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## **SELLING A FEMINIST AGENDA ON A CONSERVATIVE MARKET --The Awakening Experience in Taiwan**

by

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The feminist movement in Taiwan, as it emerged in the early 1970s, generated impressive social change. Over the last two decades feminists have been remarkably productive despite operating with limited social and economic resources and within a highly restrictive cultural and political environment. The movement has been of necessity innovative and flexible. The complex experience of Taiwanese feminists and the dynamic nature of the movement is worth recording and analyzing not only in itself, but because it also adds a new dimension to contemporary feminist discourse, which has been rooted in the heritage of the West and articulated by Western authors, or third world women trained in Western academia.

With its non-white, non-Western tradition, Taiwan has never been part of the first world, nor does it share the collective memory of most third world nations of having been colonized by a Western power for hundreds of years. Its old heritage of Chinese culture and recent history of fast economic growth and political liberalization also place it outside the third world experience. Owing its ideological origin to Western feminism, the movement has diverged notably in its priority and strategies, taking into consideration the tradition of communal collectivism and Confucian ethics of social harmony. Yet it has been faced with similar issues that may have or still confound feminists in other parts of the world: women's changing roles in the public and private spheres, the choice between ideological purity and pragmatic gains for women on issues like abortion, more equality or protection for women in the labor market and at home, recognition of sexual violence as a social issue in a more feminist world, the uneasy partnership of the feminist movement and political formations already in place, and the interrelationship of the feminist movement and women's studies, and so on.

My personal growth has been closely tied to feminist movements and feminist studies since the early 1970s, when an American friend lent me a copy of Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* in Claremont, California, which provoked me to think about women's status. Margery Wolf's *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* was another book that taught me to rethink what I thought was the familiar. Returning to Taiwan in the mid of 1970s, I taught at National Chiao Tung University and volunteered to work for the Pioneer Press, a short-lived feminist press, which exuded the idealism and passion for social reform of the 70s and was ambitious in organizing large-scale activities. On my first visit to the Pioneer Press, I met [Li Yuan-chen](#), a young lecturer of Chinese literature, who was there for the same purpose and later became the pivotal visioner and movement organizer in the 80s. We started a life-long friendship and comradeship then and there.

Li's perseverance convinced a small group of women to start the first feminist magazine, press, and movement organization, *Awakening*, in 1982. At a time when feminist ideas were considered too radical to be accepted by the mainstream media, it provided a forum for the suppressed voices and a ground for mutual support. For many of us, *Awakening* was the major source of friendship and strength for daily struggle in a gloomily anti-feminist society.

To answer the questions raised by the movement as well as those by the critics of the movement, we felt the pressing need for acquiring new knowledge, keeping records, and learning from the feminist experience in other parts of the world. In 1985, I had chances to attend the Asian Women's Conference in Davao, the Philippines, the NGO World Women's Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, and to visit women's organizations in New York City. Exhilarated by the world-wide feminist struggle, and informed by the newly sprung academic field of Women's Studies, I co-founded the Women's Research Program (WRP), which was the first inter-collegiate women's studies center (sponsored by the Asia Foundation) in Taiwan, and offered the first Women's Studies course in that year.

In 1987, as political liberalization accelerated on the island and social movements gathered momentum, *Awakening* registered itself as a foundation, enhancing its ability for fund raising. It was also in 1987 that I was invited to deliver a paper on the feminist movement in Taiwan in a conference on "Female intellectuals and the development of Taiwan society," organized by the all-male editorial board of *China Forum*, a journal for social and cultural discussion, to celebrate the International Women's Day. For the first time, the feminist movement was formally recognized and discussed in an academic meeting, but many attending the conference (mostly female university instructors) argued that a feminist movement did not exist, and,

citing the constitutional guarantee of gender equality argued it was not needed, and would not be accepted by women in Taiwan.

They criticized *Awakening* for being too radical for a women's group, too small to have social impact, and so on. Some asserted that the correct approach to the women's movement was demonstrated by the newly founded New Environment Housewives League, which tried to win social respect by cleaning the environment instead of subverting gender roles or antagonizing the sexes.

At the Women's Research Program, I was also constantly reminded to heed our images as scholars, not feminists, by my colleagues. Feeling unable to bridge the gap between academia and activism, or to live up to their level of "respectability", I left the Women's Research Program in 1987. It was Li Yuan-chen and other feminists' moral support that sustained me through the struggle during this period.

In spite of the unfavorable social atmosphere, a handful of core members at the Awakening kept the movement alive and vigorous until it generated wider social support in the 90s. Within the last decade it has successfully pushed for legalization of abortion; drafted the Equal Employment Bill and Revision of the Family Law; institutionalized protection for teenage prostitutes; pressured the government to revise its gender-biased primary school textbooks; and changed government hiring policy for banks and credit unions, training policy for insurance workers, and retirement policy for female employees in socio-educational institutes, and so on. We saw these legal reforms and policy matters as critical steps in generating the conditions under which women could be safe at work, at home and at study.

Incremental change was pursued discreetly and undisturbingly. This was a deliberate strategy. Knowing what we wanted to achieve, we were also aware of our constituency and the cultural context. When legalization of abortion met strong opposition in the Legislature in 1984, Awakening called upon other women's groups to jointly petition for the passage of the Eugenic Protection Bill, and assembled women to observe the legislative proceedings. This was done when martial law was in force, and no women's group had ever petitioned the Legislature before. However, in order to secure support from other women's groups, to win sympathy from the press and the general public, and moreover, to ensure passage of the bill, Awakening had to adapt its petition to the schema of the ruling apparatus (i.e. the paternalistic conception regarding female sexuality and behavior) by arguing that legalizing abortion could serve the purposes of maintaining social stability, controlling population growth as well as saving young, innocent girls who were impregnated as a result of rape or an act of incest. By submitting to the dominant ideology that pregnancy and childbirth were suitable punishment for

women's sexual joy/sins, the petition tried to win sympathy and protection for the poor women who fell victim to male sexual violence. In such cases, we could argue abortion was necessary for both their livelihood and for the maintenance of social order. Other crucial particulars pertaining to abortion, which may be more important from the feminist perspective but might fall into the category of discretionary abortion, such as women's right to make their own choice, were totally left out of the petition. The fact that most abortions were performed upon married women to remedy contraceptive failure was never mentioned.

This strategy of appealing for sympathy and protection from the ruling apparatus to satisfy their sense of supremacy produced the intended results. Without appearing to submit to the prevalent paternalistic ideology, Awakening might have failed to solicit enough signatures from its supporters for being too "extreme," and the legislators would certainly not have passed the bill if doing so would give the impression of yielding to feminist pressure. By accommodating to mainstream ideology, Awakening secured immediate, practical gains for women, especially low-income ones who are more dependent on government-financed public health services. Building all arguments around necessary abortions helped to capture a large share of middle-of-the-road support. Once the law was passed, it could not be "fine-tuned" so as to discriminate in practice between necessary and discretionary abortions. If the law was intended to protect poor, innocent, victimized girls, in practice it applied to women of all age groups and marital status.

They all benefited from the new law in having access to safer, legal abortions, and thus gained more control of their bodies. On the other hand, to make ideological concessions for pragmatic purposes was not without cost. By not making a strong demand on women's rights to their bodies and sexuality in order to avoid direct, ideological confrontation with the ruling apparatus, the movement also lost an opportunity to mobilize and radicalize women en masse. Moreover, it had to accept attached restrictions that required parental or spousal consent for legal abortion. To a large extent, women's bodies and sexuality were still subordinated and supervised. In the short term our strategy may look like capitulation but the situation is that women wishing to obtain abortions can, and unlike the United States, this is not a privilege of the middle class. Our chances for mobilization had to come later.

Similar to the painful gains made on the legalization of abortion, other changes were pursued with careful consideration of social acceptance, as the themes of Awakening's annual activities revealed. They ranged from very conservative ones (such as "developing women's potential," "year of the housewife," dialogue between the sexes") in the early 80s, to attempts at drastic, structural changes

("women and politics", "women and the law") in the late 80s; themes like autonomy for women's bodies and sexuality only emerged in the early 90s. Besides its planned, annual activities, Awakening also responded quickly to the fast changing social environment and women's new social needs. For example, in 1987, Awakening and Rainbow, a rehabilitation program for teenage prostitutes, organized a coalition of 31 women's, human rights, native people's rights, and religious groups to march on the red-light district in Taipei, and to launch an island-wide signature campaign against the inhumane traffic in underage women. By making prostitution a human rights issue, it immediately captured the attention of the media and the public.

As a result, the coalition was transformed into the more permanent Taiwan Women's Rescue Association, and the police set up a special project to regulate the trade. In 1988, a Mr. Taipei Beauty Pageant was staged as a parody of the Miss World Beauty Pageant when the latter was held in Taipei. The absurdity of a beauty contest was instantly noticeable as the gender role was reversed. In the 1989 national election, Awakening drew up a joint women's platform with several other women's groups, organized a women's policy promotion team to speak at campaign rallies, hosted a debate on women's policies between the candidates of the ruling and the opposition party, and invited Ethel Klein from Columbia University to give talks on women's leadership training and election strategies. Before the 1992 election, it publicly evaluated the past performances of sitting legislators, and invited candidates to present their views on women's issues and make commitment to related policies. In 1994, it orchestrated a successful anti-sexual harassment demonstration in Taipei, preceded by public hearings in large cities and lecture tours on campuses to bring out over 1,000 women and men. For the first time, women in Taiwan marched for a gender issue per se, that does not have to be justified by other causes such as human rights, religion and so on. By the mid-nineties our campaigns and strategies have come to resemble those of the Western radical feminists more closely than twenty years ago.

Since the mid 80s, Awakening members worked behind the scene to organize new women's groups for specific purposes. It helped to deliver the Taipei Women's Development Center for the rehabilitation of women surviving a family trauma in 1983; the first Women's Studies conference, and the first Women's Research Program, in 1985; the Rainbow Project in 1986; the New Environment Housewives' League, the Warm Life Association, a mutual support group for divorced women, and the Taipei Women's Rescue Association in 1987; Angles Askew, a loosely organized study group of young women, in 1989; Between Us, the first lesbian group, in 1990; Women's Studies groups on campuses in the early 90's; and the Feminist Studies.

Association in 1994, which, made up mainly of female university teachers and cultural workers, considered itself the academic arm of the feminist movement. Proliferation of these grassroots groups helped to draw together women, some of whom reluctant to be identified with feminists, to work for diverse and common causes.

Awakening also assisted and subsidized women outside Taipei to organize their own Awakening, sisterly but independent groupings of local women. In 1993, it began to issue a quarterly newsletter in English, edited by its foreign volunteers. In 1994, more than thirty Awakening members and friends pooled together their savings to open the first women's bookstore and coffee shop called "fembooks" in Taipei, which also offers regular lecture series.

When these groups were newly formed, their memberships greatly overlapped and the resources seemed to be stretched thin. But over the years, each developed its own characteristics and focused attention, while the Awakening remained the leading group tackling a broad spectrum of issues and continued to open up new fronts of struggle after the late 80s. The turn of events in 1994 signaled a new phase of the movement, which has won greater support and paid more attention to the cultural arena.

Compared with movements elsewhere, the Taiwan experience bears some unique features.

Firstly, on this densely populated small island, most political, economic and cultural activities take place in Taipei, the capital. The concentration of activities gives the movement organizers easier access to the ruling apparatus: the central government, the legislature and the media, as well as more frequent interaction with other social movement groups to speed up feminist reform.

Secondly, the fast economic growth in the 1970s-1980s and rapid political liberalization since the 1980s provided for the acceleration of social and political events. Taking advantage of the political opportunities of this period, movement organizers agitated for changes in favor of women, which would have been considered too radical in a previous era. Nevertheless, Confucianists' emphasis on social harmony and hierarchical order hampered the development of individualism and the notion of equal rights. Colonial rule under Japan in the early twentieth century further fortified patriarchal practice.

Moreover, as Taiwan has been excluded from the international community since the 1970s by the People's Republic of China, the status of women in Taiwan is not monitored by the UN and its agencies, and we do not enjoy the legal protection and

institutional support to which women of most UN member nations are entitled. By firmly upholding feminist goals while remaining flexible in its tactics, Awakening patiently cultivated women's consciousness in every affordable way, and took every political opportunity to act, and waited until a sizable number of women were ready to make demands for themselves. What a small group of women have achieved under adverse cultural and political circumstances in the past decade manifests the strength of women's collective energy and determination. We expect more women will be empowered as feminism becomes more accepted in Taiwan so that more permanent and radical changes will be produced in the next decade.

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