

Back to the Land where Industry Grew

by Tsai Ming-Jiun

Since 2013, Lo Yi-Chun has used banana peels, tobacco, and bagasse as her themes and creative materials. The phase continues to this day and has led to the creation of her most representative works. Its origin can be called an accident. In 2013, feeling lost after a failed proposal during her residency in Japan, she wandered around town and found inspiration after seeing a shelf full of bananas. She flattened, arranged, and dried banana peels collected from a local dessert shop to create “Banana · パナナ · Saging” (2013). One by one, the banana peels turned into brushstrokes, arranged into a scene from a Taiwan market. The work connects the expat to Taiwan through the ubiquitous banana and further explores the banana trade between Taiwan and Japan. Just like Yi-Chun, I am also a banana lover. When I was a student in London, although most banana imports in the UK were from Africa or Central and South America, as long as there were some bananas in the kitchen, it reminded me of having them as a child at my home in Nantou. A large banana orchard brought a sense of security. Therefore, I would like to talk about how, besides trade and economy, the series “Black · Gold · White” can let us explore the origin of crops, the people that grow them and their relationship to the land.

Trade and production

From the richness and diversity presented at “The Taiwan Exposition” (1935), during the Japanese Occupation period, the abundance of Taiwanese products is well established.¹ Different varieties, locations, and soils affect the taste of the same banana species. “Since the beginning of the 20th century, most of Taiwan’s bananas have been exported to Japan. From 1957 to 1984, the proportion of banana exports to Japan was close to 100%. However, since 1973, Taiwan’s banana exports have gradually declined. In addition to the competition from Central and South American and Philippine bananas in the market, Japan’s national income has increased since the 1980s and the demand for fruit

products has diversified.”² As Taiwan’s exports declined, in Nantou County, where bananas were the main fruit product, the yield was reduced to only a quarter of the peak period. In Taichung, citrus fruit gradually replaced the original banana industry.³ Changes in global industrial landscape, consumption habits, and trade competition have a major impact on production. The farmers must look for alternative crops to grow as the change to production and marketing affects the living conditions of the local residents.

In the 1980s, Taiwan’s failures in the export market prompted the government to urge the citizens to consume more local fruits. Not only bananas, but citrus, tomatoes, and mangoes were also a tough sell abroad.⁴ “According to the United Nations statistics the output per unit area of sugarcane was the highest in the world whereas that of tea ranked fifth (1961). Banana, citrus, and pineapple had the highest total output value and sales (1965). Japanese newspapers in 1967 claimed that Taiwan’s canned asparagus output was the second highest in the world and banana exports to Japan exceeded 6 million baskets, a record number.”⁵ Taiwan’s agricultural industry, supported by farmers and industrial workers, was robust at the time. However, the influence of global trade and the free market as well as domestic political challenges in the 1960s and 1970s had an adverse effect. For instance, Wu Zhen-Rui (吳振瑞), once known as the Banana King, was wrongfully imprisoned due to the “banana peeling scandal” (剝蕉案) which devastated the prosperous industry and particularly the Kaohsiung Fruit Market Cooperative. Similarly, various factors during different eras have affected the Taiwanese agricultural exports. Political infighting and policy changes have affected all aspects of agriculture and the former agricultural landscape has all but vanished. Lo Yi-Chun’s “Tropical Collection” (2016) connects these bygone agricultural landscapes from different eras in Taiwanese history through an imagined sea voyage from Japan. Based on 12 archival photos of Taiwan, a collage of banana, sugarcane, pineapple, tobacco



leaves, sika deer, Alishan, Taroko, and scenes from Hakata Port, Japan show Taiwan in the context of global trade and economy. The former views of Taiwan make one imagine the changes between then and now and the transformation through politics, development, and economy.

The economic development led by global trade and free market has caused the disintegration of traditional rural areas. Taiwan officially joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2002 and has had to work together with the influence and power that WTO can exercise over the governments of its signatory countries.⁶ As the radio clips included in the song “Chrysanthemum Night March” (菊花夜行軍) by Jiaogong Band (交工樂隊) go: “Compatriots, cultivate industry with agriculture / developing industry through agriculture / this is the reality of Republic of China/ simply about economic development.” The words are eloquent and optimistic but what really concerns the farmers are the following lines: “Moonlight shines, sorrow is a thousand knots/ WTO, the collapse of tobacco crops and raising pigs/ To borrow two-hundred thousand yuan and plant flowers for five-and-half cents/ Thinking about it in the middle of the night gives me the shivers.” “Chrysanthemum Night March” is set in Meinong where Lo Yi-Chun held her “Golden Jasmine” (2017) exhibition and the inspiration for the name of the band. “Jiaogong” (交工) is a “labour sharing” system to deal with extra labour demands at different times. Meinong, once known as “Tobacco Town”, used tobacco as the winter crop in the middle of rice cultivation. Tobacco made Meinong prosperous for a time, however, the industry gradually declined in the 1980s as a result of the simultaneous impact of policy changes regarding tobacco farming and cigarette imports. After joining the WTO, the Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau was restructured into a new state-owned company. The tobacco harvest of 2016 was the last batch purchased by the government and spelled the end of the Meinong tobacco industry. Its tobacco heritage has been turned into a local cultural site. In the world of capital and free market, agriculture has become part of the tourism industry and instead of relying on the produce grown from the land, people are left with commodities and memories.⁷

Farmers and Producers

Due to the Industrial and urban growth as well as various social transformations, the rural areas have experienced structural changes including an exodus of people. Another song by the Jiaogong Band “Homeland is Far Away” highlights the influx of the so-called “foreign brides” to Taiwan since the 1990s. These women, mostly from Southeast Asia and China, are now called “new residents”. Beginning with “literacy classes”, they have gradually

established themselves in their new country. In 2003, “TransAsia Sisters Association” was formed to address immigration-related policies and to promote immigration and migrant worker issues.⁸ Why is it that when someone moves to another country, they are valued unfairly, face all kinds of discrimination and obstacles, and can only survive on the margins? Lo Yi-Chun’s “Taste of the Ocean” (2018) continued to use banana peels which link the changes to migrant worker life due to the industrial transformation. The work shifts the focus from the industry to the migrant workers who are being employed by a growing number of Taiwanese businesses. In the area of agricultural production, the new generation of workers are the “new residents”, whereas in industrial production, the new generation of workers are migrant labourers. The demographic changes in these areas make us realize how national boundaries have affected labour and living conditions and beg the question whether the rights of the migrants are respected like all other people or are they ignored and suppressed for reasons of nationality, language, culture, or even politics.

Since the age of discovery, although the colonial period has long been over, the exploitation of race and labour, consumerism and capitalism, and their deep-rooted and unceasing links to power, politics, and economy continue to cause problems of life and death among the poorest, for example, the so-called “banana republics”. The global politics and economic manipulation has brought about the turbulent fate of the Caribbean, Central and South American countries. “Voyage to the Homeland” (2015) turns dried, black banana peels into small migration and trade boats that respond to the current immigration and refugee issues caused by politics, economics, famines, and other issues. “Banana Justice – The Drama of Global Trade and Riots” (2014) explores the cause of “Fusarial wilt” (also known as Panama disease) from the perspective of trade, labour, and living conditions of the labourers. This fungus-caused disease, with a long and complicated history, has become a global pandemic in the past decade. Large-scale cultivation of single-variety bananas to justify worldwide exports and excessive use of pesticides to ensure disease resistance have had serious impact on the soil and other damaging effects. Additionally, trade and price competition have suppressed labour wages, worsened the health of the labourers, their quality of life, the quality of the bananas as well as the ecosystem at large.⁹

How strongly and directly can the place that produces the commodities be affected by the consumerism and power of its buyers? Dietary anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz, in his important book “Sweetness and Power” (1988) used Britain, a former colonial power, as an example to discuss the impact of its demand and consumption of “sucrose”

on the labour, land, and environment of the sugar-producing colonies and consequently, the effect on the history of their business, culture, and policies.¹⁰ Unlike banana, which is an important crop and staple food in many countries, sugar can be considered a luxury food, not a necessity. It is a commodity created to satisfy social needs. Since 1650, the image of sugar has changed from that of a rarity and a luxury to something basic and necessary in many countries, including the United Kingdom. With a few exceptions, the increase in sugar consumption after 1650 coincided with the “development” of the Western world. In my opinion, sugar is the second (or the first, if tobacco is not counted) luxury product to undergo such a transformation and symbolizes the productivity and rise of world capitalism (initially concentrated in the Netherlands and United Kingdom).¹¹ Due to the Dutch colonization, Taiwan also has a part in the age of discovery. Lo Yi-Chun’s “Zeelandia” (2017) responds to this history. The first record of sugarcane use in Taiwan appears in the “Daoyi zhilüe” (島夷志略) by Wang Dayuan in the following words: “Boiled seawater becomes salt, fermented sugarcane pulp becomes wine”. Sugarcane at that time had nothing to do with sugar. The production of cane sugar began in the 17th century when the Dutch East India Company gradually switched from deerskin to sugar, which became Taiwan’s main trade commodity. Buffaloes and cattle were used to press sugarcane with pull carts. By mid-to-late 17th century, sugarcane fields covered one-third the area of rice fields before the Dutch East India Company moved the focus of the sugar industry to Java, Indonesia. Later, during the Occupation period, the Japanese government put forward the “Proposal for the Improvement of Taiwan’s Sugar Industry”, established modern sugar refineries, and ushered in a new era of Taiwan’s sugar industry. Lo Yi-Chun participated in the “2019 Madou Sugar Industry Art Triennial” with the work “Bagasse, Molasses, Ethanol. Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Sugarcane Fields So Different, So Appealing?” (2019) which utilizes the historical materials of this period. In addition to the issues that are often discussed in the colonial context such as labour, economy, urban industry, and rural landscape, Lo Yi-Chun explored the link between agriculture and military through Taiwan’s sugar industry and pointed out that the simple economic structure under colonization and trade was not merely about production and consumption. People worked hard to produce cane sugar for a living and towns became prosperous from sugar production but possibly unaware of their political and military roles.

Back to the Land of Growth

With industries that operate well beyond the production and consumption dynamic, Lo Yi-Chun’s recent creations reveal the labour and political issues hidden behind the complex network of colonization, trade and capital, and the

free market. However, it is useful to consider the projects as well as the other less directly related works that precede the current series to appreciate Lo Yi-Chun’s concern for the environment in her works. From “Listening” (聆聽) at the Cheng-Long Wetlands International Environmental Art Project in 2010, “Happy Farm” in Xingang, to “Winter Garden” in the United States in 2012, and “One Night in the Typhoon” at the Siao-Long Cultural Park in Tainan (2015), she is always concerned about the connection between people and the land. Her works allow her audience, through their own backgrounds and perspectives, to understand, connect with, and think about people’s creations that must ultimately return to the land. In the midst of the current climate crisis, perhaps we can find through methods used by Yi-Chun, an object that allows us to reflect deeply. This object may not be from banana, tobacco, or sugarcane, but perhaps alpine cabbage, betel nut, or oysters. Then, from these agricultural products, we can once more understand our relationship with the earth.



¹ Taiwan Old Photo Database, <https://dl.lib.ntu.edu.tw/s/photo>

² Liu Tsui-jung, 2019, *Environmental History of Taiwan*, NTU Publishing Center, p. 158.

³ *Ibid.* 2, pp. 157-158.

⁴ Wu Yin-Ning, 2014 (first ed. 2007), *Where are the rivers and lakes? – Taiwan Agriculture Observation*, Imprint Literary Life Magazine, p. 199.

⁵ *Ibid.* 4, p. 72.

⁶ *Ibid.* 4, p. 450.

⁷ Lin Ji-Xiang, 2016, *The Last Meinong Tobacco Field: The Twilight of Tobacco Farmers and Their Social Culture*, <https://opinion.udn.com/opinion/story/9096/2198857>, accessed 2021/12/21.

⁸ Hsia Hsiao-Chuan, 2018, *How far has it been from “foreign bride” to “new resident”?*, <https://opinion.cw.com.tw/blog/profile/65/article/6575>, accessed 2021/12/21.

⁹ Louise Gray · 2021 · *The ‘pandemic’ destroying the world’s favourite fruit · BBC: Follow the Food* · <https://www.bbc.com/future/bspoke/follow-the-food/the-pandemic-threatening-bananas.html>, accessed 2021/12/25

¹⁰ Sidney W. Mintz, translated by Li You-Ning, 2020, *“Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History”*, Big Name Publishing/Hike Culture, p. 237.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 10, p. 30.