

The Woman under the Burial Quilt—Death of a Trans Warrior

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December 11, 2003. As the transgender community of Taiwan eagerly awaited the first public appearance by Leslie Feinberg in Asia two days later at a transgender conference, news came that a local transgendered person had thrown herself in front of an on-coming express train and was killed instantly. Several transgender friends tried frantically to confirm the identity of the deceased, but no one expected it to be Tsai Ya-Ting, perhaps the most actively “out” transgender activist in Taiwan.

Ya-Ting first “came out” to the media when she submitted an official petition to the President’s office in 2002, requesting that she be allowed to use a photo that reflected her actual appearance on her identification card. Ya-Ting had been living as a woman for three years and was trying to raise enough money for her sex-reassignment surgery. She had little problem getting along in life except when stopped by the police for an ID check. As the primary procedure usually checks the person against the photo on the ID card, the incongruence between her appearance as a woman and the much earlier photo on the ID card when it was issued had been a source of constant hassle, not to mention her difficulties in applying for jobs, which prompted Ya-Ting to file the request.

There had been reports about transgendered personalities in Taiwan before Ya-Ting’s endeavor. Some narrated the tragic fate of being born into the wrong body; others sensationalized the capture of those “deviant persons” found wearing women’s clothes and underwear while committing petty crimes. Ya-Ting’s case was the first time a transgendered person openly demanded her basic civil rights by challenging existing laws governing the issuance of identification cards. Her action was applauded by many trans people but also worried some who fear that public attention would be drawn to dissident gender expressions.

Ya-Ting’s move made her well-known all over Taiwan and put her in touch with Taiwan’s only but burgeoning transgender support group, The TG Butterfly Garden, through which she soon joined other actions to promote the transgender cause. In December 2002, when marginal sexualities groups announced the ten worst cases of sex right violations in Taiwan that year, Ya-Ting acted as the transgender delegate who reported on two cases that involved the transgendered: one, the rejection of her application for an ID card that would bear a photo that matched her real life identity, and two, the suicide of a transgendered youth after suffering family scolding and exile. In March 2003, Ya-Ting wrote and presented an education program at a training camp for activists in an effort to help other marginal groups understand the specificities of trans oppression and the realities of transgender existence. Continued involvement in activism helped Ya-Ting develop into an articulate transgender spokesperson who could even deal with the sensationalizing media quite level-headedly. Yet her impressive performance and activism also hid from view the actual difficulties of living as a trans person in a highly trans-phobic world. When a well-known MTF Lin Guo-Hua killed herself out of desperation in a hotel room in May 2003, five years after her transition, Ya-Ting was the one who braved the shock and went in front of the cameras to read her heart-breaking eulogy for Lin, a eulogy that would prove to be just as fitting for her own funeral seven months later.

Ya-Ting’s family might have wanted to keep a low profile on her suicide as well as her trans identity, the transgender community was however reluctant

to let one of their most articulate activists leave quietly and in shame. A memorial poster was made in Ya-Ting's honor that presented a record of her contribution to the transgender cause. Ya-Ting's smiles and thoughtful moments were immortalized amongst glittering butterflies that symbolized the transgender identity in the Taiwanese context. The poster was then prominently displayed at the transgender conference on Dec. 13th, 2003 reminding the attendees of the real lives and stories that lie behind theoretical musings. While delivering his keynote speech, Leslie Feinberg paid special tribute to Ya-Ting and called for more vigorous struggles to carry on Ya-Ting's unfinished work.

In the meantime, activists from the Gender/Sexuality Rights Association of Taiwan (G/SRAT) rushed to Ya-Ting's family to help with funeral arrangements amidst the isolating effect of stigmatization. Ya-Ting came from a very poor family that had great difficulty understanding her "condition" and after her suicide only hoped the whole thing would quickly blow over so that family members would not miss too many days of work because of this incident. GSRAT activists learned other details about Ya-Ting's life and death too: that she had been out of work for the greater part of the year due to her high-caliber media visibility, that she had met with only frustration when trying to win the love of one woman journalist, that she took off her female clothes before throwing herself in front of the train naked, as if she wanted to destroy that cumbersome male body.

Ya-Ting's father was obviously dismayed by her last gesture of defiance as well as worried by the disrepute that the news had brought the family. GSRAT activists sat with the family at the wake for two nights and worked patiently with the professionals from the funeral home to persuade Ya-Ting's family that it is a long-standing Chinese tradition that the will of the deceased be revered. As Ya-Ting's last move declared her insistence on her female identity, GSRAT hoped to sway the family toward fulfilling her last wish. After two days of negotiation, GSRAT achieved two results. To begin with, the name tablet featured at the funeral and on Ya-Ting's ash urn would bear two names, with her given male name in the middle but her chosen female name on the side in smaller characters. This would constitute a public announcement of Ya-Ting's double identity as the son of her father and a woman in her own right. And on a more private side, Ya-Ting would be dressed in her favorite black dress and full female underwear. The traditional burial quilt that covered the deceased from neck down would ensure that the family did not suffer any suspicion or shock at this quite unconventional arrangement. And after the ceremony, Ya-Ting was cremated in this outfit which aptly fulfilled her life-long wish.

On December 17, 2003, GSRAT activists bid farewell to Ya-Ting at her funeral and cremation. She left a legacy of clear thinking, careful analysis, persistent effort, and outstanding bravery, which makes her suicide all the more enigmatic. Despite unanswered questions, the transgender community will always remember Ya-Ting and will continue her fight for basic human rights and dignity for all trans persons.