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The Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb and Predicaments of the Feminist Movement in Taiwan

Anru Lee and Wen-hui Anna Tang

Abstract: “The Twenty-five Maiden Ladies’ Tomb” is the collective burial site of the female workers who died in a ferry accident on their way to work in 1973. The fact that of the more than 70 passengers on board all 25 who died were unmarried young women, and the taboo in Taiwanese culture that shuns unmarried female ghosts, made the Tomb a fearsome place. Feminists in Gaoxiong (高雄) had for some years wanted the city government to change the tomb’s public image. Their calls were not answered until the Gaoxiong mayor’s office finally allocated money to clean up the gravesite and, as part of the city’s plans to develop urban tourism, to remake it into the tourist-friendly “Memorial Park for Women Labourers”. Consequently, even though the tomb renovation seemed to indicate a triumph of the feminist endeavour, it was more a result of the Gaoxiong city government’s efforts towards culture-led urban revitalization.

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Keywords: Taiwan, women’s movements, marriage, religion, urban development

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Introduction

Using the recent renovation of the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb in Gaoxiong (高雄), southern Taiwan, as an example, this essay examines some of the predicaments faced by the feminist movement in contemporary Taiwan.¹ People who were involved in the renovation process of the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb included the families of the deceased "twenty-five maiden ladies", the Gaoxiong city government, and feminist groups in Gaoxiong and elsewhere in Taiwan – most notably the Kao-hsiung Association for the Promotion of Women's Rights (高雄市女性權益促進會, Gaoxiongshi nüxing quanyi cujinhui, or KAPWR) – all of whom had different considerations and therefore diverse expectations regarding the future and purpose of the tomb. In this essay, we ask to what extent the feminist advocates in Gaoxiong represented the memories of the deceased women while at the same time addressing the concerns of the living.

The Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb was the name given to the collective burial site (with 25 individual graves side by side in three rows) of the female workers who drowned in 1973 in a ferry accident on their way to work at an export-processing zone in Gaoxiong. The fact that of the 70 plus passengers on board all 25 who died were unmarried young women, and the taboo in Taiwanese culture that shuns unmarried female ghosts, made the Tomb a fearsome place. Feminist activists at the KAPWR had for some years wanted the Gaoxiong city government to rectify the name of the tomb. They also wanted the city government to renovate the tomb site. Their calls, however, were not answered until Gaoxiong was hard hit by Taiwan's recent de-industrialization. In order

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to reinvent the city's economy, the Gaoxiong mayor's office finally allocated money to clean up the gravesite and remake it into the tourist-friendly "Memorial Park for Women Labourers" (勞動女性紀念公園, Laodong nüxing jinian gongyuan). Therefore, even though the renovation of the tomb seemed to indicate a triumph of the feminist endeavour, it was more a result of the Gaoxiong city government's efforts toward culture-led urban revitalization (Yeoh 2005).

Taking place near the city center of an emerging metropolis and deeply ingrained in the metropolis' urban plans, the renovation of the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb presents a salient case to deepen our understanding of the feminist movement – and social movements in general – in current Taiwan. It is also one of the few instances instigated by feminists in southern Taiwan that captured national attention (which tends to be biased towards news events in northern Taiwan). Resonating with the general trend of social movements in Taiwan (Ho forthcoming b; Hsiao and Ho 2010), Taiwanese feminist movements started to show more concerted mobilizing and organizing efforts only upon the lifting of martial law in the late 1980s. We also began to see a diversification of feminist discourses after that time (Chang 2009; Lu 2004). Similar to – but much more so than – other kinds of social movements (Ho 2003, 2005, 2006), the feminist movement made great legal and political advances in the two decades following the late 1980s. Legally, the patrilineally leaning, patriarchal family laws were amended, and several pieces of major pro-women legislation became laws, including the Juvenile Prostitution Prevention Law, the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act, the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, the Gender Equality in Employment Act, and the Gender Equity Education Act (Chang 2009: 118-155). Politically, Committees of Women's Rights Promotion (女性權益促進會, Nüxing quanyi cujinhui) were established under the Executive Yuan of the central government, the Taipei city government, and the Gaoxiong city government. Representatives of feminist (or women's) organizations and experts and scholars of women's issues have been invited to serve on these government advisory task forces (Chang 2009: 153). In recent years, "gender mainstreaming" has become a buzzword among government officials, referring to a process that, ideally, requires that gender-equality considerations be incorporated into the operation of every single government agency (Peng 2008).

Taiwanese sociologist Fan Yun (2003) postulates that the tendency of Taiwanese feminists (especially those who started their activism prior

to the mid-1990s) to adopt legal means as opposed to employing mass mobilization techniques as their principal approach may have to do with their overall better class positions and higher educational credentials – many are lawyers and college professors – when compared to their counterparts in other social movements. The movement strategies that these (earlier) feminist activists chose reflected their own life experiences and professional expertise. (In comparison, however, younger generations of feminist activists are more willing to engage in grassroots organizing (Fan 2003: 152)). While the aforementioned legal and political advancements are generally welcomed by the feminist circle, some scholars have voiced their concerns about this turn to “state feminism”, i.e., the institutionalization, propagation, and execution of feminist goals by the state (Yang 2004), which could – and would – lead to a situation of political influence and/ or presentation for feminist organizations without (the incentive to seek) a mass base (cf. Ho 2006). Similarly, how to best collaborate with government agencies while at the same time retaining one’s autonomy presents a great challenge to Taiwanese feminists at the present time (Tu and Peng 2008).

The KAPWR and Awakening Kaohsiung (高雄市婦女新知協會, Gaoxiongshi funü xin zhe xiehui) are the two major feminist organizations in Gaoxiong critical of the patriarchal nature of, and the consequential gender inequality in, Taiwanese society. (This does not mean, however, that the KAPWR and Awakening Kaohsiung are the only two associations in Gaoxiong dedicated to women’s issues. There are many other women’s groups in the city whose main missions are less to challenge the patriarchal social structure but more to make social services available to women, such as providing counselling, organizing self-growth groups or study groups, and offering assorted adult-education classes.) Many of the core members of the KAPWR and Awakening Kaohsiung are friends and colleagues in their personal lives and in other aspects of their professional lives; they assist one another and collaborate on many projects. They also share common ideological ground and ideas of movement strategies, and they work closely with their counterparts in nationwide feminist organizations. The main approaches that the KAPWR adopted in their attempt to change the public image of the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies’ Tomb (namely, holding press conferences, lobbying the Gaoxiong city government, writing op-ed newspaper articles) all echo the common strategies of the feminist movement – and thus the quandaries – that we identified above. While KAPWR activists

succeeded in inspiring some discussion of the issue in the public sphere as well as exerting pressure on the Gaoxiong city government, the KAPWR activists' contact with the families of the deceased young women was minimal. This choice of tactics, it seems to us, might have cost the KAPWR a full appreciation of the cultural context and meanings of the tomb (cf. Ho forthcoming a; Huang 1990). Consequently, as we will show in the following sections, it is not clear on whose behalf the KAPWR initiative was meant to be, which, in turn, may have undermined the organization's ability to meaningfully shape the course of the tomb renovation, thus leaving the task to the city government.²

It All Began with a Ghost Story

Gaoxiong is the second-largest city in Taiwan. It is Taiwan's hub of both light and heavy industries and a world-class port. It is also the location of Taiwan's first few export-processing zones established in the 1960s and 1970s, even though its manufacturing-based city economy has been greatly affected by the economic recession and de-industrialization in Taiwan in recent years. Qijin (旗津) is a small island right outside the Gaoxiong harbour. These two places are connected by a tunnel for ground transportation, and a ferry service. Most taxi drivers in Gaoxiong have, at one time or another, driven passengers to Qijin. They had surely all heard the story about something unusual that allegedly happened to one of their fellow drivers. One late, frigid winter night, said driver was returning to Gaoxiong after dropping off a passenger in a local village in Qijin. While passing by the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb, located near the tunnel mouth on the Qijin side, he noticed someone gesturing

2 We are not suggesting, however, that feminist aims are incompatible with economic development, whether in Taiwan or elsewhere around world. A full discussion of that requires more space than is allowed here; it is also not a central question of this article. For the purpose of this article, suffice it to say that the goal the KAPWR set out to accomplish happened to coincide with the urban development plans of the Gaoxiong city government over time, even though the KAPWR's endeavour was not motivated by economic considerations. The outcome – the way that the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb was renamed and renovated – was deemed satisfactory to both the KAPWR and the Gaoxiong city government. Yet, this does not mean that future KAPWR initiatives will be supported by the Gaoxiong city government. The point we intend to make is that the strategies adopted by the KAPWR might have compromised the strength and influence of the organization and rendered it dependent on the government.

for him to stop. He wondered why anybody, especially a good-looking young woman, would wait for a cab in such a remote, deserted place at this time of night. After the passenger got into the cab, she explained to the curious driver that she was getting married early the next morning. She was afraid that she would not have enough time to get herself ready before the groom came to collect her, and had thus decided to go to Gaoxiong to have her hair done early. The driver followed her instructions, drove through the Gaoxiong-Qijin Tunnel, and stopped the cab at a dark alley near one of the export-processing zones in Gaoxiong. After paying the fare, the young woman asked the taxi driver to come back in an hour because she needed another ride home. Although it was getting very late, and the driver was exhausted from a day's work, he came back an hour later to pick up the young woman, who looked splendid after having her hair done. The driver took the same route back to Qijin. To keep himself awake, he started chatting with his passenger and learned that the young woman had lived a harsh life. She came from a poor family, so she quit school and became a factory worker in Gaoxiong's export-processing zone at a very young age. Her income supported her family and helped to pay for her brothers' educations. Now, after many years of labouring, she finally found a fine man to marry. Her only wish was to lead a good life with her new husband.

The driver was getting increasingly tired and drowsy after a long day's work, and the conversation faltered. They were quiet for a while. After passing through the tunnel, and when the car was approaching the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb, where the young woman first got into the cab, the driver dutifully congratulated his passenger on her upcoming nuptials and asked where he should drop her off. However, there was only dead silence amid the late night's pitch dark. When he looked into his rearview mirror, he saw no one. He could not believe his own eyes, and began to fear that he had met a female ghost. In a cold sweat and without hesitation, he turned and drove home immediately. When he woke up the next morning, he was terrified to find the bills that he received from his mysterious passenger the night before were actually paper money, the currency that the Taiwanese burned for the deceased to use in the afterlife.

Young men encountering beautiful young women who turn out to be ghosts is a common theme in Chinese literature and folklore (classic and contemporary) and movies (Bosco 2007: 793); oftentimes these women are said to be waiting to find a husband, especially if they died

unmarried. In the Qijin story, the young female waiting on the roadside is said to be one of the twenty-five women who died in the ferry accident in 1973. Although coming across a phantom is rarely a welcome event to the Taiwanese – and many people would actively try to avoid such an experience – there is apparently something exhilarating about meeting a beautiful female ghost. In the surveys we conducted at a university near Qijin, we found that the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb was a popular topic of banter among students (Tang and Cheng 2010). Male students would jokingly remind one another that they should have a female friend occupying the back seat before they ride their motorcycles through the tomb site, otherwise they might have an unexpected “love encounter” with one of the ladies.

Yet, it is precisely this mixture of emotions and responses (fear, avoidance, teasing, and excitement – mostly negative) provoked by the “maiden” statuses of these deceased young women that propelled feminists in Gaoxiong to voice their disapproval of the way these women were treated, both when they were alive and after they died, and to demand that the Gaoxiong city government help rectify the wrongs done to them. These feminists were particularly infuriated by the fact that the tomb, like many other places occupied by the remains of people dying of improper deaths (e.g., people who died too young, unmarried, or without children, or people who were executed or died violently, etc (Cohen 1977)), was treated by gamblers of illegal lotteries as somewhere they could get winning numbers (Weller 1994). In other places with similar backgrounds, when the gamblers lost their bets because of the “wrong” numbers presumably given by the spirits, they took their anger out on the spirits, in this case by destroying the photos of the women that were affixed to their individual headstones (Hu 1989). The fact that somebody was running a karaoke business in front of the tomb site during the day seemed to further fuel the indignity felt by the local feminist activists.

But what exactly happened on that fatal morning nearly 40 years ago that ended the lives of these 25 women?

The Ferry Tragedy and Its Aftermath

One of the Asian Tigers, Taiwan had been a manufacturing powerhouse in the world. The export-processing zones in Gaoxiong were the first of their kind in the world; they were established to attract foreign direct investment, which has proven crucial to Taiwan's post-World War II

economic development. The manufacturing jobs created by the factories inside the export-processing zones and in Gaoxiong not only contributed to the success of Taiwan's export-oriented economy but also helped to bring employment opportunities to many families in the surrounding regions, especially those families with young daughters (cf. Hsiung 1996; Lee 2004, 2009). Indeed, the image of thousands of young women riding bicycles – and, later, motorcycles – out of the entrance gate of an export-processing zone is a part of the collective memory of the Taiwanese who lived through the heyday of Taiwan's export-oriented industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s (Arrigo 1980; Kung 1994).

Qijin used to be a peninsula attached to Gaoxiong. However, it was separated from Gaoxiong and became a tiny island of a few fishing villages as a result of the expansion of the Gaoxiong port in 1967. For many years thereafter, people had to rely on ferries (run by the Gaoxiong city government or private companies) to travel between Gaoxiong and Qijin, but that dependence on the ferry ended in the mid-1970s when the government finally built a tunnel connecting Qijin with the mainland of Taiwan (primarily as a result of the ferry boat incident discussed in this essay). Traditionally, many parts of Qijin were poor fishing villages, and the local families were only able to raise their family incomes when their daughters started manufacturing jobs in Gaoxiong's export-processing zones. Every morning, these young factory workers would meet up with other Qijin residents to take the ferry to work. On the morning of 3 September 1973, a small boat with a maximum capacity of 13 passengers (plus 2 sailors) was loaded up with more than 70 passengers, many of whom were export-processing zone workers rushing to work. This in and of itself was not unusual; the ferry owner had been doing this for quite some time even though it was illegal. Only on that fatal morning, the boat capsized: 46 passengers were saved and 25 were drowned. The 46 saved passengers, men and women, were all married, whereas the 25 drowned passengers were all unmarried young women (most of whom were export-processing-zone workers). Many people in Qijin as well as in Gaoxiong did not perceive this as a coincidence, but rather as a sign of supernatural significance. A widespread story supporting this ghostly interpretation of the fatal event tells of one of these 25 drowned young women, one who was first rescued and sent to the hospital for treatment. Just when everybody thought she was about to be saved, she suddenly turned to her mother waiting at her bedside and said hastily: "I am going to be late. My sisters, they are waiting for me. I have to go now". After

that, she died right away, and became the last casualty of the ferry incident. To further support the otherworldly interpretation, one married woman was first rescued but then pronounced dead; yet, she miraculously came back to life later on.

It was quickly reported by some witnesses after the fatal incident that the overturned vessel might have been leaking before it left the pier in Qijin; and it was soon found that the captain of the overturned ferry did not have a license to drive a boat. There was also no lifesaving equipment on board the ferry. Given the fact that the boat – and the owner of the ferry company – passed a safety inspection not long before the incident, the Port of Kaohsiung, the central government agency supervising the Gaoxiong-Qijin ferry service, failed in its job of protecting ferry passengers. There appeared to be a serious breach in public safety. Later, it was discovered that some of the deceased women were under the age of 16, younger than allowed by Taiwan's labour regulations. These young girls obviously faked their identifications while applying for jobs at the export-processing zone, and the companies where they were hired probably turned a blind eye to the falsehood in their applications. Using a false identification was not unusual at a time when children from many Taiwanese farming – or, in this case, fishing – families with precarious incomes sought stable employment in the booming manufacturing sector (Lee 2004); it was also not unusual at the time for labour-short factories to hire underaged workers, although it was illegal. However, as a result of this labour violation, the families of the underaged drowned workers did not receive the pensions to which deceased employees' families are entitled.

In spite of – or because of – these many aberrations exposed in the aftermath of the ferry incident, the Gaoxiong city government intervened and helped to settle the pension and compensation issue. The city government also helped to find a plot of land big enough to accommodate the graves of all these 25 women after their families decided to have them buried in one location. Originally, the bereaved families were going to bury their daughters separately. However, after the earnest endeavour of Chuang Chin-chun (Zhuang Jinchun), the father of one of the fallen women, the families all agreed that these women should be buried together, with their individual graves side by side, in one place. Mr. Chuang had recommended to then-Mayor Wang Yu-yun that the vessel that caused the fatal incident should be kept near the pier where it sank, as a commemoration of the tragedy. However, Mayor Wang rejected this idea.

Mr. Chuang then sought to have a collective burial for the women as an alternative (Wang 2006). Eventually, the 25 individual graves were lined up side by side in three rows. They were arranged according to the date of birth of the deceased. That is, the grave of the oldest of the women lay in the middle of the top row, followed by those of the next two oldest to her sides, and so on. The grave of the youngest thus sat at the edge of the first row. Parents of the deceased also began to address these women as “sisters” and refer to the collectivity as a “sisterhood”.

Later, in 1988, because the land of the tomb site was acquired by the government for the further expansion of the Gaoxiong port, the tomb, along with other graves from Zhongzhou, where the bereaved families lived, was relocated to a new seashore site. This time the Gaoxiong city government also erected a memorial gateway (inscribed with “The Twenty-five Maiden Ladies’ Tomb”) for the new site. Compared to the original burial ground, which was at a fairly remote corner of Qijin Island that not many outside visitors would usually go, this new location was right beside a main road of Qijin. It sits facing the Taiwan Strait, enjoying a scenic view of the water and the coastline.

Gender, Marriage, and Ancestor Worship

From the perspective of the Gaoxiong city government at the time, the ferry incident had come to a relatively satisfactory conclusion when the legal and political responsibilities of the ferry owner, the ferry captain, and other concerned parties were settled, when the bereaved families were financially compensated, and when the collective burial of the 25 deceased was established. For the families grieving for their lost daughters, however, there was still unfinished business. Specifically, where and how to place the spirits of those who died unmarried presented a great challenge to these families.

Marriage has until recently been nearly universal to both men and women in Chinese societies including Taiwan (Jones 2005; Thornton and Lin 1994). Marriage as a social institution is particularly significant for women, for it serves as both a symbol of and a gateway to their ultimate (though subordinate) position in the Chinese kinship system (Wolf 1960, 1972). Unmarried females are viewed as temporary members of their natal families. Normatively, it is through marriage that women are accepted into their husband’s family and permanently integrated into a lineal line (Hsu 1971; Wolf and Huang 1980), although there are varia-

tions of – as well as exceptions to – this practice (Chang 2000; Lee 2008; Shih 2007, 2009; Wolf 1978). It is also through marriage that a woman earns a rightful place in her husband's ancestral hall in the afterlife (Ahern 1971; Harrell 1986), even though ancestral authority – and, by extension, ancestor worship – is on the wane as a result of social change in contemporary Taiwan (Yang, Thornton, and Fricke 2000).³ Correspondingly, if a woman dies a violent death before marriage, she can become a ghost if she is not properly prayed for (Harrell 1986: 113). Spirit marriage – where a female ghost marries a living man – has been a strategy adopted by such a woman's family to insure that she is cared for in her eternal life (Harrell 1986: 113). Marriage also provides the opportunity for men and women to perpetuate the family line through childbearing, the failure of which is considered a serious breach of filial piety in Taiwanese culture even today (Simon 2004). Economically, marriage also grants, especially to women, some financial support and social security as men continue to be seen as and act as primary breadwinners in contemporary Taiwanese households. Together, these concerns – religious/spiritual and economic/material – have made many generations of Taiwanese parents anxious to find their sons and daughters a suitable spouse; it is a priority for them as parents.

Most of the families of the 25 deceased young women, however, were presented something other than a spirit marriage to care for their daughters. A few years after the ferry accident, after the collective burial was completed, some members of the grieving families began to report paranormal incidents. The father of one deceased woman told us during our interview in 2009:

At first, they [the young women] would come back to their family members' dreams, and say that they were now learning to become

3 Interestingly, at the time of this writing, on International Women's Day 2010, the Council of Labour Affairs announced its revised answers to some of the questions in its Mortician License Exam test bank, in order to make the exam reflect more gender equality (*China Times* 2010). For example, in the previous test bank, the answer to the true-false question "The tablet of a woman who died unmarried can only be placed in a temple" was "true", but in the revised test bank it is "false". The old answer to the question "How should the names of the deceased's relatives be arranged on the obituary?" was "Males should always come before females". The revised, correct answer is "It should be based on birth order but not gender". Although this revision effort is welcomed by advocates of gender equality, whether or how it will affect death rituals or funeral services in a practical sense remains to be seen.

“enlightened beings”, and they wanted their families to have their “god statues” made. But, of course, none of us believed them [the deceased] at first. We thought they were just talking nonsense, and we blamed them for coming back to disturb us. Yet, again and again, these girls kept coming back [...] [In our case, our daughter] showed up in her mother’s dream so often and when she appeared, she sobbed and sobbed. They also started causing mischief: Some families began to experience excruciating stomachaches or serious diarrhea; sometimes we had high fevers [...]. When all this first began, none of the families related these ailments to the girls. Yet, no matter how much money we spent on finding a cure – or how many deities we appeased – nothing seemed to work, until one night one of the “ladies” showed up in the dream of [a family member of hers] and told the family about what she did to them because they failed to grant her wish [...]. The family reluctantly accepted her request and had her “god statue” made. As soon as the family did that, every problem was gone and everybody [in the family] was cured.

Shortly thereafter, many different families told similar stories, and, before long, 22 out of the 25 deceased young women received their “god statues”. When we enquired in 2009 why the remaining three women did not get a god statue, we were told that they did not come back to ask for it; their families did not receive any notice from them. Many of these 22 god statues were welcomed into their fathers’ houses, placed in the family altar, and worshipped – like someone with a pious status, but not as a deceased family member (or ancestress) – along with these women’s patrilineal ancestors and other deities in the altar.

Let’s Talk Less about the Supernatural but More about the History! – Feminist Framing of the Discourse

On 2 April 2004, right before Qingming Day, the traditional tomb-sweeping day in Chinese societies, the KAPWR called a press conference, in which members rallied for the reconstruction of the tomb and equated the reconstruction with gender equality and with Gaoxiong’s status as a progressive city (because of its advocacy for gender equality). Two days later, on Qingming Day, then-Secretary of the KAPWR Wen-hui Tang (one of the authors of the current article) published an op-ed article entitled “Women Who Cannot Go Home”, in *China Times*, in which she commented on the custom that Taiwanese married women could only

commemorate the ancestors of their husbands but not those of their natal families. The article also highlighted the predicament of Taiwanese women like those young women buried at the Maiden Ladies' Tomb

who not only did not have an easy life while alive but also did not have anyone to venerate them after their deaths just because they died unmarried (Tang 2005).

The timing of submitting this article for publication was carefully chosen. It came right when many people in Taiwan were returning home, reuniting with their families, and getting ready to observe likely the most important duty required of offspring in Taiwanese culture. Therefore, the article came as a keen reminder of a fundamental inequality between men and women in Taiwanese society. The article also resonated with a primary concern of the Taiwanese feminist community at the time. In 2003, the Awakening Foundation in Taipei (婦女新知基金會, Funü xin zhe jijinhui) held a "From Maiden Temples to the Gender Politics of Ancestor Worship" (從孤娘廟談祭祀性別文化, Cong gu niang miao tan jisi xingbie wenhua) press conference on 5 April, Qingming Day, criticizing the fact that only married women could enter an ancestral hall – and thus acquire a life of eternity – leaving all other kinds of women (e.g., unmarried, divorced, or lesbian) forever uncared for. Ultimately, the press conference concluded that this cultural practice had the oppressive effect of endorsing (heterosexual) marriage as the single most important accomplishment in a woman's life and excluding other alternatives for one's life trajectory. Since this first press conference, the Awakening Foundation has continued to call press conferences on the issue of women and ancestor worship around Qingming, the latest one having taken place on 3 April 2009 (*Epoch Times* 2009; also see Awakening Foundation Blog 2010). Another example of a feminist effort along these lines was the publication of *Going Back to My Mother's House on New Year's Day: Culture, Customs, and Gender Equity Education* (TGEEA 2005), a collected volume of essays written by affiliates of the Taiwan Gender Equity Education Association (TGEEA, 台灣性別平等教育協會, Taiwan xingbie pingdeng jiaoyu xiehui), of which Wen-hui Tang is an active member. Since then, the TGEEA has been working hard to raise the general public's awareness about the gender bias embedded in Taiwanese culture and customs (TGEEA 2010).

As a way to combat the cultural bias against deceased unmarried women, the KAPWR activists emphasized the role of these 25 women as manufacturing workers who helped to build Taiwan's economic miracle,

and the fact that they died on their way to work, therefore making their deaths job-related casualties. The feminists held that a focus on these women's work roles, as opposed to their unmarried status, would also aid in advancing the public's recognition that Taiwanese women have made great contributions to the economic growth of the country. To remove the stigma connected to the tomb and the tomb site, the KAPWR urged the Gaoxiong city government in the 2004 press conference to make an effort to change the urban image of Qijin, and to reform and rebuild an urban culture with gender equality. In order to accomplish these goals, in tandem with the ongoing involvement in gender equity education of many of its core members, the KAPWR recommended that:

1. the Kaohsiung City Bureau of Cultural Affairs commission experts to conduct research on the history of the 'Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb, with the goal of recognizing the sacrifice and contribution these women made to Taiwan's economic development;
2. the Kaohsiung City Education Bureau invite scholars to write up the ferry incident and the context around it as teaching materials for local studies and school education for gender equity. More broadly, this would also provide Gaoxiong city residents with an opportunity to understand the gender and social implications of the urban landscape of their own city; and,
3. the government (central and/ or municipal) help publicize these women's economic contributions and the issue of gender (in)equality intertwined with their stories, so that the women could gain the respect they deserved to have while alive and the reverence their spirits should command at the present time.

In the following years, the KAPWR continued to push for the Gaoxiong city government to reconstruct the tomb and its surrounding environment as well as to rectify its name. On Qingming 2005, the KAPWR held a memorial service at the tomb attended by KAPWR members and their families. Another press conference was held on Qingming 2007. Individual KAPWR members, many of whom were college professors, also wrote academic articles, newspaper essays, and commentaries on the topic, and many of these professors incorporated the tomb into their own classroom discussions (Tang and Cheng 2010). These efforts eventually paid off. The Gaoxiong city government commissioned film director Ke Wan-ching (Ke Wanqing) to make a documentary about the lives

of the 25 women and the tragic ferry incident that took their lives. Director Ke did more than that. More than two years in the making, her film *The Lost Youth: Women and Industrial Work in Taiwan* (她們的故事：生產線上的容顏, Tamen de gushi: shengchan xiangshang de rongyan) finally premiered on 18 October 2008 at the Kaohsiung Film Archive. The documentary is not just about the 25 women but also portrays the labour history of women at Gaoxiong's export-processing zones, starting from the 1970s when Taiwan's economy began to take off. The film takes the audience through the days when young girls fresh out of elementary school joined the factory workforce and laboured for the livelihood of their families and the collective fortune of Taiwanese society, thus giving the life stories of the 25 women some much-needed context. After watching the film at the premier, Gaoxiong Mayor Chen Chu (Chen Ju), herself a single woman in her late fifties, commented that "the story of Taiwanese female workers is the history of Taiwan. [Our] society should give [all women workers] the long-awaited recognition that they deserve". *The Lost Youth* was later shown on many occasions, to the general public and on college campuses as well as at subsequent Gaoxiong film festivals.

In addition, the National Cultural Association (國家文化總會, Guojia wenhua zonghui) – a semi-official, non-profit organization advocating the promotion of culture, broadly defined – published in 2006 *The Marks of Women's Clogs: Cultural Landmarks of Women in Taiwan* (女人履痕：台灣女性文化地標, Nüren jihen: Taiwan nüxing wenhua dibiao), a book about cultural landmarks – both tangible and intangible – important to women or women's causes in different parts of Taiwan. The Qijin Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb was chosen as the one and only landmark in the city of Gaoxiong. This seemed to indicate that the name-rectification effort of feminists in Gaoxiong was no longer merely a local issue but now elevated to the national limelight.

When the State Intervenes

In response to the KAPWR press conference and KAPWR Secretary Wen-hui Tang's op-ed piece – and aside from commissioning the making of a documentary – then-Mayor of Gaoxiong Frank Hsieh (Xie Changting) promised to pursue the improvement of both the site of the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb and the tomb itself, and he assured citizens that he would kick off the name-rectification effort for the tomb shortly thereafter. Yet, the physical appearance of the tomb site and

tomb remained unchanged. Instead, as a political tactic to evaluate the degree of support for the tomb issue among Gaoxiong's feminist circle as well as the general public, Mayor Hsieh and his staff commissioned Awakening Kaohsiung to conduct a study on the attitudes of the families of the deceased on the renovation of the tomb.

Awakening Kaohsiung was given only a few months by the Gaoxiong city government to complete the study. Within this short period of time, they managed to visit most of the families of the 25 deceased young women. Awakening Kaohsiung talked to – or, at least, had a brief chat to – one or two (and on a few occasions more) members of each of these families about how they would like to see the tomb site changed, and Awakening Kaohsiung then compiled a final report at the end of the study (Wang 2006). Although Awakening Kaohsiung's contact with the families of the deceased was nominal, the report does suggest that the families interviewed seemed to, by and large, welcome the recurring attention given to the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb. The report, however, also indicates that these families might have a different idea about the tomb from that expressed by the KAPWR. For example, family members who answered the question about the karaoke business (disapproved of by the KAPWR) did not seem to mind its presence. Some of them seemed to even welcome it because the owner of the karaoke business helped to maintain the individual gravestones; he offered fresh flowers and paid tribute to those buried there before he opened for business nearly every day. He also helped to keep an eye on the environment, at least during the daytime, when the business was in operation. The family members also indicated that the karaoke business and its customers helped to make the place more animated and full of life.

The inconclusiveness of the Awakening Kaohsiung report seemed to convey to Mayor Hsieh and his chief staff members that the tomb renovation was not an urgent issue. At the time of the KAPWR-held memorial service on Qingming 2005, the tomb and its surrounding environment had not been changed. Only in early 2006, under a new mayor, Yeh Chu-lan (Ye Julan), did one begin to see some signs of action on the part of the city government. At a municipal press conference, then-Deputy Mayor Cheng Wen-lung (Zheng Wenlong) revealed Gaoxiong's "Qijin: An Island for Tourism" project, which was a part of the city's larger plan to develop urban tourism. Deputy Mayor Cheng explained:

Among the different districts of Gaoxiong, Qijin probably has the best conditions to develop tourism [...]. In addition to infrastructure improvement such as building five-star hotels and shopping districts, the city government will also spend at least a year on community-building. By doing so we are hoping to help local residents in Qijin to raise their consciousness about their own community and see themselves as world citizens of an island of international tourism [...]. We have also allocated 170 million [Taiwanese] dollars [roughly 5.3 million USD] to the “Qijin” plan, including the 25 million [Taiwanese] dollars [780,000 USD] for the “Memorial Park Dedicated to Workers Dying of Job-Related Accidents” [on the current site of the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb] (*Min-shen Daily News* 2006).

All of these projects were to be completed by October 2006, according to the Gaoxiong city government's proposal. To ensure the overall success of the “Qijin” plan, transforming the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb and changing the public image of the tomb site were essential in order that the place not look or feel like a graveyard – even though, in reality, it might continue to house the remains of the 25 drowned women.

The announcement of the “Qijin” plan did not win much admiration from KAPWR members, who pointed out that the Gaoxiong city government still addressed these 25 women as “young girls” in its public announcements, in spite of its self-declared effort to change the image of the tomb site. Also, the fact that the new park would be a park devoted to all labourers, not specifically to female workers, seemed to indicate the city's offhand approach to gender issues. There appeared to be an enduring gap between the way the KAPWR understood “gender equality” and “de-stigmatization of these women's names” and the way the Gaoxiong city government understood those terms.

It was a long process of discussion, debate, agreement and disagreement before anything further happened. In the end, four mayors later, the city government finally decided in 2008 that the park should be re-named the “Memorial Park for [All] Women Labourers”, a decision endorsed by the KAPWR. This is not to say, however, that the city government (and, by extension, the KAPWR) always shared the same concerns of the families of the deceased young women or that the disagreements between these two sides could always be bridged. For example, initially, the families of the deceased wanted the tomb to be renovated into something like the Eighteen Lords Temple (十八王公廟, *Shiba wang gong miao*) at the northern tip of Taiwan, which was originally “a simple roadside shrine for unidentified bones – the sort that sits unat-

tended and almost unnoticed all over the countryside” (Weller 1994: 141), but has grown into one of Taiwan’s major temples and has enjoyed unprecedented popularity since the 1980s. The majority of the families also insisted that the name “The Twenty-five Maiden Ladies’ Tomb” – or, at least “Twenty-five Maiden Ladies” or “Twenty-five” – should be kept. They also wanted the presence of a tomb or an architectural structure of worship where they could place the urns and/ or hold memorial services (Wang 2006: 11-13). They also expressed their wish to keep the memorial gate. The parents were concerned that no one else in the family would be making regular offerings to their daughter-gods after they passed away. Essentially, the families of the deceased were envisioning a refurbished tomb/ temple/ memorial hall with a redecorated memorial gate, surrounded by the new, friendly “Memorial Park for Women Labourers” with flowers and plants. A memorial gate was important; it was to serve as the gateway to the shrine of the 25 enlightened ladies.

However, it had always been the position of the Gaoxiong mayor’s office – this time under Mayor Chen Chu – that there should be no trace of the tomb left after the renovation. Henceforth, there was not going to be anything remotely resembling a shrine or temple, and the existing memorial gate had to go. In the end, the government prevailed. The individual graves of these young women were removed, and trees and meadows were planted. At the center of the park is a sculpture of a Buddhist lotus on a pedestal – the original design proposed by the city government called for the shape of a vessel, but that design was rejected by the families, who wanted something symbolizing the afterlife status of their daughters. Below the lotus sculpture is a chamber where the urns of the women’s remains collected after the removal of their individual graves are kept. The parents of the departed had expressed their wish that there be a door that could be opened from the outside, so that they could go in from time to time to take care of the urns. However, Mayor Chen was against the idea. She reasoned that anybody – not just the parents – could go in if there were a door; as such, the final resting place of these women could very likely be transgressed again, just like the vandalism caused by the losing gamblers on the photos on the women’s previous headstones. Consequently, the chamber was sealed for good.

On 3 September 2008, 35 years after the fatal ferry incident, the Memorial Park for Women Laborers was inaugurated. Mayor Chen’s words, “[Let’s] Remember our sisters who laboured [and] Wish for a city of happiness”, (懷念勞動姊妹, 祈願幸福城市, Huainian laodong zimei,

qi yuan xingfu chengshi) were inscribed on the pedestal of the Buddhist lotus sculpture. The inscription also explains the purpose of the park:

Resting in peace here are twenty-five women who gave their lives in the labour front [...]. In 1973, they died while on their way to work. The Gaoxiong city government helped to bury the deceased together at the time, and named the collective entombment “The Twenty-five Maiden Ladies’ Tomb”, as an important documentation of the contemporary life of Qijin and a witness to the sacrifices the working-class people made for Taiwan’s economic development. However, the term “Maiden Ladies” carried stereotypical gender ideologies that ignored both the economic contributions of women workers and the urgency of safety issues in the workplace [...]. On the recommendation of the Kaohsiung Association for the Promotion of Women’s Rights and other groups, the current Gaoxiong city government decided to rectify the site as the “Memorial Park for Women Labourers” to commemorate the twenty-five martyrs who died on their jobs [...]. We hope that we can work together to build a country for working people and a city of happiness, so that the sacrifice made by the deceased women will not be in vain.

By Way of Conclusion: Whose Voice Were the Feminists Speaking?

Feminist activists at the KAPWR played a critical role in bringing the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies’ Tomb into the public eye and framing the story behind it in gender and labour terms. Although it took a long while and many mayors, the Gaoxiong city government eventually responded to the KAPWR’s call, renovated the tomb site and its surrounding environment, and agreed to instate a Buddhist lotus sculpture that carries some religious symbolism relating to the afterlife yet does not look as conspicuous as a crypt. The inscription engraved on the lotus sculpture reflects much of the KAPWR’s appeal that society should recognize these women as production workers who made great contributions to Taiwan’s economy and who lost their lives for their jobs. Implied – though less evident – in this latest inscription is also the message that these women were filial daughters who died from sacrificing for the happiness of their families, but not that they were fearsome maiden ghosts coming back to seek resolutions for their unfulfilled lives. This all seems to suggest the triumph of the feminist endeavours. However, in retrospect, one wonders why the tomb had to be transformed into a

sanitized park in order to make right the gender inequality and social injustice inflicted on these young women. Were there any compelling reasons why the continuing existence of the tomb – or the unequivocal appearance of a tomb – would hinder the cause of gender equality or the recognition of these women as hard workers crucial to the post-World War II development of Taiwan? In essence, how did the course of action adopted by the KAPWR, which tended to focus on rallying for the support of the government (but which had minimal contact with the affected families and the local community where the families and the tomb are/ were located) – thereby conforming to the larger trend of “state feminism” in Taiwan – affect the organization’s influence and effectiveness?

For the parents who lost their daughters in the ferry accident more than 30 years ago, there was probably never any doubt that their girls were filial daughters and hard workers. When interviewed by *Awakening Kaohsiung* (Wang 2006), quite a few parents had tears in their eyes while telling their interviewers how considerate their daughters were that they understood the hardship borne by their parents in order to support a big family. They told their interviewers that these girls selflessly shared their parents’ burdens, took care of their younger siblings, and always put their own desires secondary to the needs of the family. Some of them also mentioned that their deceased daughters were seen dressing in white coming back to visit and making sure everything was alright with their families. Mr. Chuang Chin-chun, who helped to make the deceased women’s collective burial a reality, became charged in our interview as he recalled the moment at the funeral of these young women when, according to Taiwanese custom, parents were called upon to whip the coffins of their unfilial daughters who died before their aging parents: “That was just pure nonsense! How could anybody bear to think these girls were unfilial? They were humble, wonderful daughters”. At the funeral, Mr. Chuang tried to stop the parents – and indeed succeeded in many cases – from whipping their daughters’ coffins. Yet, Mr. Chuang also had a definite opinion about the spiritual tablet placement of women who died unmarried: “It has been like this since the beginning of history that no parents worship their dead children; [and unmarried] daughters’ tablets shouldn’t come back home”.

The dilemma that the parents of the deceased faced, between their lasting worries for the eternal well-being of their daughters who should have been married and led fulfilled lives of their own but instead died a

violent untimely death, on the one hand, and the normative value that dictates against incorporating the spirit of a female descendant into her patrilineal ancestral shrine, on the other – both of which, paradoxically, were derived from the same cultural logic – propelled them to seek (or accept) help beyond their individual households. To them, their daughters were of course hard-working, wonderful girls – they did not need to be reminded of that – and a public acknowledgement of their daughters was certainly welcome; but this was not the point. Ultimately, they were looking for some assurance that the welfare of their daughters' spirits would be continuously and regularly cared for. This became clear to us when Mr. Lin, the Qijin district office liaison to the families of the deceased – who later helped us to get in touch with these families for our research – came to us one day with an urgent look and wanted us (whom he took as having some special ties with the Gaoxiong city government) to reaffirm for the parents the city government's promise of holding a spring memorial ceremony (on Qingming Day) and a fall commemoration service (on the day of their daughters' deaths) in front of the Buddhist lotus sculpture every year. The city government made the pledge in order to placate the families before the tomb renovation. While we felt we could not speak for the city government, we promised that we would at least hold a service ourselves with our students the coming spring. However, it was apparent from the expression on Mr. Lin's face that our promise failed to give him and the families the conviction they were seeking. It was the government's firm commitment that they wanted to hear.

Last but not least, the timing of the tomb renovation begs for closer examination. While we credit the KAPWR's persistent efforts to press the government for change, the change came at a time when the development of tourism in Qijin became a part of the Gaoxiong city government's plans to revive the city's economy. Given the strategic location of the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb, it became understandable why, from the perspective of the Gaoxiong city government, removing the phantom image of the place and rebuilding it with a new, sanitized look was necessary. Tourists do not normally come to a cemetery for leisure; it is not a common cultural practice in Taiwan. The city government's portrait of the deceased as noble workers dying on their jobs, as it is engraved on the lotus sculpture at the refurbished park, though often taken as an attempt to give these women's life stories a larger context and more public meaning, could be in fact another attempt of the Gao-

xiong city government to develop urban tourism. After all, what could be a better symbol than the image of 25 young women dying tragically on their way to work to characterize the romance and pathos of Gaoxiong's past as a blue-collar, working-class city? The gender implications of the tomb story are thus consumed by the Gaoxiong city government's economically-minded urban revitalization effort.

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