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# Historical Development of Women's Art in Taiwan

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This essay is a translation from the catalogue, Mind and Spirit - Women's Art in Taiwan, Taiwan Fine Art Museum, 18 April-9 August 1998 - a major exhibition of women artists in Taiwan in the20th Century.

As Taiwanese cultural development in the 20th century was deeply influenced by political and social changes, the development of Taiwanese women's art may be divided generally into three phases. The first is that of the "classical tradition" during the period of Japanese rule (1895-1945), a time when women's awareness first sprouted under the colonial system. The second is the post-war period (1945-1980), characterized by "East-West dialectic," a time when Taiwanese culture modernized and feminism was propounded. The third period, the 1980s and 1990s, has been a time of increasing international pluralism, dynamic cultural autonomy and freedom; it has produced the full flowering of women's art. This essay attempts to do a preliminary investigation of the form and content of women's art through an analysis of the general cultural environment, the art education system, exhibition activities, and artists' creative media. Besides confirming that society and culture were strongly affected by changes in the political and economic climate, this study aims to interpret the images and content of works from each period in order to explore the historical and esthetic trends of women's art.

## Classical tradition: the period of Japanese occupation (1895-1945)

1895, when Taiwan was ceded to Japan, marks an important starting point for 20th century Taiwanese politics, economics, society, culture, and art. On the one hand, it marks the time when the political and cultural umbilical cord to the Chinese

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motherland was cut, and on the other hand, since Taiwan became a Japanese colonial base, the moment when Taiwan began to take on a new political system. Colonial cultural policy and planning had far-reaching effects on the development of Taiwanese art in the early 20th century.

Although the old examination system was quickly dismantled, the traditional ideas of Chinese Confucianism were deeply rooted in the population. In the fine arts, the literati styles of calligraphy and painting remained primary modes of expression. During the first decades of Japanese occupation, most women artists had grown up in educated families, through which they inherited Confucian tradition. The plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum - images that were so characteristic of literati painting - were their frequent subjects. The main thrust behind compositions, which demonstrated complete facility with poetry calligraphy, and painting, was to highlight how the artists had surpassed ordinary concerns and symbolize their inheritance of cultural orthodoxies. Although their expressive forms transcended their temporal limitations, these works lack the characteristics of a regional style. During this period, the most active women artists included Ts'ai Pi-yin (1874-1939), Chang-Li Te-ho (1893-1972), and Ts'ai Chih-ch'an (1900-1958). These three women were also talented writers of poetry and prose; the content and form of their art inherited the modes of classical tradition. In addition, works like Fan K'an-ch'ing's (1908-1952) Tenderness have also come down to the present. This work features rough, forceful brushwork and may be said to reflect to a very large extent the fierce "Min style" in painting.[1] Very few works with this subject matter have survived to the present, and it may have been painted to celebrate a wedding. Of course, insofar as the depiction of mutual love and respect between the husband and wife in the painting reveals a woman's yearning for such love, it is extremely significant for its time.

From the first Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition was held in 1927, these four artists were frequent participants. Chang-Li Te-ho was already 41 years old when she first participated in 1933, and after this she participated eight times, culminating with her being listed as a "regular exhibitor," which was an extremely high artistic honor during the Japanese occupation period.[2] Meanwhile, Ts'ai Pi-yin, with her poetry and calligraphy, and Fan K'an-ch'ing, with her ink paintings, were active among the local educated circles of Tainan and Hsinchu respectively. They followed the artistic practices common among literati at the end of the Ch'ing dynasty. Although the number of women artists at this time was very small, we can tell from the content and quantity of their surviving works and the records of their enthusiastic participation in cultural activities that they had gradually overcome patriarchal constraints to develop art showing their own self-awareness as women.

Previously, the term kuei-hsiu (which referred to educated girls from a good family but meant literally "beauties of the women's quarters") was often used to define the position of women artists in history, since they were unable to leave the familial

domain, go out and be seen in public: their activities were often limited to their own private quarters. Unlike them, however, Taiwan's women artists showed a high level of artistic accomplishment while engaging in cultural activities. The term ts'ai-nu ("talented women") became more appropriate.

The Japanese eliminated traditional private schools and the Ch'ing civil examination system and replaced them with modernized Western-style public elementary and secondary schools. Although Taiwan did not have any separate arts academies for women, the promotion of art education by the faculties of girls' high schools did in fact influence many students, and the authorities organised many exhibitions where their talents could be shown. Ch'en Chin (1905-1998), who attended Taipei Third Girls' Senior High School and received the encouragement of her teacher, Gohara Kotoh, went to Japan as early as 1925 to attend the Tokyo Fine Arts Academy for Women. Ts'ai P'in, Huang Ho-hua (1913-), Chou Hung-chou (1914-1981), and others also went to the same academy in Tokyo during the 1920s and 1930s, continued their professional study of art, and participated in officially organised exhibitions. In the 1930s and 1940s, the works of Lin Yu-chu (1918- ), Ch'i Chin-lien (1912- ), Huang Tsao-tsao (1915- ), Huang Hsin-lou (1922- ), and Ch'en Pinu (1924-1995), among others, were also frequently selected for the Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition and the Taiwan Territorial Governor's Exhibition.[3] Because these two annual exhibitions followed open, fair rules of competition, the joryu gaka (women artists) attracted attention, so they were very eager to participate. Through their record of participation in these public exhibitions, we can see the persistence and productivity of women artists and how important the exhibitions were to them.

One of the stylistic considerations for this period was "local color". Another one was the emphasis placed on "realism" in form and content. Since Gohara Kotoh was an active figure in art education and served on the judges' panels in exhibitions, the ratio of women artists who did casein paintings at this time increased. In contrast to their male collegues, who sought to express loftiness of spirit through complex compositions, women artists tended to include more images from the domestic life around them, plant and flowers from nature, scenes of local culture, and rural landscapes. Generally, in terms of composition and technique, women's art from this period was relatively free and to the point.

During the period of Japanese occupation, Ch'en Chin was persistent in getting past the realism barrier. Besides continuing to publish her works and receiving commissions for many years, she maintained her judge's position in the Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition, Taiwan Territorial Governor's Exhibition, and, after the retrocession, the Taiwan Provincial Fine Arts Exhibition. Her active participation in art-related events was deeply appreciated. However, because she did not have a teaching position and never set up a teaching studio, her level of influence on the development of women's art was limited, despite the fact that she was always regarded as an outstanding model among women artists.

Judging from the size and overall content of their surviving works, this group of early 20th-century women were high-spirited, dedicated artists. After the war, however, they concealed their activities or interrupted their creative work for three general reasons: i) After the Republican government moved to Taiwan in 1949, ink painting replaced the category for casein painting in the Provincial Fine Arts Exhibition after a struggle over which technique could be considered orthodox. As a result, casein painters lost the opportunity to exhibit their works in fair and open exhibitions. ii) In the tense atmosphere after the February 28 Incident of 1947, intellectuals who had grown up during the period of Japanese occupation were quickly silenced. Most Taiwanese viewed political and public social activities as taboo. iii) With the resurgence of the traditional social norms of the "three obediences and four virtues" (the "three obediences" taught that a woman was to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son during widowhood; the "four virtues" were fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech, and efficiency in needlework), little respect was given to women's post-marital creative careers. In this patriarchal social system, women's roles as homemakers and child-rearers were considered primary, and the display of individual artistic talent became secondary.

**East-West Dialogue on Esthetics: the Post-War Period (1945-1980)**

After the Second World War, Taiwan was removed from Japanese colonial rule. The main cultural policy of the Republican government was to promote Chinese culture. In the area of art education, National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) established its Department of Art in 1949, and Huang Chün-pi served as its chairperson for the next twenty years. The teaching of traditional ink painting there between 1950 and 1970 thus formed the primary background to Taiwan's post-war artistic modernization.[4] Among the mainland women artists who followed the government or their husbands to Taiwan at this time were Yuan Shu-chen (1911- ) from Hsin-hua Art Academy in Shanghai, Sun To-tzu (1912-1975), who graduated from the Department of Art in Peiping's National Central University, and Wu Yung-hsiang (1913-1970), who graduated from the Peiping Art Academy.

This group of women artists from the mainland could teach courses in either Western art or ink painting at NTNU through their cultural and political connections. Meanwhile, the leading art educator at Fu-hsing-kang Political Warfare College, Shao Yu-hsüan (1919- ) was a specialist in watercolors of the Shanghai School. Among these artists, the most progressive in her thinking was Sun To-tzu: although she used oil painting as her starting point, she greatly encouraged the exploration of how Eastern and Western esthetics and forms could be combined, and she was vigorously involved in the development of the May Painting society. Thus, during the 1950s and 1960s, she was a model female artist for the students at NTNU. Also, besides being an enthusiastic teacher, Sun Tuo-tzu opened her own painting studio to students. For many years, she quietly worked to improve art education and was

entirely dedicated to her work. [5] Wu Yung-hsiang, meanwhile, set up a studio in her home, where she taught classes besides the ones she taught at NTNU. Her students included Lo Fang, Hung Msien, Tung Meng-mei, and others. She was thus instrumental in the teaching of ink painting to women artists.[6]

Although each of these transplanted women artists had their own creative styles, all of them had a point in common: they had good political backgrounds. When they came to Taiwan, they were in their thirties, a time when artists usually develop their most fecund creative capacity. When we discuss the quantity and style of their surviving work, however, we find that they usually followed existing artistic forms and rarely went beyond them. The content of their art also did not reveal much thinking about current trends or social changes - they were constrained by the ivory tower of artistic tradition. Besides occupying their teaching positions, they were also invited to the judges' panels for the Westenn and Chinese painting categories in the Provincial Exhibition. This strengthened the connections among the Provincial Exhibition, the colleges, politics and art.[7]

Ideas from contemporary modern Westenn art hit the local art scene at the end of the 1950s, and in response a number of societies centered on modern art were formed one after the other: the May Painting Society, the Oriental Painting Society, the Modern Print Society. These formed the main arenas for artistic activities outside the academic system, but most of their members were men. In the early 1960s, the establishment of the art departments in National Academy of Art and Chinese Culture College also brought new life to the art scene beyond the Department of Art at NTNU. Female artists of the first post-war generation who completed their academic training included, among many others, Chung Kuei-ying (1931- ), Ho Ch'ing-yin (1934- ), Li Fang-chih (1933- ), Cheng Ch'iung-chun, Chang Shu-mei (1938- ), Ma Hao, Huang Jun-se (1937- ), and Tung Yang-tzu (1942- ). Their artistic development after graduation, whether in Taiwan or overseas, will be further discussed below.

From 1951 to 1970, a number of women artists who graduated from NTNU's Department of Art went abroad for further study, including Li Fang-chih, Cheng Ch'iung-chuan, Ma Hao, Ch'en Ming-hsiang, Chou Yüeh-po, and Tung Yang-tzu. Before leaving Taiwan, they had shown their works in exhibitions organized by the May Painting Society and Today Painting Society. In concept and execution, their works could be classified as relatively progressive. The experience gained through these societies and the cultural impact of studying abroad deeply influenced their art. The East-West dialectic in the arts became a main discussion topic, and traditional ink painting faced the test of modernization. Meanwhile, as these artists internalized Westenn forms of expression, they searched for Eastern spiritual content. Li Fang-chih in the early period attempted to concentrate the Eastern spirit in non-imagistic painting, and Tung Yang-tzu continued to develop new forms for traditional calligraphic techniques.

Among the first post-war generation of female artists w ho began their careers directly after graduation and made Taiwan the center of their activities were Ho Ch'ing-yin, Chung Kuei-ying, Chang Shu-mei, Li Chüan-chüan (1942- ), and Wang Mei-hsin (1944- ). Most of them, however, adhered to their own teaching positions and worked quietly. The demands of teaching in normal colleges meant that these women artists and teachers had to develop a comprehensive range of artistic skills-painting, watercolor, graphic art, pottery, etc. Teaching from such a diverse perspective broadened their experience with different media, but their heavy teaching and administrative loads always limited their creative development. Meanwhile, outside the normal education system, another institution that cultivated female artists was the Department of Art at Political Warfare College. On the faculty besides Shao Yu-hsüan, there were the brothers Liang Ting-ming and Liang Chung-ming, who focused on social realism and propagandistic watercolors. Shao and the Liang brothers trained a number of female artists, including Li Chung-chung, who went on to concentrate on developing more contemporary watercolor styles. Their other students maintained the more traditional watercolor style. The children of the Liang clan-Liang Tan-feng, Liang Hisu-chung, Liang Tan-mei, Liang Tan-pei, Liang Tan-huei, and Liang Tan-huei (the names of the last two are homonyms)--also brought a vast array of talent to the Taiwanese women's art scene.

The second post-war generation of female artists grew up during the 1970s, when the ideas of feminism began to spread and female artists gradually gained more familial and social support. They could now realize their own ideal artistic career plans. At this time, artists like Tseng Shai-shu (1952- ), Cho Yujuei (1950- ), and Li Huei-fang (1948- ) returned to Taiwan after completing their studies in Europe and the United States. The sureness of their career plans indicated the awakening of their subjective self-consciousness as women artists, and each artist's choice of themes retained a distinct individualistic character. The majority of works from this period returned to concrete images and realism, in response to the photo realistic style of the 1970s; human figures and objects showing distinctive local characteristics were chosen as subject-matter.

Under the various political taboos and economically-driven national policies of the post-war period, women's art did not have much space to develop freely, and it was subject to repression. During this time, women artists not only had to play the roles of virtuous wives and mothers but also had to be utterly devoted to their careers. As a result, they had to bear the multiple pressures from society, their families, and their own self-expectations, and their artistic development had to take place on the seam between their families and careers. The circumstances of their lives and their personal experiences were deeply inscribed in their art.

**International pluralism and cultural autonomy: the 1980s and 1990s (1980-1998)**

Through the 1980s, Taiwan entire political and economic environment became

more and more stable. The "economic miracle" helped build the determination and confidence required for political and cultural autonomy. Due to the number of students who returned from overseas study over the years, social perspectives in general were broadened, and Taiwan went from being an isolated island to being a hub of cultural exchange. Through the 1980s and afterward, the number of women artists greatly increased, along with their educational levels and stylistic variety. The few examples raised below with regard to exhibition spaces, public exhibitions, artists' organizations, and creative trends are intended to explain this process.

The Taipei Fine Arts Museum opened in 1983, and since then it has been organizing the ROC Contemporary Painting Exhibition, the Sculpture Exhibition, and other competitive exhibitions. The opening of the Taichung and Kaohsiung Fine Arts Museums followed. These new museums gave women artists additional settings for fair competition and showing their work professionally. Now, through fair and open judging, they can rely on their individual creative powers in order to gain recognition. When Ch'en Hsin-yuan (1951- ), Lai Ch'un-ch'un (1953- ), Hsiao Li-hung (1946- ), Wu Mali (1957- ), Li Mien-chou (1959- ), and others won competitions in the new museums, their prizes had the effect of enhancing their dedication to art and building their confidence.

With regard to artists' organizations, the Taipei Women's Oil Painting Society was established under the leadership of Yuan Shu-chen in 1984, and since then it has held regular annual exhibitions. Such organizations were helpful for building collective strength, and most of their core membership consisted of artists of the first post-war generation who by this time wre reaching their middle age. These artists' facility with coordinating political and economic resources and providing leadership to younger artists gave added impetus to their organizations' activities. Members of the Taipei Women's Oil Painting Society are admitted by recommendation from its Organizing Committee. Being female is required, but no limits are placed on the mode, style, or content of their art, and the main function of the organization is to establish friendship among members.[8] Although the Society has come under criticism for the uneven level of talent among its members, its purpose and significance are acknowledged. The friendly nature of its exhibitions and discussions stimulate further artistic exploration and thought among members; these activities expand the range of concern in women's art. In addition, the meetings and the process of artistic creation itself have a therapeutic, spiritually uplifting effect that helps members get through difficulty. Creating art fulfills their ideal of the good life.

One phenomenon in women's art that cannot be ignored - even though it is seldom mentioned - is the appearance of studio art studies outside the main education system. As early as the 1950s, under the politically correct premise of "reviving Chinese culture" classes in watercolor painting were offered for officials' wives, with Chiang-Soong Mei-ling most prominent among them. Although the traditional teaching method of copying after drafts was used, students did learn more about

the wonders of traditional art and the vastness of Chinese culture, which is one of the purposes of art education. This kind of watercolor studio was first started by Huang Chün-pi. Later on, private studios were set up by Hu Nien-tsu, Wang Chün-I, Wu Yung-hsiang, Li I- hung, and so on, and they accommodated anywhere from several dozen to several hundred students. By holding regular meetings and organizing joint exhibitions for their teachers and students, these studios form an artistic current apart from the formal art education system. Their activities provided another place for social intercourse among Taiwanese women with artistic interests, thereby building a greater sense of sorority. Although these studios and activities are always considered out of the mainstream, they have had a definite, profound impact on the level of exchange and solidarity among women artists. Private studios in oil painting, pottery, calligraphy, and flower-arranging continue to develop rapidly today.

As multiple directions of thought developed through the culturally pluralistic 1980s, women artists' diversity could be seen through the different media they used, particularly in contemporary pottery and weaving. The trends in politics and art after the lifting of martial law did not change women artists' creative attitudes and orientations per se, but neither did it cause them to lose themselves in "art for art's sake". Instead, it allowed them to develop unique creative methods. Having abandoned standards of academic art and gone beyond the East-West dialectic in the arts, women artists used the things around them and their own experiences as starting points for presenting a kind of documentary record of the events and ideals from each period in their lives. Thus, art becomes not only an exploration of the external world but also an exposure of the artists' personal secrets, which provoke reflection on the phenomena and essential quality of our lives. The process of creation then becomes a kind of religious ritual in which the soul is purified, a kind of therapy that heals wounds.

Amateur artists received a boost from the hsiang-t'u movement of the 1970s, and the articles carried in Hsiung Shih Art Monthly, The Artist, and other magazines promoted concern and self-awareness of native culture. Amateur women artists such as Wu Yü-ko (1901-1991), Lin-Li Hsieh-liu (1899-1996), Chou-Ch'iu Ying-wei (1919- ), and Su Yang-o (1911-1990) were given critical introductions, then acknowledged and well-favoured. Art was thus no longer limited to the forms of "pure art" but was felt to materialize in one's life, issue from the heart, and represent individual creativity, whether in weaving, embroidery, sculpture, or painting. Art went beyond the norms and rules of any school or system and became the realization of the belief in "the artistic life and living art". Recent aboriginal art has also been discovered by interested persons. This art combines traditional media and vocabulary with contemporary modes of expression, and is highly distinctive. It has further enriched the diversity and stylistic freedom of today's art.[9]

The development of a social discourse is one obvious phenomenon in recent women's art. As women's self-awareness increased and as they became more involved

in social institutions, women artists started to reinterpret social structures and events through their gender consciousness and economic conditions. Therefore, feminism has become one of the primary issues, while discourse on issues in politics, culture, war, violence, and environmental protection has broadened the thematic range for contemporary art. Meanwhile, the input from research conducted by Yen Ming-huei, Lu Jung-chih, Hou I-jen, Fu Chia-huei, Wu Mali and others has provided broader theoretical and historical perspectives to the development of art by Taiwanese women.

Exhibitions centered around women's themes have been held intermittently since the latter part of the 1980s. Whether arranged by media, period, or subject, they have uncovered and organized a vast amount of material. Finally, the long-forgotten history of women's art is gradually being unearthed and receiving serious attention. From the discussion above, it is clear that Taiwanese women artists in the 1980s and 1990s have made clear advances in terms of public exhibitions, artistic organizations, and private studio classes, and in the areas of pottery, weaving, metalwork, design, drawing, and aboriginal art. These advances have given women's art during this time its diverse, lively character. We have also fully described women artists' abundant creative capacity and their persistent enthusiasm for art. As a result of these developments, we know that the rare appearance of women's art in earlier history is definitely not due to any lack of talent but to discrepancies in the historical record and in art-critical perspectives. If it were impossible for women to establish an independent critical discourse and historical perspective, then we could still worry about the future of women's art.

**Conclusion**

Women artists were witnesses to Taiwan throughout the 20th century--from the beginning, when its art was still dominated by the tastes of the traditional literati; through the colonial period, when Eastern and Western-style paintings put great emphasis on local color; through the post-war period, when the colleges were reorganized and the contemporary art movement began; and in recent times, when Taiwanese art was diversified while society became internationalized and computerized. While women artists adhered to tolerant attitudes about culture and a humanistic spirit, they expressed a female social perspective and recorded the images of Taiwan's historic development. This initial examination of Taiwan's cultural atmosphere, art education system, painting societies, exhibitions, and the artists' media, forms, and subjects establishes that art is intimately connected with its general external environment. Cultural policy led by political authorities influenced the art education system and its direction on the one hand, and affected the form and operation of officially-organized exhibitions on the other. Thus the face of women's art changed with each period's changes in social values and the increase in women's self-awareness. It seems that the open, accommodating,

innovative, and self-expressive qualities of women's art has achieved excellent results. However, because it freely developed on the fringes of the authoritative center, it still tends to be considered as representative of a special minority. It is therefore difficult for women's art to attract more careful, positive evaluation. Although contemporary women's art is an extremely important part of the broader art world, establishing an independent theory and history for its and interpreting its vocabulary, signs, and forms will require greater collective participation from the entire artistic community.

**Notes**

1. Lin Po-t'ing 'Chung-yuan hui-hua yu T'an-wan te kuan-hsi' ('Chinese painting's relationship to Taiwan') *Ming-Ch'ing shih-tai T'ai-wan shu-hua tso-p'in (Taiwanese calligraphy and painting from the Ming and Ch'ing periods*) (Taipei: Council for Culture Affairs,1984) pp. 428.431

2. Lai Ming-chu '"Ts'ai-ch'ing yü jen-chih te lo-ch'a--lun Chang-Li Te-ho te ts'ai-tekuan yü hui-hua ch'uang-tso-kuan' ('The gap between expression and recognition-a discussion of Chang-Li Te-ho's views on talent, virtue and painting' ) *I-shu-chia (The Artist)* 245 (1995. 10) pp.330-340

3. Ibid

4. Hsiao Ch'iungjuei *Wu-yüe h yü tung-fang--Chung-kuo mei-shu hsien-tai-hua yun- tung tsai chan-hou T'ai-wan chih ch'i chan-lan-kuan (1945-1970) (The May Painting Society and Oriental Painting Society-the Chinese contemporary art movement in post-war Taiwan and their exhibition halls, 1945-1970)* (Taipei: Tung-ta, 1991) p. 62.

5. Hsich Li-fa 'Mei-you chi-ch'u te ho-nien-k'a--nien Sun To-tzu hsien-sheng' ('An unsent New Year's card--In memory of Teacher Sun To-tzu') *Tang-tai i-shu-chia fang-wen-lu (Interviews with Contemporary Artists)* 1 (Taipei: Hsiung-shih, 1980) pp. 135-148.

6. Shen I-cheng 'Wu Yung-hsiang yü Ch'en Chün-fu k'ang-li hsiao-chuan' ('Biography of Wu Yung-hsiang and her husband Chten Chun-fu') *I-shu-chia nien-p'u (Artists' Chronologies)* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1985) pp. 45-46

7. Hsiao Ch'iungjuei *Wu-yüe h yü tung-fang* p.144

8. Ho Ch'ing-yin 'Wei T'ai-pei Hsi-hua Nu-hua-chia hua-hui' 10 chou-nien-ch'ing chi 1994 nien-tu hui-yuan lien-chan shuo chi-chü-hua' ('A few words on the tenth anniversary of the Taipei Women's Oil Painting Society an the 1994 Member's Exhibition) *1994 nien T'ai-pei Hsi-hua Nu:hua-chia lien-chan chuan-chi (The 1994 Member's Exhibition of the Taipei Women's Oil Painting Society)* (Taichung: Taiwan Provincial Fine Arts Museum, 1994) p. 4

9. See Chien Fu-yü's series 'Rock and Roll Ancestral Spirits' in *I-shu-chia (The Artist)* nos. 272, 274, and 275 (1998. 1, 3, 4)


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