POST-COLONIAL AND CONTEMPORARY ART TRENDS
IN TAIWAN

Pan Fan

Speaking of the modernization of Taiwanese art, regardless of the complicated world of politics and the real development or self-discipline of art, we have no choice but to view the incident of the 1895 Japanese invasion of Taiwan as a fundamental historic turning point. By clearly distinguishing and recognizing this starting point, we can gain a profound understanding of the diversity implicated and contained in Taiwanese art. In its modern development, Taiwanese art is faced with the setback caused by the conflict of self-identification and cultural contradictions, thus forcing Taiwanese art to feel the need unceasingly to search for self-orientation and self-reconstruction.

1. Colonization and Post-Colonization

Taiwanese art is not just theoretically post-colonial. In fact, Taiwanese art faced the fate of colonization as its real fate and sought to reflect the significance and value of local traditions, customs, and art. When the first Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1894, Taiwan was ceded to Japan and imperial colonialists applied armed repression from 1895 up to Chiang Wei-shui’s democratic movement in the 1920s. Similarly, imperial colonialists used methods of armed repression in cultural reform movements. Culturally, Taiwanese art must face both the gap between two different generations and the predicament of re-self-orientation. Culture had to find its identity while under the dominion of different nations.

The first thing to focus on is this: before Japan ruled Taiwan, during the period of the governance of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Taiwan was not just a geographical border but was an island on the southeastern coast, far away from the capital, Beijing. At the same time, Taiwan was also a cultural border. Its fine arts were deeply influenced by the southeastern coast of mainland China due to the fact that over 95% of
the residents of Taiwan emigrated from the Fujian and Guangdong coast. Due to this cultural identification, the artistic style of that time was called ‘Fukien province customs’. Nevertheless, when world culture changed from the era of land power to that of sea power, because of its location Taiwan was viewed as one of the main routes for global navigation, the center that linked northeast and southeast Asia. However, this also marked Taiwan as the main place for imperialists to invade. The cultural and geographical borders of former days were now a gateway for imperialism to expand its domain. In the early days when China was still in its days of power and prosperity, both the Netherlands and Spain had control over navigation and trade.

In the 17th century, the two nations settled on the Penghu Islands and in Damshui in northeast Taiwan. The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) sent in troops to regain control of Penghu. After the collapse of the Ming dynasty, the Southern Ming dynasty of Zheng Cheng-gong retreated to Taiwan in order to resist the Qing dynasty and banished the western colonizers. At this time, the Hans first established a regime in Taiwan. However, for the aborigines who had been settled there for thousands of years, the Netherlands, Spain, the Southern Ming dynasty, the late Qing dynasty, or Japan were all colonial regimes. This complex history constructed the basic features of Taiwanese art today. In other words, the diversity of our cultural identifications and the frequent replacement of regimes forced this immigrant island called Taiwan, consisting mainly of Han people, to reflect constantly on the significance and meaning of customs and culture. Nevertheless, it was due to the degree of cultural difference between the Japanese and the Taiwanese that the Taiwanese people tasted the bitter pain of being colonized for the first time in the period of the Japanese colonization.

As a result of World War II, after 50 years of rule by the Japanese colonial government Taiwan returned to the hands of China in 1945 and was taken over by the Kuomintang (KMT, also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party) government. To insure the continuity of its regime and its culture, Taiwan should have been connected with and related to mainland China. However, in 1949 when the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek failed in the Chinese Civil War against the communists in mainland China, they retreated to Taiwan, where hundreds of military men crowded into the place inhabited mainly by immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong. Cultures from