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**Women Made Of Steel: Organizing and Creative Work in the  
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## **Women Made Of Steel: Organizing and Creative Work in the US and Taiwan**

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### **Abstract**

This working paper looks at the connections between creative production by and about migrant worker organizers in Taiwan and my work with the Auntie Sewing Squad in the US. The findings are a result of preliminary research conducted in April 2022 in Taipei and are part of a larger project or projects that are ongoing. The output will be a documentary film or films.

### **Documentary film project: *We Go Down Sewing: The Auntie Sewing Squad***

As a jumping-off point for my ICCS residency, I hoped to conduct research in Taiwan in order to broaden and internationalize my documentary film, *We Go Down Sewing: The Auntie Sewing Squad*, which is now in production. Although I intended to include research findings and interviews from my trip to Taiwan in the film, after speaking with some organizers in Taiwan and learning more about the rich history of labor and community organizing there I am hoping instead to create a standalone film on that topic.

*We Go Down Sewing: The Auntie Sewing Squad* looks at the Auntie Sewing Squad, a collective of mostly Asian American women volunteers who came together on social media with a mission: to protect essential workers and vulnerable communities from COVID-19. This national network of hundreds of Aunties, Uncles, and non-binary volunteers who sewed cloth facemasks in their living rooms in order to counter the US government's failure to provide protective gear for its people. Some of the Aunties or their parents or grandparents fled authoritarian regimes in Taiwan, Vietnam, China, and Burma only to face racism, discrimination, and anti-Asian violence in the United States. Many Aunties were raised by garment workers and other service workers. The film explores the history and connections between the Auntie's activism and past Asian and Asian American labor organizers.

*We Go Down Sewing: The Auntie Sewing Squad* honors the contributions of Asian American and other women of color in the US, centering the voices and stories of the Aunties themselves, who are primarily queer and/or women of color crafters who joined the collective because of its unique radical framework around sewing and mutual aid. Many Aunties have mothers or grandmothers or have themselves worked as seamstresses and the film explores the legacy and influence of Asian American garment workers, including the 1982 New York City Chinatown garment workers' strike in which more than 20,000 Asian women workers successfully went on strike for higher wages and better working conditions. The film ties together past histories of women of color activism and organizing in California and beyond, including: Dolores Huerta and the United Farmworkers; Filipino Mexican American labor organizer Lorraine Agtang, who participated in the 1965 Delano Grape Strike; organizers of the fight to save San Francisco's International Hotel such as Jean Ishibashi and Violeta Marasigan; and activists in the 1968-69 San Francisco State College Third World Strike including Laureen Chew, Sharon Jones, and Carmen Carrillo.

The Auntie Sewing Squad are a group of seemingly implausible activists who rose to the challenge of working with vulnerable communities in their battle against the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. When people imagine "activists" they rarely envision middle-aged Asian women in khakis with seam rippers—the Aunties are an example of how the most unlikely of people can do the most revolutionary of work. While the US media and the federal government encouraged residents to hunker down, hoard toilet paper, and look out for themselves first, the Aunties instead reached out with a radical form of mutual aid that brought respite to those that the government had overlooked. Working together with BIPOC communities across the country, the Aunties helped those in need to protect themselves and others. The Aunties began as a group that donated handmade facemasks to those unable to access PPE but the group quickly expanded its operations. By mid-2020, just a few months after its inception, the Squad was driving cargo vans full of sewing machines, bolts of fabric, 3-D printers for manufacturing face shields, bar soap, laundry soap, hand sanitizer, and other items requested by their partners in Navajo Nation which aided tribal members in working toward self-sufficiency in their fight to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Similarly, in June 2020, during the massive demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd, the Aunties worked with the Movement for Black Lives to send facemasks to protestors in the streets. The Aunties also have partnered with First Nations, farmworkers, migrants seeking asylum, incarcerated communities, and poor communities of color through a network of community organizations including CASA, Alma Backyard Farms, South Texas Human Rights Center, and Lao Family Community Development. What many of these communities have in common is that they have historically borne the brunt of structural racism and violence in the US. *We Go Down Sewing: The Auntie Sewing Squad* amplifies the voices and stories of the Aunties, who are primarily queer and/or women of color who joined the Squad because of its unique radical framework around sewing and mutual aid.

Creative work that has emerged from the Auntie Sewing Squad include the anthology *The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making, Radical Care, and Racial Justice* (UC Press, 2020, eds. Mai-Linh K. Hong, Chrissy Yee Lau and Preeti Sharma) and Kristina Wong's successful 2021 off-Broadway one-person show, *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord*. The documentary film will be another creative project exploring the activism and organizing of the women-led Auntie Sewing Squad.

### **April 2022 Taiwan research trip**

During my April 2022 ICCS residency I sought to connect the creative work engendered by the Auntie Sewing Squad and women organizers in Taiwan.

While in Taipei I met with organizers from TransAsia Sisters Association Taiwan (TASAT, aka Nanyang Sisterhood) and the Taiwan International Workers Association (TIWA). On my blog [beyondasiaphilia.com](http://beyondasiaphilia.com) I've written extensively about confluences of Asian American arts and activism. In 2009 I wrote about the Asian Pacific Labor Alliance (APALA) convention and how organizers integrated creative arts such as music, film, and poetry into their programming acknowledging the legacy of protest songs in the labor movement. In 2011 I wrote about writer and spoken word artist Bao Phi and how he integrates his creative work and political activism. In 2014 I reviewed Jeff Chang's book *Who We Be*, in which Chang explores the intersections of art, commerce, and activism.

Because of my prior interest in art and activism I was very pleased to find that the labor and migrant workers' organizations that I talked to in Taiwan have a history of creative practice in their organizing.

Taiwan continues to be a nation in flux, as evidenced by its changing demographics and its attempts to acknowledge residents from many diverse backgrounds and national origins. In 2016 President Tsai Ing-Wen's administration apologized to Taiwan's Indigenous peoples in an attempt

to begin recognizing the sufferings that settler colonialism has wrought on those communities but Indigenous people are still underrepresented in Taiwan's legislature. Taiwan is also seeking to improve its relationship with the hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers who travel from overseas to live and work in Taiwan.

### **Taiwan International Workers Association (TIWA)**

The Taiwan International Workers Association (TIWA) is a national organization that serves migrant workers across Taiwan.

According to the TIWA website,

Recognizing that the struggles of different worker groups are interrelated, a group of labor organizers with long experience in the Taiwan labor movement established the Taiwan International Workers Association (TIWA) in October 1999. TIWA is the first NGO in Taiwan dedicated to serving migrant workers.

TIWA has produced several documentaries, has a youtube channel, and has published many books that give voice to migrant workers in Taiwan. As noted on their website, "In order to allow Taiwanese society to know the complete people/migrant workers, to allow migrant workers to speak for themselves, and to speak out for migrant workers, we also train and create migrant workers through various possible cultural activities when we have spare capacity in our daily work."<sup>1</sup>

TIWA's 2010 documentary *Lesbian Factory* (dir. Susan Chen) looks at organizing amongst migrant workers in Taiwan. The documentary's Chinese title, T 婆工廠, is *T-Wife Factory*. T-Wife is a slang term that roughly translates as Tomboy-Wifey, or butch-femme, and the film focuses on several same-sex female couples living and working together in a Taiwan factory who are organizing for better working conditions. The film intersperses images of rallies and organizing meetings with several couples from the factory. All of the women are interviewed in pairs with their partners and in addition to their organizing efforts they also discuss how they met and began their respective relationships, how they reconcile being queer with their religious beliefs, and their strategies for intimacy without disturbing their other roommates in their dorm rooms.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://tiwa.org.tw/organization/introduction/>

The stories of the couples frame the struggles of the workers, bringing a humanistic structure to a labor issue. The film's theme of workers rights is presented through the lens of the womens' relationships, with the central tension being whether or not each couple will be able to stay together when they change employers and move to different factories. The precarity of their relationships echoes the precarity of their employment and living conditions.

In this way the film demonstrates that the personal is the political. As noted by Yam, one of the workers who faces the possibility that her uncertain status as a migrant worker may lead to her being separated from her partner, "That's why we have the very strong courage to fight, because we are thinking that we are fighting not for us but for the others"<sup>2</sup>

### **TransAsia Sisters Association Taiwan (TASAT, aka Nanyang Sisterhood)**

Founded in 2003, TASAT is Taiwan's oldest grassroots immigrant rights group and focuses on issues of Taiwan's marriage migrants, or women who have immigrated to Taiwan to marry into Taiwanese families. The organization's nickname, Nanyang Sisterhood, comes from 南洋 (nán yáng), the Chinese word for Southeast Asia, since the group serves mainly women immigrants from that region. Like TIWA, TASAT incorporates creative work into its organizing including theater pieces, books, short stories, poems, and videos. TASAT also works with legislation and policy in Taiwan that affect marriage migrants..

TASAT's founder Hsiao-Chuan Hsia says that the core value of the association is the philosophy of "empowerment" proposed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. She links TASAT's organizing with public policy, noting, "As the results of our continuous campaigns through Alliance for Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants (AHRLIM), we have successfully changed several immigration laws. The Amendments of Immigration Act was passed in 2007. Of course, not all our demands were met but what's more important is that marriage migrant women realized they could actually make an impact, which inspired them to be more active in the movement."<sup>3</sup>

Hsia also describes how TASAT uses creative work to increase awareness of the organization's work.

Another artistic form of public education is documentary film. TASAT produced a documentary film, titled *Let's Not Be Afraid!*, collectively created by marriage

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<sup>2</sup> *Lesbian Factory*, 2010, dir. Susan Chen

<sup>3</sup> *TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT)* Hsiao-Chuan Hsia, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Volume 22, Number 1, February 2019, pp. 103-112

migrants. This film is about how they have become activists. The idea of the film originated from the collective assessments after we were successful in changing some laws in 2008 and we found that many people thought that these laws were changed by the government or by the Taiwanese activists. TASAT therefore decided to produce a documentary film in which these marriage migrant women tell the audience, “You know, we are just like you, very afraid, very shy in the beginning, but our stories show you how we became activists.”<sup>4</sup>

TASAT has also produced a CD of stories and music, *Drifting No More*, (2017), which includes songs sung by TASAT members. With lyrics in Thai, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Indonesian, and Khmer, the songs reflect the many different countries of origin of TASAT members as well as their intersectional identities as migrants, women, and ethnic minorities in Taiwan. Their experiences mirror those of some of the members of the Auntie Sewing Squad and their families, as immigrants seeking a better life in a foreign country.

*Departure*, the first track on the CD, describes the anxiety of an immigrant leaving her home country:

I left the hometown I loved  
Feeling empty and unreal  
I have nowhere to go  
Feeling panicked, lonely, and helpless  
Bursts of pressure cause me suffocating pain

Bilingual wordplay further expands the intersectional experience of the migrant women. As noted in the CD’s liner notes,

The first word in this poem, “chakchenh,” means departure in Khmer, and yet it sounds like “taking root” in Mandarin Chinese. The linguistic coincidence is like a prophecy illustrating the process by which marriage migrants depart from their hometowns and take root in Taiwan.

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<sup>4</sup>ibid

Several of the songs on the CD describe experiences of raising children as well as friendships among TASAT members and other marriage migrants, with a focus on the particular problems faced by marriage migrants in Taiwan. The notes to *Good Morning, Mama*, observe, “I got a notification from the authorities. I raised my child alone and hadn’t gotten my identification card. I was informed that I had to leave Taiwan after my child reaches the age of 20, unless I can present a financial certificate showing I had five million NT dollars in savings or properties. The icy cold regulations stung my eyes painfully with each word.”

The lyrics reflect the cultural struggles of the migrant women as they cope with life in their adopted country.

The sister from next door said  
That to be happy is to get married  
But she didn’t tell me that in this country  
People would ask what presents my husband gave me  
My friend in college told me  
That children are my hope for the future  
But she didn’t tell me that on this island  
A piece of identification paper is my only hope to be able to meet my children

However, two of the tracks emphasize the women’s desire to work toward self-determination. *Fight* takes found audio from demonstrations as TASAT members chant slogans. The lyrics, adapted from interviews with TASAT members, defiantly state,

I was not born with bravery  
Sisters, let’s fight for equality  
I will not be defeated by fear  
I’m a woman made of steel

*Sisters’ Dreams* continues in this vein:

It’s your tears, which increase our wisdom  
It’s your tenacity, which creates miracles  
It’s your footsteps, which guide us forth

It's your dreams, which create our future

In this way TASAT encourages its members to work toward self-articulation and self-determination.

Both TIWA and TASAT have published books that include first-person experiences of their members. These include TASAT's book *Don't Call Me "Foreign Bride"* (2005) and TIWA's *Our Stories: Migration and Labor in Taiwan* (Ku Yu-ling, 2008/11). Both books emphasize the use of creative work to explore social issues, personalizing the struggles of migrant workers and presenting a nuanced, realistic exploration of the migrant experience. Reporter Wang Wan-chia observes, "The book is rich with TASAT's spirit, with none of the tragic stereotypes so common in the mainstream media."<sup>5</sup>

Like *Drifting No More*, *Our Stories: Migration and Labor in Taiwan* similarly presents a more well-rounded vision of migrant life in Taiwan. As noted on TIWA's website,

Yu-ling's insightful and sensitive approach to the subject does not stigmatise the migrant workers as the 'other' or as the 'victims'. Neither does she project them as larger than life – she simply tells their life stories as they are; with humour and affection. This book is part of the social history of Taiwan, as well as of Asia. It documents not just the memories of the individuals; it also records the collective memory of our modern times.<sup>6</sup>

My preliminary research was cut short when I contracted COVID-19 in late April 2022, which prevented following up on my initial contacts. But based on my initial research these organizations demonstrate the vibrant organizing and activism in Taiwan among migrant workers and other groups. Like the work that the Auntie Sewing Squad has done in the US, these organizers are working to insure justice and equity for underrepresented populations in Taiwan. I'm hoping to continue on with my research in upcoming trips to Taiwan.

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.taiwan-panorama.com/en/Articles/Details?Guid=53874ca0-ea3d-4ce1-bb9c-55320273da7b&CatId=7&postname=Giving%20a%20Voice%20to%20Immigrant%20Women--TransAsia%20Sisters%20Association,%20Taiwan>

<sup>6</sup> <https://tiwa.org.tw/organization/introduction/>