).

