

Painting Taiwan's Modern Identity

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In this era of rapid global integration, a close examination of the lives of painters can add to our understanding of transnational linkages. How do good ideas travel and become the basis for local creativity? During the early and mid twentieth century, authoritarian regimes ruled Taiwan, and yet the environment for art remained open enough to allow painters to experiment with modern art. Chinese, Japanese and Oceanic elements of style, media, and palette mixed with influences from Euro-American art. The best painters scouted out what was valuable in the new aesthetic legacies and found ways to create something original and all their own.

I propose to write a conference paper based on my research of senior-generation painters—including Zhang Daqian (張大千 1899-1983), Liang Danfeng (梁丹丰 b. 1935), Lee Tze-Fan (李澤藩 1907-89), Chen Cheng-po (陳澄波 1895-1947), Li Meishu (李梅樹, 1902-1983), Chen Huikun (陳慧坤 b. 1907), Yen Shuilong (顏水龍 1903-97), and Liao Chich'un(廖繼春, 1902-76). My study encompasses both Taiwanese educated during the years of Japanese rule and mainland-born Chinese painters who immigrated to Taiwan in 1949. Because of the island's complex history of migrations and political changeovers, Taiwan is one of the places in Asia where uncertainty around cultural identity is felt most acutely. In such a circumstance, society looks to art to define cultural identity, to unify and render concrete that which may be, in life, unstable and diffuse.

One influential Japanese art educator, Ishikawa Kinichiro (1871-1945), fostered the beginnings of modern painting in Taiwan during the teens and twenties, training Taiwan's pioneer watercolorists and oil painters to become proficient in open-air sketching. Ishikawa urged students to use their own eyes to portray the special atmospheric conditions of Taiwan's tropical air and sun. He admired the local temple architecture dotting the Taiwan landscape. Ishikawa feared that Taiwan might lose its local character, if rapid modernization continued unchecked. His teaching

instilled in Taiwan's painters a pride of place and an aspiration to forge a modern art that was distinctly Taiwan's own.

Taiwan's painters did not exclusively look to Paris or New York for ideas about how to make their painting modern. Other sources of inspiration--including local geography, Chinese art, Japanese art, and aboriginal art on the island of Taiwan itself--enriched their aesthetic choices. Even painters who chose to follow Western models exclusively were obliged to study Western art secondhand. World War II disrupted the plans of all but a few Taiwanese artists to go to Europe to study Western art at its source: most learned Western art indirectly from Japanese teachers in Japanese art schools. In contrast, artists who came to Taiwan from Mainland China in 1949 remained firm in their Chinese identity and committed to preserving China's aesthetic heritage. While grateful for the escape from Communism that Taiwan provided, they did not necessarily view Taiwan as their permanent home. Remembering this challenging environment deepens our appreciation for the success with which Taiwan's artists, both native and émigré, adapted to cultural fluctuations, absorbing and blending styles and paving a path for future generations.

Last summer, while based at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences at National Taiwan University, I spent three months in Taiwan interviewing painters and collecting materials. As a recipient of a Taiwan Fellowship (sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), I wrote a rough draft of a thirty-page article which is still unpublished. For the conference, I would draw from my article to develop a visually stimulating and interactive presentation.

I am an independent scholar currently teaching World Art History at Middlesex Community College in Bedford and Lowell, Massachusetts. Previously, I taught Chinese history at Rhode Island School of Design, Boston University, and University of Massachusetts, Boston and served as a research assistant in the Asiatic Department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. My book manuscript, *The Art of Resistance during China's Cultural Revolution*, is under review at Harvard University Press, Asia Center.

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