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Constructing and practicing feminist pedagogy in Taiwan using a field study of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb

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Drawing on theories of space, gender, and participatory learning, central concepts in feminist pedagogy, the author designed a university-level general-education course that took the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb in southern Taiwan as the focus of a field study and class discussion. This local gendered site, which commemorates a 1973 ferry accident that killed 25 unmarried young women working in Kaohsiung, raises issues about patriarchy in Taiwan, gender inequities in traditional Han customs, and women’s labor. The course relied on guided class discussions and focus-group discussions, culminating in a visit to the site. Face to face with the researched, the author not only built an inclusive and supportive relationship with students in the classroom, but also put her researcher’s reflexivity into teaching practice. Research results indicate that the freedom of the class discussion format succeeded in breaking down the logic of binary opposition that accompanies the traditional gender duality of male/female. Avoiding a top-down teaching style also minimized students’ resistance to perspectives emphasizing gender equality.

Keywords: focus groups; feminist pedagogy; general education; gender and space; Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb

Introduction

The Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb (Figure 1) in southern Taiwan commemorates a shipwreck nearly 40 years ago. In the early morning on 2 September 1973, a private ferry with a capacity of only 13 people, seriously overloaded with more than 70 passengers and their motorcycles and bicycles, attempted to cross Kaohsiung Harbor from the Chong Chou area in Cijin to the Cianjhen Export Processing Centre. The boat was lost, resulting in 46 injuries and 25 deaths. All of the dead were unmarried girls living in Cijin, a poor, rural fishing village.

Most of the young girls lost in the wreck worked in the Cianjhen Export Processing Centre, although they were underage: only 13 or 14 years old, in many cases. To remember the deaths of these unmarried girls, the Kaohsiung government invited local leaders to negotiate with the families of victims to set up a collective graveyard.

At the time of the accident, Taiwanese society maintained traditional gender relations, especially in rural areas like Cijin. Marriage as a social institution is particularly significant for women, for it serves as both a symbol of and gateway to their ultimate (although subordinate) position in the Chinese kinship system (Wolf 1972; Lee 2004, 2009). If a woman dies before marriage, she can become a ghost if survivors fail to pray properly for her. Spirit marriage, where a female ghost marries a living man, has been a

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strategy adopted by some families of such women to ensure that the unmarried woman is
cared for in her eternal life (Harrell 1974, 1986). The graveyard (Figure 2) has become a
locally feared place, since all 25 passengers who died were unmarried young women, and
a taboo in Chinese culture shuns unmarried female ghosts.

Figure 1. Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb.

Figure 2. The cemetery site, with tombs and monuments.
Traditional Chinese culture treats daughters as belonging to their eventual husband’s family. Being single is not an acceptable status for women. A woman must marry someone in order to become a whole person. If a woman dies before marriage, it causes trouble for her natal family, in part because the elderly cannot pray for the younger generation, so the death must be treated as not filial. The families of these 25 young girls consequently faced two challenges: finding an acceptable burial place and resolving an embarrassing family situation. A collective tomb supplied by the local government offered a reasonable solution that saved face on both counts. Nevertheless, the question remained: why were all of the dead unmarried young girls? The accident became a kind of puzzle, which gave rise to local folklore essentially suggesting that the young girls wanted to find men to marry in hell – and if they did not succeed, they would retaliate by hurting living people and even their own families.

In Taiwan, the memorial tablet of an unmarried woman is not supposed to be placed in the ancestral temple – and that is why there are gu niung (maiden) temples, explicitly gendered places like the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb (Shih 2007). Traditionally, people would avoid these temples, as graveyards are regarded as places that are yin, or gloomy. Not surprisingly, after the construction of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb, local people’s word of mouth reinforced a sense of gloominess and mystery around the area. Locals and tourists alike now show a sense of fear when passing through the area. While originally intended as a commemoration of the sacrifices of the young women, highlighting the issue of transportation security, the site gradually became a discredit, even creating a sense of fear in the public.

Young women’s labor and their contribution to Taiwanese economic development during the 1970s were generally ignored at the time. Even their families thought of these young women primarily as obedient daughters and victims of an unlucky personal accident. This perspective masks the essential role of female workers around the world: indeed, Taiwanese state policies exploited cheap local labor – often by underage girls and young women – as a quicker route to economic prosperity (Lee 2008). As Doreen Massey argues in her 1994 book *Space, Place, and Gender*, British industry actively used geographical differences in gender relations in order to remain competitive. For reasons of economic development, the Taiwanese government similarly tolerated foreign industries hiring unmarried young girls to work on labor-intensive assembly lines.

The Labor Standards Law that might have protected these underage girls was not passed until 1984, nearly a decade after the accident. In 1973, illegal child labor was not yet viewed as a human rights issue in Taiwan. Many poor families sent young daughters to work in factories to support the family livelihood and contribute to sons’ education expenses. These 25 girls and many like them entered the labor market – sacrificing their own educational chances – as part of a broad economic strategy that also served to maintain the patriarchal family and society. Both the family and the state supported this gendered division of labor in poor families. Justice and equality for girls and women were largely absent in rural Kaohsiung and all of Taiwanese society in 1973, and the national government facilitated this ideology of male privilege.

At the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb, gender inequality was memorialized, along with the group of young women lost in the ferry accident. Monk (1992) shows nearly every monument to be found in the public landscape codifies and reinforces gendered norms. Little (2002) documents a similar situation in the United Kingdom, arguing that British notions of a rural idyll support gender inequality and promote limitations for women. Hughes (1997a, 1997b) has also shown that a traditional culture of ‘domestic rural womanhood’ is expected and perpetuated in English communities. The case of the
Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb reveals a remarkably similar gender context at work in Taiwan in 1973.

This research aims to apply feminist pedagogy as a means of engaging students in critical social thinking and to promote critical understanding of gender inequities in a traditional patriarchal society. I am myself an academic feminist and nonacademic activist in the Taiwanese women’s movement. I was part of a group of feminists that successfully pushed the Kaohsiung city government to rename and renovate the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb site. This research has its place in my own personal challenges teaching feminism in Taiwan. I have taught gender courses at the college level for more than 20 years, but teaching feminism remains even harder than working in the women’s movement in Taiwan. I firmly believe that the personal is political, so I continue trying to find better examples grounded in Taiwanese society as texts to persuade my students that gender inequality does exist all around them. After researching this 1973 incident, I have developed the case of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb into a curriculum that ties together local heritage and history and gender practices, which I use to guide general-education university students to examine and evaluate gender issues through group discussions, field study, and participatory learning. Through a critical, feminist pedagogy, students examine gender roles and traditional culture in the current social structure, which helps achieve the research objective of highlighting gender equality.

I admit I cannot claim that this course single-handedly prompted students to change their gender ideology, but my research does document some important shifts in attitudes. This type of course design gives students a chance to speak out about their own perspectives on gender, using the starting point of a local historical event. When they saw and knew the true story, students came to realize that people’s unique gender experiences are influenced by individual life experiences and contextualized by different environments across time. Indeed, incorporating this gendered place into the course helped to frame both women’s labor and essentialized notions of women and feminity in a local and global historical context.

Feminist pedagogy: participatory learning in action

Feminist research in geography has been quite limited in East Asia, including Taiwan (Chiang and Liu 2011). Taiwan’s program of gender equality education, however, has emerged over the past 20 years through interactions among the state, educational institutions, and academic and nonacademic feminist reformers (Lee 2011). Due to limited resources, few gender-related graduate programs, and no gender studies departments at the university level, gender and feminism are primarily taught in college general-education courses. Self-described feminist professors are still in the minority in Taiwan. The classes are large: typically more then 80 students, and sometimes as many as 200. These large lecture courses do not have group discussion, and few have teaching assistants (TAs) in the classroom. The interaction between students and professors is formal and circumscribed. Student performance is typically assessed by midterm and final written exams. Teachers must locate their own grants – which are very competitive – if they want funding for TAs or course field trips. I am fortunate to have received several grants for my Gender and Society courses over the past few years. The awards allowed me to hire TAs and schedule field trips – both indispensable to my effort to teach gender from a feminist perspective in Taiwan.

Feminist pedagogy tends to focus on socially contextualized knowledge claims, participatory learning, and valuing personal knowledge (Newbery 2009, 247). Feminist instructors must realize that it is unproductive to disguise personal views.
Inevitable differences between students and instructors cannot be denied or avoided. Feminism challenges oppression, advocates equality, and pursues honesty, so students’ individual views and interests should be treated seriously and respected when opinions in class are divided (Gardner, Dean and McKaig 1989). In the feminist classroom, students who are skeptical and resist the perspective of the instructor must be treated as legitimate members of the learning community, while the instructor manages the situation during the teaching process (Titus 2000). Students whose voices are marginalized in class – especially male students or female students who sympathize with the men – often describe oppression and hurt in the course evaluation. Research also suggests that, apart from denying gender suppression and inequality, students typically resist analysis by social structure. When the discourse of feminism and gender suppression fails to convince them, students may hold a skeptical attitude toward the instructor (Pitt 1997, 129).

With these challenges of feminist teaching in mind, I chose a local historical event and site – the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb – as core teaching material, intended to emphasize the relationship between social context and the construction of knowledge. I have been responsible since 2005 for the Gender and Society general-education course at National Sun Yat-sen University in Kaohsiung. We meet once weekly for 2 h during an 18-week semester. The class has 80 undergraduate students – one-third females and two-thirds males – with most students majoring in the natural sciences. I am the only instructor, teaching with the help of four TAs, each responsible for 20 students. The TAs each lead three small discussion groups of 6–7 students. ‘Gender and Customs’ is one of three core topics of the course, so the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb serves as teaching material for 6 weeks, or about one-third of the course. The first section of the course, ‘Sociology of Gender’, introduces some basic sociological concepts and theories of gender studies. The final part of the course is men’s studies and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ).

In one common model of feminist pedagogy, participatory learning, instructors guide students into the exploration of gender issues through group discussion, focus groups, and field study. With interactive teaching, action research is an appropriate and effective pedagogical approach. In action research, students (who chose to register for the course) become ‘actors’, while instructors guide students to define issues and provide different angles and directions for analyzing existing problems through cooperative, participatory learning. The recently designed Gender and Society course, featuring a unit on the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb, relies on these learning models and pedagogical techniques. By revealing the limitations facing unmarried young women in Taiwan’s traditional culture, the events surrounding the death of the 25 ‘ladies’ effectively highlight how ideology and the hegemony of patriarchy have influenced the value and treatment of women in Taiwan. The remainder of this article will describe the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb teaching module, the field study experience, and students’ reactions – both positive and resistant – to the course’s feminist pedagogy.

Methodology

After researching this 1973 incident and participating in feminist activism to demand renovation of the tomb site, I have developed the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb into a case study curriculum that ties together local heritage and history and gender practices, which I use to guide general-education university students to examine and evaluate gender issues through group discussions, field study, and participatory learning. I decided to use this event in my Gender and Society course when it struck me that the accident happened in my college’s neighborhood. The tomb is a sightseeing attraction visited by many new college
students when they move to the city – yet much of what students think they know about
the Twenty-Five Ladies is wrong. Interestingly, most students entering my class say they
believe that the tomb site commemorates women who died in the war or were sexually
assaulted by soldiers and then committed suicide. They are genuinely surprised to find out
about the ferry wreck and its aftermath.

Through a critical, feminist pedagogy, students enrolled in my course examine gender
roles and traditional culture in the current social structure, which helps achieve the
research objective of highlighting gender equality. During the first class session, I stated
strongly that students should not hesitate to add their own perspectives during class,
especially if they do not like the points I supply. I also encouraged students not to take it
personally if another student’s opinions differ. We even devoted some class time to having
students practice speaking up to oppose my opinions – even if they actually agree with
me. During the semester, the students gradually come to understand that Gender and
Society is a course about thinking critically from different perspectives, not merely
absorbing established knowledge from the instructor. Throughout the course, students
were invited to ‘go out’ of the classroom to observe the real social space of the 1973 events
and encouraged to ‘speak out’ and share their opinions and feelings.

‘Going out’: action plays a key role
Apart from experiences and memories accumulated by me and my colleagues since 2005,
the core research sources are drawn from the Gender and Society course as taught in the
second semester of 2006. During that semester, there were 80 students and 4 TAs, with 50
males and 28 females. In Taiwan, a gender-related course would usually be dominated by
female students, but in this case, male students outnumbered female, since all natural
science students were required to take a certain number of social studies credits.

To coordinate with a festive tradition in Taiwan, the class visited the Twenty-Five
Ladies Tomb during Tomb-Weeping Festival (Qing Ming Jie), which is held on 5 April.
The festival is a time for the whole family to visit the graves of the husband’s ancestors to
burn incense and perform a ritual offering and tidy the gravesites. Before the field trip,
students were asked to fill in questionnaires which gave me a better picture of their
understanding of the 1973 shipwreck and events that followed. Most students had already
developed in different social contexts an impression of or thoughts about the shipwreck
and memorial. During class discussions, I and the TAs followed up by disclosing the real
historical contexts and background.

Guided by me and my four TAs, students carried out the field study to explore and
study the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb in Cijin. Further class discussion followed the field
study, led by the TAs, who met me to discuss teaching materials before each class. The
TAs also received 2 h of training in techniques for facilitating group discussion, so they
were well equipped to initiate and guide the discussion and provide support to the students.

‘Speaking out’: I speak, therefore I am
The TAs, who had weekly firsthand contact with students during the small-group
discussions they facilitated, were central to this research effort. Assistants made audio
recordings of the group discussions, when students met after the field study to analyze their
experiences and reactions. The TAs also selected a smaller subset of students (a total of 10)
to participate in a focus-group discussion with me. Aiming at getting a deeper understanding
of the issue, the focus group served to collect diverse opinions and perspectives, which are
particularly beneficial to exploring issues such as ‘attitude’ and ‘cognition’. When there are different perspectives, focus groups also enhance the creativity of data collection.

The field trip to the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb is the core of the teaching strategy for achieving the course’s objective. As a matter of fact, the different perspectives students gained from both discussion in class and the focus group confirmed that teaching strategies and course design are crucial to highlighting the differences and diversity of gender perspectives. After the field trip, many students shared the same opinion. One said, ‘Our university campus is so close to this grave site, but most of us did not know the real story of those 25 girls. I feel ashamed, and I think our society treated them unfairly before’ (YA-7). It is worth noting, as well, that revising and evaluating the course are other important goals for this research.

Sources of data

Small-scale, qualitative/interactive approaches and use of diverse techniques to teach about gender are critical to my research. Data collected from this research were drawn from the following sources: (1) students’ written feedback. Besides the questionnaires, students recorded their thoughts on the course’s online discussion board; (2) feedback and observations recorded after group discussions by the TAs, who helped lead the weekly discussions; and (3) focus-group recordings.

I use the following system for referencing the students’ remarks. The first letter represents the two male (S, Y) and two female (J, W) TAs. The second letter (A, B, or C) indicates each TA’s three groups, with a numeral denoting various students in the group. For example, ‘JC-3’ means student 3 in discussion group C, led by TA J. The letter ‘Z’ indicates the focus-group discussion. When TAs are quoted, they are indicated by a single letter (J, S, W, or Y). I decided to keep the students anonymous, instead of citing them by name, because Chinese names are difficult to translate into English and the pronunciation of different names can be confusingly similar. It also protects the students’ anonymity.

Results

From the students’ accounts, there emerged four main themes, named in the headings that follow. The group discussions and data collected from the students showed that the field trip to the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb in Cijin clarified the historical event after the visit, students had a better and deeper understanding of the events surrounding the ferry accident. Setting aside the location and purpose of the graveyard for the 25 girls, students started asking fundamental questions about the tradition of offering sacrifices especially to unmarried women. Students shared their personal experiences – what they had seen or heard – and evaluated their perspectives on gender issues through the learning process, which definitely helped them to see the diversity and complexity of the issues before us.

An eerie collective memory

Many students mentioned occult and mysterious stories that they had heard. One student said:

Before the field trip, I had heard so many stories about the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb. For example, if a young man rides a motor bike through the graveyard at midnight, the bike would stall suddenly without a reason. Somebody also said that there are always women in white clothes walking around that area. I don’t really believe it, but I’ve never thought about visiting it [the tomb] (YA-6).
Another student mentioned a similar ghost story about the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb:

There are rumors that if you walk pass it, you’d better walk quickly. There are also similar ghost stories about it in the BBS [the course website’s bulletin board system], and under such an atmosphere, I really have an obstacle to exploring it further (YB-3).

Threats to men – and their fear – are a common theme:

Before the field trip, my impression of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb was that when a man passes through on a bike without a passenger, he’ll end up taking a woman ghost back home. I don’t even know anything about the shipyard in Chong Chou (JA-7).

Another student remarked, ‘I’ve been to Cijin several times, but I never stay around the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb for long. Not only men have a sense of fear; women do, too! To Chinese, there’s a gloominess around the place where women are buried’ (SA-4). Terror, gloominess, and fear are the adjectives students typically invoke to describe the memorial. For instance, ‘When I passed through the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb in the past, I wondered why it’s a graveyard only for girls. It looks a bit odd, with the surrounding environment and coastline. I’ve heard some ghost stories about it, and I am really terrified and feel a sense of gloominess’ (SB-6).

**Gender, but not only gender**

Many students clearly demonstrated more sensitivity to gender and equality issues after visiting the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb and completing the class, which highlighted traditional customs and patriarchy. Although different voices and opinions emerged in class discussions, students were valued as equals of the instructor and TAs and encouraged to express and share their experiences, which enriched the class with diversity. Several male students commented that women’s inferior status was a very serious problem in the past, but is getting better nowadays. Female students responded that they think men and women are still unequal. More students – primarily young women – elaborated on the inferior status of women. One of the students said, ‘Women are the subordinates of men, no matter their social or cultural role. Their status is lower under patriarchal society’ (YA-2). In their personal experiences, students had seen women receive less education than men. A student observed:

The underlying implication of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb is sexual discrimination, which means men are always more valued than women. For example, girls from a poor family always take up the family housework, while the boys are supposed to go to school. There’s a Chinese saying, ‘It’s a virtue for women to be uneducated’ (YA-7).

Some students criticized the unequal social structure revealed by the memorial: ‘The victims had a hard life before, and even after they died, they still couldn’t go back home. I think this is totally unfair to women in the past’ (JB-6). They gradually started challenging the discourse of patriarchy:

Whether it’s their death or their identity as a young village girl living in Chong Chou or a factory worker at the Processing Centre, they are not recognized or respected by society. Even after their death, traditional customs excluded them from burial in the family ancestral hall. To identify a woman’s contribution by her marital status again shows the dark side of patriarchy (YB-1).

Some students pointed out that it is not fair for women to have to ‘marry into’ and become part of the husband’s family under traditional gender culture:

According to traditional culture, men are the nucleus of the pedigree chart. If a girl hasn’t married, she won’t be a member in the family ancestral hall. It seems that in the past, the status and contribution of a woman in a family was only based on reproduction. Though this group
of young girls didn’t contribute in this sense, they gave up their learning opportunities and sacrificed themselves at such a young age to support their family. It is so unfair that they only became mysterious legends, when they had contributed a lot! (JA-7).

Another added:

Women must get married, which means they have a home they belong to. Most of the women in the past would get married and take up the role of reproduction. Unmarried women who pass away will become ‘lonely ghosts’ and they cannot even go back to their original family, but must be in a gu niung temple. Their rights are definitely not respected! (SA-5).

Students also challenged the discipline of women’s bodies by the patriarchal culture. One student complained:

The name ‘Ladies Tomb’ (there’s a binary concept distinguishing between ‘ladies’ and working-class women) is just ridiculous. But more absurd is society’s wish or urge to insist on the status of ‘lady’, which is actually a discipline to women, even after they have died. The stories about the ladies (the ghosts) are actually lust from men’s imagination. This is the men’s desire, not theirs (SA-1).

Some students actively contested traditional cultural values:

Why are there no (or very few) stories about male ghosts? It seems that most of the ghost stories are about female ghosts. Perhaps it is an extension of men’s manipulation of women, even after death, ‘You have to get married as soon as possible, or you will die as lonely ghosts, hurting others’. These kinds of stories are actually brainwashing women and are a second harm to those women who died unmarried (WA-1).

Another student, who is more optimistic, said that unequal gender roles may change as time goes by: ‘I think ... traditional customs are deep-rooted in the older generation’s mind, while there may be less and less in the new generation, who will gradually leave them behind’ (Z-1).

Some students voiced their opinions from a contrary perspective, intending to prompt further a conversation about feminism. In class and during group discussions, several students called into question gender roles as an explanation for social inequities. Their willingness to express opinions that opposed the teachers’ interpretations shows that the classroom atmosphere provided a safe and comfortable platform – a breakthrough in the top-down approach to education.

One of these students remarked, ‘Gender roles have their good points and shortcomings ... For example, in terms of education, if a woman works hard, she could rise to a high position. So, there’s no need to claim anything’ (WA-3). Another student asked, ‘Isn’t it a kind of inequality to deliberately magnify the role of women?’ (JB-4), and a third struck a more moderate position: ‘I don’t think it’s necessary to overemphasize gender issues when analyzing an incident, since it’s just a passage of history. People should be respected regardless of their gender’ (SA-5).

As these remarks suggest, on the one hand the Gender and Society course succeeded in introducing gender as a key category for analysis. On the other hand, the TAs and I were able to take the opportunity provided by these comments to explain that gender is not the only perspective for analyzing cultural issues. By not only recognizing the different opinions and doubts of students, but also responding to observations on gender issues such as changing attitudes toward ‘men being superior, and female inferior’, instructors were able to lead a smoother class with diversity of opinion and minimal resistance.
**Conserving cultural traditions**

Some students viewed the memorial’s name from the perspective of conserving cultural tradition. They pointed out that an accurate introduction to the history of the place is needed, whatever the name, and a name that reflects the memorial’s history and culture is easier to accept. One student commented:

> It is unnecessary to change the name ‘Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb’, as it’s been there for many years, which everyone knows. People may forget it if it is renamed. A thorough introduction about the place and incident is needed, though. People get upset, not because of the death of the unmarried ladies, but because of the reason they had the accident (WA-7).

Another student supported a name change for the memorial, but preferred a name that emphasizes the site’s history: ‘Between “Cultural Museum of the Shipwreck and History of Cijin” and “Women’s Laborers’ Memorial Park”, I think the former is less likely to arouse controversy’ (SA-4).

The discussion among students mainly focused on the neglect of women under traditional customs. Some students pointed out that, in a patriarchy, the fact that women become subordinate to men and their cultural and social roles are oppressed is inevitable. Students’ opinions and evaluations shifted tremendously before and after the discussion of these issues, which reflects their increased awareness of gender inequity and digestion of the teaching materials.

**Labor rights**

Some students pointed out that the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb relates to occupational safety and labor rights, as much as gender. A student complained, ‘This is actually just a shipwreck, but now women are emphasized, due to traditional customs. Honestly, I do not like it’ (WB-4). Drawing attention to labor safety, rather than gender inequality, a student remarked:

> The name ‘Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb’ doesn’t highlight the chief issue of the incident. I think the emphasis should be laid on occupational safety, instead of the ‘ladies’. With such a tragedy, the contribution of labor – including female labor – as well as workers’ welfare, should be reevaluated (YB-6).

A few students even did some research themselves and discovered that a system of attendance awards at the Export Processing Centre was a contributing factor in the death of the girls. A student explained:

> I just surfed the internet and discovered that, beyond the overload of the boat, an attendance award system led to the tragedy. Due to this system, which was very popular at the time in the Export Processing Centre, all the passengers on the boat were rushing to the exit, which caused an imbalance resulting in the shipwreck. It is actually the attendance system that took away the lives of the people! Gender inequality is less relevant to this explanation (Z-2).

Some students also analyzed the incident from the perspective of child labor: ‘I think that not only the fact that the victims in the shipwreck were girls should be emphasized. The issue of child labor deserves evaluation, as well’ (JB-4). Another student blamed state policy:

> It was a serious tragedy, in which a number of women lost their lives. Yet the government just glossed over it and buried them together and set up some tombs. They didn’t do any evaluation for improvement in the future or offer any compensation (SB-3).

Those who analyzed the incident from the perspective of labor issues were mainly male students. One mentioned that gender equality should extend to men, as well:
The attention on men is much less than on women! It seems that no one thought about the men in the shipwreck. Why doesn’t anyone stand up and speak for them? Like the girls who lost their lives in the same accident, the men seem to have been forgotten. Isn’t it unfair? It seems that women have been highlighted in society, while men who also have contributed are always forgotten. Nowadays, everyone is talking about gender equality, but it seems that only women’s status has been raised while the men have been neglected (SB-5).

Other students responded, reminding him that the 25 who died in this accident were all girls, although several men were among the injured. Some started to discuss if this was inevitable or merely coincidence. Some thought that the high incidence of female death was an inevitable result, as the proportion of women on the boat was higher and most of the women could not swim, while some thought that it was just a coincidence. One female student wondered if it was because women at the time were not allowed or taught to swim. Some students and TAs noted this additional gender inequity in their discussions and reported it to me.

**Heritage and cultural education**

Some students raised the question of local historical and cultural education. For example, one suggested:

> From the sharing of classmates, many people in Kaohsiung do not know about the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb and the origin of the incident. I think this is due to the lack of heritage and cultural education. It could be edited into the curriculum, so that more local people in Kaohsiung would know about this incident (SB-2).

Another struck a more melancholy tone:

> In Cijin, I always feel that the sense of desolation of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb echoes the decline of the city. To me this place is a border city that has fallen behind. Instead of the local government or people studying its history, intellectuals from other places have stepped in to do that (SA-1).

It is worth noting that during the group discussions, students learned to respect others’ opinions. When one of the students suggested that ‘I’d better believe it’ when sharing traditional customs and views, instead of laughing at or ostracizing the student, others adopted a respectful and empathetic attitude. Another student explained:

> Since I was young, I’ve been hearing the stories about the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb. For example, it’s better not to go there, especially for boys, and if you even pass through it, avoid disrespectful thoughts, such as ‘Oh, the girls died so young’. That’s why I feel uncomfortable when talking about it, especially when the pictures were shown in the second class. It is not that I do not want to join the discussion, but I was told not to talk about it since I was young (Z-6).

The responses of students show that most had a positive attitude toward using gender as a lens for analyzing the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb.

**What did students learn about gender?**

The field trip motivated students to learn the real story of these 25 girls. In the group discussion, the students shared extensively about their own opinions toward this historical event, their individual gender experiences, and even their gender socialization. One female student in the small group explained:

> I took many gender courses before, but I never heard my classmates – especially males – share such private gender experiences in public, and I think this is very helpful for me to
understand where the others’ gender perspectives came from. That’s why I enjoy this course very much (JB-6).

A male student said, ‘I love this course because the professor allowed us have our own opinions about gender and introduced other perspectives, not only “men oppressed women”. I learned more about gendered social contexts in different places and times’ (Z-2).

Transformed into discussion material for a gender education course, the story of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb created a space for conversation and aroused considerable discussion among students and the TAs, particularly in the section of the course designed to teach theory application. The interviews with the focus group also demonstrated that students – no matter whether they held generally positive or resistant attitudes – presented their distinctive viewpoints with acuity and insight, which led to a good learning cycle of ‘input-discussion and process-output’ for both students and instructors. In the class discussions, students, who held diverse viewpoints – not only limited to gender issues – also learned how to accept dissenting remarks, discuss, and analyze from different angles with a positive learning attitude.

**The resistance of male students**

Some male students complained that Gender and Society was a class only about feminism. One young man remarked:

I think the discussion is more inclined to feminism. There is lots of discussion about the original sin of men. No matter whether one supports feminism or not, the discussion makes me feel defensive, which makes it difficult to accept different viewpoints. It is quite obvious that the class is more inclined to females, since the atmosphere has been like this since the first class (WB-1).

Another evaluated the course negatively:

Our class is Gender and Society, but it chiefly focuses on feminism, which makes it a bit boring. I think issues related to both males and females should be included in class. If a class unnecessarily views male issues from women’s perspective, I think there is too much emphasis on feminism (JB-3).

It is important to acknowledge that, when they expressed these opinions, they were actually participating in the class and discussion. For instance, when female students brought up an opposite viewpoint, a female student said, ‘No, the teacher never mentioned that the feminist viewpoint is the only right way to analyze the issue’. Conversations among students could help them construct their knowledge on gender issues and, most importantly, learn to listen to others.

Yet one of the male students shared that he felt a sense of loneliness when he held a dissenting opinion:

During the discussion, I think there were too many subjective views in class. This is a discussion-oriented class, and so the content and discussion should not be decided or led by teachers. The most important thing in this class is that everyone has the chance to express their opinions. So that’s why I think the class is very subjective, and most of the students are inclined to support feminism. Probably due to the teaching materials and goals, which chiefly promote feminism, most of the students would follow and agree, while those who have a opposite view might feel a sense of solitude . . . I don’t think it is an ideal way for discussion (WB-1).

This was a perfect opportunity to explain that, while this is a class with a specific style and teaching goal, different viewpoints and challenges from students are definitely accepted and understood. In this equal and interactive discussion, knowledge is constructed through
the process of self-evaluation and argument. With different schools and strains of feminism, even among scholars, it is inappropriate to characterize feminism in any one way. A female student mentioned that students actually welcomed and looked forward to discussion as an opportunity to voice and listen to different viewpoints, but a difficulty is that some male students who kept silent in class nonetheless hindered further discussion: ‘Why are they [male students] directing their attitudes against us? They do not voice their opinions, so how do we know what they actually want to say or argue?’ (JC-3).

Throughout the course, students learned and had a series of chances to practice critical thinking. Whatever their perspectives on gender issues, the students offered lots of valuable discussions and criticisms in the gathered data, confirming that the class’s teaching goal – to stimulate and train students to think, criticize, discuss, and argue – was fulfilled by this Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb curriculum.

**TAs’ observations**

Emphasizing the value of personal experience, feminist pedagogy encourages students to express their opinions and share their feelings in class discussion. Acting as planners and discussion leaders and assisting instructors in carrying out activities, the four TAs were important throughout the Gender and Society course. During group discussions or on the Internet, TAs provided clearer, deeper observations on students’ perspectives on gender issues through their frontline experience.

One of the TAs noted that students clearly demonstrated growth during the course. He said, ‘Of course there were some students who wanted to discuss issues from a gender perspective but failed to grasp the key points. Still, being able to view the issues from different angles is already very good!’ (S). Leading students in class brought changes to the TAs, as well:

As a TA, I began to notice when students understood something that totally confused them at the beginning. This change in analyzing issues might not mean they have an improved awareness of gender, but at least they have undergone a thinking process (J).

One TA mentioned the importance of cultural education:

If gender education is integrated with local history, it will be easier for people to question and criticize the traditional norms and values regarding women in this postmodern society. Taking this course as an example, lots of students managed to explain how the traditional cultural structure leads to discrimination against women by citing their life experience or some proverb or traditional saying. Since this type of education starts with their lived experience, which won’t have a sense of distance, students would not be resistant in class (Y).

Another TA, however, observed that students’ limitations and blind spots may be an obstacle to gender equality education:

Superficially, gender issues seem to be a rather sensitive topic. Some students from one of the groups had a strong sense of gender issues and lots of interactions during discussion. Even some who were not very sensitive toward [how] gender issues have changed. But on the other hand, some [female] students adopted a rather passive and resistant attitude, and even challenged the others’ opinions. There is still lots of room for improvement on gender equality education (J).

The assistants found that students’ gender did not always determine their attitudes toward gender equality. One of the TAs indicated, ‘One or two girls in my group do not have the feeling that there is particular discrimination against women. They think that it is a tempest in a teapot. I think this is an interesting phenomenon’ (W).

The TAs’ experiences clearly show that the structures oppressing women are deeply inlaid in social life, whether they are visible or not. Through the process of socialization,
these limiting structures are reproduced from generation to generation, regardless of gender, class, or age. So, action and effort are still needed to continue the journey toward gender equality.

**Teaching gender equality: conclusions**

Inspired by feminist geographer Linda McDowell – who argues that the ‘specific aim of a feminist geography is to investigate, make visible, and challenge the relationships between gender divisions and spatial divisions, to uncover their mutual constitution and problematize their apparent naturalness’ (1999) – I have found that the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb, as a gendered place in the local Taiwanese countryside, is well worth capitalizing on as a text for teaching feminism in Taiwan. I believe that teachers living in other places – both within Taiwan and in the broader worldwide feminist community – will be similarly rewarded by finding a local place that points to women’s labor and other major issues in gender studies as an illustration and ‘way in’ to classroom discussion of historical and contemporary gender inequities.

The results of my research show that many of the students began the course without a thorough understanding of events surrounding the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb. Regarding the girls’ deaths as a ghost story just like the famous Chinese tale Liaochai, students had a sense of fear about the death of unmarried women that echoes traditional local attitudes toward women. After the field study and teaching activities, however, most of the students showed improved awareness of gender issues, including the ability to critically discuss and analyze from their personal experience discrimination against women and their oppressed status in traditional society. ‘Male blaming’ – a discourse commonly treated in research on feminist pedagogy (Pitt 1997; Markowitz 2005) – did indeed often appear in the discussion among students. Yet with a special course design and open attitude, students in this feminist classroom felt free to express their opinions, not only from a feminist perspective, but also from other angles. This break with the simple binary concept of ‘gendered’ versus ‘non-gendered’ helped students get a clear and more thorough picture of the Twenty-Five Ladies Tomb.

Students’ lively discussion and reactions to this course have encouraged me to reevaluate the importance of perspectives that are not directly related to gender or feminism. If an instructor can lead the class effectively, different perspectives will enhance students’ motivation to participate in the discussion. After all, if only students who agree with feminist perspectives choose to participate in the discussion while those who oppose them keep silent, the class will have no sparkle or energy, and discussion will fall flat. So instructors must guide students to analyze issues from different angles and encourage them to discuss and criticize freely during class. An equal relationship between students and teachers enhances the class and offers students useful training in critical thinking.

I want to emphasize that the Twenty-Five Ladies curriculum succeeded in large part because of the course design and an open attitude in classroom. Teaching strategies that advance gender equality education must be actively promoted, especially in general-education courses at the university level, as these courses reach a broad audience and offer a unique opportunity to help students of both genders to confront patriarchal elements of their own local culture.

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References


ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

Construcción y práctica de la pedagogía feminista en Taiwán utilizando un estudio de campo de la Tumba de las Veinticinco Señoritas

Basándose en las teorías de espacio, género y aprendizaje participativo, conceptos centrales en la pedagogía feminista, la autora diseñó un curso general de nivel universitario que toma la Tumba de las Veinticinco Señoritas en el sur de Taiwán como centro de su estudio de campo y de discusión en la clase. Este lugar local generizado, que conmemora un accidente de ferry de 1973 en el que murieron 25 jóvenes mujeres solteras que trabajaban en Kaohsiung, plantea cuestiones sobre el patriarcado en Taiwán, desigualdades de género en las costumbres tradicionales Han, y sobre el trabajo de las mujeres. El curso se basó en discusiones guiadas en la clase y en discusiones en grupos focales, culminando en una visita al lugar. Cara a cara con lo investigado, la autora no sólo construyó una relación inclusiva y de apoyo con los estudiantes en la clase, sino también aplicó su reflexividad de investigadora en una práctica docente. Los resultados de la investigación indican que la libertad de formato de la discusión en clase rompió exitosamente la lógica de oposición binaria que acompaña a la dualidad de género tradicional hombre/mujer. Al evitar un estilo de enseñanza de arriba hacia abajo, también minimizó la resistencia de los estudiantes a las perspectivas que hacen énfasis en la igualdad de género.

Palabras claves: grupos focales; pedagogía feminista; educación general; género y espacio; Tumba de las Veinticinco Señoritas

在台湾运用二十五淑女墓的田野研究建构与实践女性教育法

根据空间、性别与参与式学习理论这些女性主义教学法的核心概念，我设计了一门大学通识教育课程，以南台湾二十五淑女墓做为田野研究和课堂讨论的焦点。性别化的地方场所，纪念的是1973年一场导致二十五位在高雄工作的未婚年轻女性丧生的船难事件，并引发有关台湾的父权结构、汉人传统习俗中的性别不平等、以及女性劳动等议题。该课程仰赖引导性的课堂讨论与焦点团体讨论，并以受访该地做结。透过和研究对象面对面接触，我不仅与学生之间建立了包容且支持的关系，并将自身的反身性带入教学实践。研究结果显示，自由的课堂讨论形式，成功地解构传统的男性 / 女性之性别二元对立逻辑。避免由上而下的教学方式，亦可将学生对强调性别平等的视角之反抗降到最低。

关键词：焦点团体、女性主义教育法、通识教育、性别与空间、二十五淑女墓