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The Afterlife of Women Workers: A Renewed Direction of Gender Studies in the Field of Taiwan

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The Twenty-five Ladies' Tomb was the collective burial site of female workers who were drowned during a ferry accident on their way to work at Kaohsiung's export processing zones in 1973. Of the seventy plus passengers on board all twenty-five who died were unmarried young women. Taiwanese culture shuns unmarried female ghosts who have no husband's ancestral hall to rest in peace. This made the tomb a fearsome place. Since the early 2000s, the Kaohsiung Association for the Promotion of Women's Rights, a major feminist group in Kaohsiung, had urged the Kaohsiung City government to rename the tomb to remove the stigma of unmarried female ghost and to reflect the productive role of the deceased young women. Their calls, however, were not answered until urban tourism became a prominent part of the Kaohsiung City government's developmental plan. As a part of an effort to reinvent the city's economy, the Mayor's Office finally allocated money to clean up the gravesite and remake it into a tourist-friendly "Memorial Park for Women Laborers" in 2008.

This paper takes its departure from the renovation of the Twenty-five Ladies' Tomb, and asks why and how the renovation happened in the way it happened at the time when it happened. Specifically, I orient my analysis around approaching "women workers" as a metaphor, and trace the change in its meaning and implication at different historical junctures leading to the tomb renovation whilst "women workers" assumed a postmortem central role in both of the feminist intervention and the Kaohsiung City government's discourse at a moment when manufacturing was no longer the primary sector of female employment. Past research on Taiwanese factory women including my own work tended to locate the issue in the context of gender and global industrialization, and critically evaluated the interplay between global capital expansion and local patriarchal system that placed women at a subordinate position in both economic and gender terms. As a result, when there was a decline in female industrial employment, there was also a decrease in academic interests. My book that investigated the gender and labor politics amid the deindustrialization in the mid-1990s was thus published at the tail end of the literature. Women workers seemed to quit being worthy research subjects when Taiwan moved into a postindustrial era.

However, a close look at the renovation of the Twenty-five Ladies' Tomb reveals otherwise. It shows that "women workers" could be a crucial signifier with or without a corporal body to labor. This enables us to (re)evaluate the significance of women workers, in real life and theoretically, in two interrelated ways. First, the economic contributions of women workers does not always derive from their productive roles but also from the symbolic capital they help to create as icons in a culture-led urban economy (such as that of Kaohsiung). This, in turn, highlights the fact that women workers are – or become – icons not only because of their economic contributions but also because, surrounding their productive activities, a way of social life was organized, and a structure of feeling and a sense of collective identity were forged. To understand "women workers" is, therefore, not just about understanding the economic but also the social, the cultural, and the political.