

BEFORE THE DAWN: JOURNEYS OF 15 TAIWANESE ARTISTS FROM COLONIALISM TO DEMOCRACY

曙光來臨之前：15 位前輩 藝術家的時代散策

This book tackles the stories and backstories of fifteen Taiwanese artists living and creating under colonial and then Martial Law rules and restraints. Working during this “dark age” of domestic creativity and artistic expression, the lonely but vital path they blazed makes them the progenitors of today’s prolific creativity.

As Taiwan’s reputation for artistic innovation and creativity continues to rise both at home and abroad, authors are wading in to tell the story of the history of modern art on the island. In *Before the Dawn*, Lee Tuo-Tzu invests his authorial skills as a former political speechwriter to frame stories of formative local artists of the early and mid-twentieth century within the context of contemporary political pressures and influences, showing how they and their work stealthily and effectively cut against the current to foster hope in the future.

The book opens on Huang Tu-Shui (1895-1930), a talented sculptor working in the 1920s with dreams his art would secure his indelible reputation in East Asian art circles. However, most of his works vanished in the chaotic postwar years. As a Taiwanese artist working in colonial Japan, Huang’s legacy was ignored and underappreciated until *Water of Immortality*, featured at the 1921 Imperial Art Exhibition in Tokyo, resurfaced in 2021. Its return to public awareness marked a watershed moment in the recognition and visibility of Taiwan art.



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Many of the other artists covered in this work are contemporaries of Huang, including Li Mei-shu, an oil painter who invested much effort in supervising the restoration of his hometown temple, social activist Chen Chih-chi, and Chen Cheng-po, a victim of summary execution by KMT soldiers during the (1947) 228 Incident. Late-colonial period artists also featured include Chen Chin, Lin Yu-shan, and Kuo Hsueh-hu – three painters known for their works in the “Eastern gouache” genre. The innovations and education they and their contemporaries brought to the island’s art scene helped fuel steady, subtle resistance to autocratic rule.

Standalone stories in each chapter are fronted by two-page narrative comic strips drawn by popular comic strip artist Ruan Guang-Min. Centered around a fictional high school art student learning about these prewar artists, these strips open another window into their life and times.

Text by Lee Tuo-Tzu 作者／李拓梓

Lee Tuo-Tzu is a former political staffer who worked for the Tsai administration’s writing team. Today, Lee is a columnist with a particular interest in Taiwan art history and Japanese history and culture. His publications include *Before the Dawn: Journeys of 15 Taiwanese Artists from Colonialism to Democracy* and *Japan’s Epoch-Making Prime Ministers*.

Illustrations by Ruan Guang-Min 繪者／阮光民

Manga artist Ruan Guang-Min, known for his fresh style, humor, and compassion, deftly captures the family, parent-child, and human emotional entanglements coloring everyday life in Taiwan. His award recognitions include multiple Golden Comic Awards, and the 14th Japan International Manga Award Silver Prize. Rights to his work have been sold in Japanese, French, German, Italian, Turkish, and Arabic. Two of Ruan’s works, *Dong Hua Chun Barbershop* and *The Corner Store*, have been adapted into television series.

BEFORE THE DAWN

By Lee Tuo-Tzu, Ruan Guang-Min

Translated by Elliott Cheung

The Pursuit of Permanence in Adversity: Huang Tu-shui (1895–1930)

An Artistic Genius Born in Rags

Huang Tu-shui was the most outstanding Taiwanese artist of the 1920s, and the first Taiwanese to receive a full modern art education. Though he came from meager means, his studies changed the course of his life. He attended Bangka Public School which, back then, bore little resemblance to its modern successor, today's Lao Song Elementary School. Classes were held at Ching Shui Yen Tzu Shih Temple. Later on, because of his father's early death, he moved to Tua-tiu-tiann (Dadaocheng) with his mother.

While studying in the normal division of the Governor-General's National Language School (the predecessor of University of Taipei and National Taipei University of Education), Huang's gift for sculpture drew immediate attention. After graduation, Uchida Kakichi, Chief of Civil Affairs, and Kumamoto Shigekichi, the Principal of the National Language School, recommended this gifted student for admission to the Tokyo Fine Arts School (now Tokyo University of the Arts), making him the first Taiwanese student to study at that institution.

By the time Huang began his studies in Tokyo, he was already twenty years old with a strong sense of his calling. He wanted to master the creation of "permanence" in his art. Coming from the colonies, Huang was quite cognizant of his "peripherality". Japan's colonial subjects were a notch below everyone else on the metropole's pecking order. Aside from this further honing his desire to outshine his Japanese competitors, he artfully transformed his "peripheral" weakness into strength, creating works rich with nativist color that awed the art circles of the day.

Chang Shen-chieh, who later became a well-reputed author, was his roommate at the Taiwanese student dormitory (Takasago Ryo). He recalled how Huang had once expressed his dislike of conversation. He spent each day turning toward the stone, beating and knocking against it. The other Taiwanese denizens of the dorm had little regard for the unassuming "artist" named "Tu-shui" (meaning dirt and water). Even though his peers paid him no mind, by applying hard work to his gifts, Huang stepped into the most sacred halls of the art world.

Taiwan's First Perennial Champion of the Imperial Art Exhibition

Huang had his own reasons for being engrossed in his work. He realized the brevity of life and the inevitable fact that one could leave very little behind. "There is only one way for a man to cheat

death, and that is permanence of the spirit.” Because of this he went to the greatest lengths to immerse himself in creation, in pursuit of the possibility of permanence. And Huang achieved it. He was the first Taiwanese to have their art featured in the Imperial Art Exhibition – the highest honor for an artist at the time. Not only that, his pieces would go on to be featured in four consecutive years of that prestigious exhibition. For colonial Taiwan, this was a feat none had accomplished before, or would accomplish afterward.

Starting in 1920, his works *The Barbarian Boy*, *Water of Immortality*, *The Posing Woman*, and *Countryside* were respectively selected and displayed at four consecutive Imperial Art Exhibitions. Huang thus became the morning star of Taiwanese art and culture circles. While his involvement in a feud between Kitamura Seibo and Asakura Fumio, two giants of contemporary Japanese sculpture, led to his stepping away from high-profile exhibitions, this did nothing to slow his creative output during this time “in the wilderness”.

A Microcosm of the Age of Realistic Sculpture

To make ends meet, Huang, who had made a name for himself in both Taiwan and Japan, rented a studio in Ikebukuro and accepted commercial commissions. He did personal likenesses of the famous and designed mementos for wealthy individuals and companies. For example, *Shakyamuni from the Mountain*, an effigy of the Buddha, was commissioned by Lungshan Temple in Bangka, Taiwan. The head of this Buddha, rather than culminating in the traditional *ushnisha* comprised of many round circles, featured a layperson’s head of hair. “Realism” was one of the most important characteristics of Huang’s work, and Buddhist effigies were no exception.

The original *Shakyamuni from the Mountain* carved in wood was destroyed in the flames of American wartime bombings. Fortunately, before producing the wooden sculpture, Huang first made a plaster cast, which was later donated to one of the custodians of the Lungshan Temple, Wei Ching-te, by Huang’s widow Liao Chiu-kuei. The Wei family home had once been broken into, and the plaster sculpture stolen. However, the thief accidentally dropped it while climbing over a wall and abandoned it where it had fallen. When it was found by the Weis, they enlisted the help of the Council for Cultural Affairs and the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) to have *Shakyamuni* restored and recast in bronze. The plaster original is now retained in the TFAM collection, with the five recast works respectively kept at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (NTMoFA), National Museum of History (NMH), Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts (KMoFA), Taipei Lungshan Temple, and Kaiyuan Temple in Tainan. The sculpture at Lungshan is the easiest to see and is located on the “tiger” side of the main hall (left from the entrance, but right from the god’s perspective).

During this period, Huang also created many animal sculptures as gifts or donations. Each of the monkeys, boars, koi fish, buffalo, rabbits, and goats he crafted leap to life. *Mother and Child*, for example, features water buffalo, with the little calf resting its face on the mother’s thigh. In humans and animals alike, children seem to naturally adopt this posture. The artist’s keen sense of observation help elicit warmth and empathy from those who see his creations.

During this period, Huang also produced many commissioned human likenesses. A fair share of these were supporters of his artistic career such as mining tycoon Yen Kuo-nien, Lin Hsiung-cheng of the Banqiao Lin family, and Kazuta Terutaro, who rose to prominence in the salt industry. His subjects also included Japanese who had contributed significantly to Taiwan's development. Among these were Takagi Tomoe, often called the "father of Taiwan medical hygiene", and Yamamoto Teijiro, the founder of Ciaotou Sugar Refinery. These individuals and their accomplishments provide a window into socioeconomic development in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period.

The Light of "Water of Immortality" Reappears

Unfortunately, Huang Tu-shui passed away at the age of thirty-six. By that time in his career, he was already a household name. Li Mei-shu, his underclassman at Tokyo Fine Arts School, produced sketches of his funeral. Huang's extant works at the time totaled around eighty pieces. However, as most were wooden or plaster-cast, a large number of these were later lost or destroyed during the war and subsequent political turmoil. Thankfully, through the hard work of many, more of his works have reappeared gradually over the past few years, with *Water of Immortality* doubtlessly the most legendary of these.

Water of Immortality was one of Huang's works featured in the Imperial Art Exhibition. It was initially kept at the Taiwan Education Association Building (now the National 228 Memorial Museum), which, after the war, temporarily housed the Taiwan Provincial House of Representatives before it and the whole provincial government relocated to Wufeng, Taichung. All of the hall's contents, including Huang's sculpture, were packed up and shipped by train. At Taichung Station, boxes and crates were loaded one by one onto trucks for the final leg of the journey, eventually leaving the sculpture of the naked girl alone on the platform. A group of young Mainlander soldiers passing by touched it lecherously, one even harassingly flecking paint onto the girl's genitals. Chang Hung-biao, a doctor who ran a clinic near the station, saw it all and was deeply frustrated.

Dr. Chang's second brother, the author Chang Shen-chieh, had years ago documented Huang Tu-shui's happenings at Takasago Dormitory. With such pedigree, it was a matter of course that the doctor knew the true value of the work abandoned at the station. Seeing it unclaimed, he brought the nude sculpture home, where it sat in the Chang family living room for many years. When the Chang family's many children returned home from school, they would set their schoolbags next to "Older Sister" before eating dinner and then finish their homework next to her afterward. This is why, although many older Taiwanese don't know what ultimately happened to *Water of Immortality*, they at least know she was last seen at the Chang family clinic.

Later on, as his health declined, Dr. Chang suspected his time was near. He surmised domestic political tensions would continue and that Taiwanese and Mainlanders would continue not respecting each other. Already, few from the generation that knew of Huang Tu-shui's glory remained, and he suspected the presence of *Water of Immortality* in their home might lead to

trouble for his family. He enlisted his children to wrap “Older Sister” up for storage, admonishing his family to safeguard her until Taiwanese and Mainlanders finally learned mutual respect. It was then, he said, that *Water of Immortality* must be returned to her country.

2021, the year *Water of Immortality* was rediscovered, just so happened to be the hundred-year anniversary of her completion by Huang Tu-shui. Its exhibition created a great commotion and rekindled public imaginings about the “Artistic Age of Formosa” that Huang Tu-shui had once prayed for. The ardent aspirations of young artists who came before, once stuffed away in wooden boxes to escape the ravages of colonial rule, war, and authoritarianism, are now once again in the light. So long as there is hope, the Artistic Age of Formosa, while perhaps late, shall arrive one day.

Out of Her Chambers, Ahead of Her Time: Chen Chin (1907–1998)

The Extraordinary Path of a Prominent and Talented Scion

Chen Chin came from a powerful family in Hsinchu. Her father was of the gentlemanly class, highly educated and of wealthy stock. Purportedly, when she dined at home, they would stir fry pork floss for her because she disliked vegetables. With meat hard to come by then, eating pork floss was a clear indication of status. Chen Chin advanced all the way to the Taipei Third Girls’ High School in her studies. Very few girls attended high school at the time, and the Third Girls’ High, a nexus of culture and refinement, was the top choice for daughters of prominent families. Among those studying there around the same time as Chen Chin include the accomplished artist Lin A-chin and noted physician Or Hsieh.

However, the conservative customs of the time held that respectable families send their daughters to high school to develop their talents in cooking, embroidery, and the traditional arts of the zither, Go checkers, calligraphy, and painting. These would be part of the “dowry” presented in their future marriage into an eminent household. Thus, the Third Girls’ High was seen as a “bridal school”. Even the distinguished Lin A-chin was told by her teacher, Gobara Koto, upon her marriage to Kuo Hsueh-hu to take care of her husband and family so that Kuo could focus on his creative work. This is what led Lin in later years to describe her younger self as “a stallion tied to a stone post”.

Chen Chin was also a student of Gobara’s. Because of her outstanding talent and comfortable family resources, Gobara advocated strongly to her father upon her graduation to allow her to study in Japan, which was swiftly supported by the Chen family. Chen’s father was strict, and she herself had high expectations of herself. Reflecting on her state of mind as she embarked on her studies, she said, “if you’re going, you have to do yourself proud. You have to be strong, and not lose. Memorize your art history and Japanese and put effort into it. If your grades are good, others won’t look down on you.” In deciding to pursue further study in Japan, Chen was bravely striking out on a path very different from her seventeen and eighteen-year-old classmates,

many of whom, seeking a life of predictable stability and comfort, were already engaged or otherwise planning to start families soon after graduation.

From Bride-to-Be to the “Three Outstanding Youths”

Chen Chin focused her studies on *tōyōga* (also known as eastern gouache painting, executed in ink and mineral pigments on silk or paper) at a time when very few women were studying Western painting in general. The portraits of beauties, birds and flowers in *tōyōga* were in Taiwan’s male-dominated society easily associated with the feminine “cultivation” of fine manners. Thus, “bridal schools” like Third Girls’ High School offered instruction in *tōyōga*. Aside from this, various women painters had been associated with the *tōyōga* genre since the Edo Period. For example, her predecessor Uemura Shoen and contemporary Ogura Yuki were both fairly distinguished painters.

Chen Chin studied at the Private Women’s School of Fine Arts, predecessor of today’s Joshibi University of Art and Design. Although it was established with the lofty goal of cultivating autonomy in women, it was often viewed at the time as a school where distinguished families sent their daughters to learn bridal manners. Not long after entering the school, Chen Chin earned the attention and respect of the art world through being chosen for the Taiwan Art Exhibition. This was the time when the Japanese government began to promote nativist painting over *nanga* with more abstract representation in water and ink. Kuo Hsueh-hu and Lin Yu-shan, who were both chosen the same year as Chen Chin, received the praise of the colonizers for their newer style, irritating many senior artists long active in the scene.

Kuo Hsueh-hu and Lin Yu-shan were already well acquainted. Living in Japan, Chen Chin, while acquainted with the work of both, had never met either. In 1931, Kuo Hsueh-hu, visiting Japan for the first time, hoped to pay Chen Chin a visit. However, the social conservatism of the time prevented women from meeting men they did not know. Further, Chen Chin was focused on her work, with little interest in social interaction. Previously, Chen Chih-chi and Chen Cheng-po had visited Chen Chin for the purpose of establishing the Taiyang Arts Association. However, they were turned away, with some saying this is the reason Taiyang lacked an *tōyōga* division at the outset. Still others, including the likes of Yen Shui-long and Yang San-lang, were interested in meeting with Chen Chin. However, she remained elusive, as she had told her landlord she would not see any man who called. By asking their mutual teacher, Gobara Koto, for an introduction, Kuo Hsueh-hu finally was able to meet Chen Chin. The two engaged in joyful conversation, and Chen Chin even introduced him to the judge for the Exhibition, Matsubayashi Keigetsu. This made Kuo’s Japan visit very fruitful, and set the foundations of the lifelong relationship shared by the “Three Outstanding Youth of the Taiwan Exhibition”.

A Bijin-ga Style in its Own Category

Chen Chin was very busy. Constrained by contemporary social mores, while many women studied painting, few became notable artists. Chen's secret lay in her focus on art creation. After graduating from the Private Women's School of Fine Arts, rather than returning to Taiwan immediately, she entered the tutelage of Kaburagi Kiyokata, a master in *bijin-ga* (portraits of beauties). The most prominent masters of this style were said to be "(Uemura) Shoen in the west and Kiyokata in the east." After polishing her skills under Kaburagi for several years, Chen was consecutively selected for the Taiwan Exhibition under the invitational category. During this time, she was also invited to serve on the Taiwan Exhibition jury and honored with the inclusion of her works in the Imperial Art Exhibition. As the media of the time claimed, she had earned the title of "Genius Girl Artist from the South".

While Kaburagi painted beauties that were refined and gentle, those painted by Chen stood out for their healthy, round faces and voluptuous bodies. Aside from this, Chen's beauties wore Taiwanese clothing and sported modern hairstyles and makeup. For example, the main character in *Ensemble* wore her hair in an elegant bob. For Japanese of the time, Chen's works wove together the Japanese technique of *bijin-ga*, classical Chinese refinement, and Taiwanese modernity. Her paintings undeniably draw on disparate elements that together speak directly to the "local color" the Japanese saw in their colony's rich variety. Thanks to this, her work was unstoppable, earning numerous selections in official exhibitions.

The Challenge of the Times and the Metamorphosis of Art

In 1934, Chen Chin returned to Taiwan. She first began teaching at Pingtung First Girls' High School. Because she was a recognized artist, the school treated her with the utmost courtesy. Not only was she exempted from administrative work, but she was permitted to teach just one semester per year, allowing her to spend the other half in Japan creating. Aside from this, while in Pingtung, Chen actively sought out inspiration, even entering the nearby Paiwan community to do life painting. Because of this, her technique improved even further. *The Women of Sandimen Area* is a work from this era. As usual, Chen began her large works with a draft before throwing herself into illustration. The woman smoking her pipe, the woman breastfeeding, the child running...with its natural movements, bright gazes, and perfect composition, this was the perfect work.

Chen's art creation was inevitably impacted by the war. Like her contemporaries, Chen did have a few "oblique" works that described the "color" of the era, such as the girls with bikes in *Women's Volunteer Corps*, the girl hiding in a bomb shelter in *Gazing Out*, and the young lady reading a "Hong Kong Falls" headline in *One Day*. Though the war had not come to Taiwan's shores, its artists depicted the color of the times, drawing on topics related to war or mobilization in their creations. Lin Yu-shan painted military dogs and war horses, Kuo Hsueh-hu painted mobilization weaving, Li Shih-chiao painted children singing together. While representing the acquiescence of art to political pressure, these creative works also reflected resistance through subtlety. Like the male artists who depicted quiet battlefields, Chen Chin, with her roots in *bijin-ga*, drew women at

war to convey both her resistance to and acceptance of the policies of the day under pressure from the “color of the times”.

After the war, conditions changed swiftly. Chen Chin, working primarily in the Oriental painting genre, saw her success in Japanese-controlled Taiwan become a barrier to continued career growth and success under Chinese Nationalist rule. In 1946 she married, giving birth to a child four years later. The characters in her work shifted accordingly from beauties to children and mothers. Though she served once as a judge for the Provincial Exhibition, her works could not escape the derision of Mainlander artists who had relocated to Taiwan. They decried her paintings as “Japanese art”. She was once challenged for drawing beauties instead of traditional motifs in Chinese painting, such as the plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum. After bowing to the fierce headwinds in the “Battle for True National Painting”, Chen’s contemporaries Kuo Hsueh-hu and Lin Yu-shan shifted to ink wash painting. Only Chen Chin continued in the tōyōga style, albeit shifting from painting humans to painting flowers, birds, and landscapes. Her affluence permitted her to move about without obstruction. Though her landscapes were realistic, they integrated certain elements of ink painting. A series drawn from her travels showed how her native Taiwan retained its color in the wabi-sabi atmosphere of eastern gouache painting.

In the postwar era, Chen became an ardent Buddhist. She began creating Buddhist murals and also incorporated religious elements and themes into her regular artistic works. The Mazu Temple in Beigang was a place she rather adored. She completed *Beigang Chaotien Temple* in 1966, *Beigang Mazu Temple* in 1979, and *Temple Festival* after that. The temples painted under her brush are shimmering and grand, their courtyards abnormally bustling, the faith of their disciples true and steadfast, and the temple celebrations powerful and rolling. Viewers cannot help but view these images with their heart as well as their eyes.

“A Great Name” of Art to the End

Though Chen Chin was outstanding, the attitudes of the age led her professional aspirations and achievements to be disregarded for some time. Unlike Kuo Hsueh-hu and Lin Yu-shan, who had switched to ink wash painting, Chen held steadfast to tōyōga without caring about the political ramifications. In her later years, eastern gouache painting (previously known as “tōyōga”) once again rose to prominence due to the work of her fellow artists, bringing her past glory once again to public attention. However, many studies still refer to her as a “female” painter, thus choosing to highlight her rarity rather than her accomplishments. This pejorative label undervalues her prowess in the field of tōyōga and her ability to shine as brightly, if not more so, than many of her contemporaries and teachers.

But no matter. In any case, Chen Chin knew how well she could paint. Her junior once praised her as an artist who emitted rays of light. She quickly responded, “I *am* greatly famous.” With the passage of time, her artistic achievements rather than her gender will certainly rise to become the overwhelming focus of her public validation.