

## North America Taiwanese Women's Association: **Sisterhood is Powerful!**

by Vince Lee

Living between two worlds is nothing new for Asian Americans. They must juggle their heritage, derived from the culture and identity of the homeland they left behind, with the pressure to assimilate into western culture in the United States. Though the change is difficult, immigration can lead to new expectations, values, and opportunities. Taiwanese American women often had to play a behind-the-scenes role while men led most of the overseas Taiwanese organizations and activities. Not content with the status quo and lacking an organization to represent them, a small group of thirty Taiwanese women from the United States and Canada formed what became the North America Taiwanese Women's Association (NATWA) in March of 1988. Through a two-day conference held in Los Angeles, these women outlined their mission: "To evoke a sense of self-esteem and enhance women's dignity, to oppose gender discrimination and promote gender equality, and to fully develop women's potential and encourage the participation in public affairs."<sup>1</sup>

With well over 1,000 members, the organization is divided into seven geographic regions and seventeen local chapters. Exploring the North America Taiwanese Women's Association Collection in the Carey C. Shuart Women's Archive Collections at the University of Houston – which contains photographs, publications, scrapbooks, and ephemera – reveals the organization's historic connection to the Houston region. Although Houston does not currently have a local chapter, it has been an active city for NATWA and its membership over the years and has produced two of its presidents, Gin Ru Lee (1995) and Cecilia Tsai (2005). During their terms, the city twice played host to the annual convention. Additionally, many of its annual magazines have been published within the region.

The one underlying emphasis and theme found throughout NATWA's archival collection is a celebration of self-worth as Taiwanese and Taiwanese American women. A non-profit run primarily by volunteers, NATWA created a non-governmental organization (NGO) to address major issues relating to women such as education, health, economy,



*The banner of the North America Taiwanese Women's Association has flown over many meetings, presentations, and protests.*

All photos courtesy of the Carey C. Shuart Women's Archive Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

domestic violence, aging, human rights, leadership training, and empowerment.<sup>2</sup> NATWA and its members have also advocated for the human rights and democracy of Taiwan, provided career panels and mentorship for young women at their national conferences, and given workshops on health and well-being for women.

Cecelia Tsai, the eighteenth president, introduced NATWA II to NATWA at her annual meeting to provide a network to "1.5 and 2nd-generation Taiwanese American and Canadian women," to cultivate and promote their tal-



*Members of NATWA are seen here in front of the Taiwanese Heritage Society of Houston.*

ents, and to preserve the Taiwanese culture and Taiwanese American and Canadian identity. As a result, NATWA II created and administered Sunday morning programs that have become a permanent fixture at NATWA annual meetings.

NATWA produces a biannual magazine that provides updates from their conferences, messages from the president, annual budgets and reports, and most importantly reflections from their members about the conference and what they learned. Topics can be personal, political, social, and controversial. One author, Kristie Wang, wrote a second generation report, "How I became a Taiwanese American and why it matters," encompassing all these aspects. Her realization of her identity as a Taiwanese American went beyond her language, her culture, and how she was perceived both in America and in Taiwan. The report stresses educating oneself and educating others on ancestry, heritage, and distinctions. Wang emphasizes that "if you are of Taiwanese descent and you identify yourself as 'Chinese' because you think that the use of 'Taiwanese' is 'political' and 'Chinese' is 'neutral,' then you are not only wrong, but you are committing a great disservice." Wang adds, "[I]f we do not make the distinction between Taiwanese and Chinese, then nobody will do it for us. To take it a step further, if you don't determine your own identity, then it will be imposed upon you, as Taiwan's history has demonstrated time and time again."<sup>3</sup>

The archival collection contains materials on NATWA's involvement with such projects as Race for the Cure, Team Taiwan, scholarships, and reports on NATWA's work with the Caring for Soldiers project. Started in 2006 by Vandy Chang in Kansas, Caring for Soldiers supports service members wounded in battle and their families through meetings, support, and care packages. NATWA has also fo-

cused more recently, especially with its NATWA II second-generation members, on Asian Americans and their role in serving human rights communities.

Annual NATWA conferences are held in April in cities across the United States and Canada, allowing members to come together to learn, discuss, and enjoy one another's company. They bring in experts and consultants to hold workshops that discuss such topics as fundraising, cardiovascular health, and issues of Medicare and benefits. They offer career panels to young women graduates and memorial scholarships to students. On the lighter side, during NATWA Night the women participate in an art show and line dancing.

Gin Ru Lee, seventh president of NATWA, hosted the annual meeting in Houston in 1995. The theme for the conference was "My Body, My Mind, My Spirit." In line with the theme, the president openly discussed a topic traditionally considered taboo in Asian communities: sex and women. Members also broke into groups for a more intimate dis-



A slideshow presentation given at the 1995 NATWA Conference held in Houston was on "Sex and Women."

**第七屆北美洲台灣婦女會年會**  
 主題：認識自己  
**My Body, My Mind, My Spirit**  
 時間：April 20-23 (Thursday-Sunday), 1995  
 地點：Sheraton Crown Hotel at Intercontinental Airport  
 15700 John F. Kennedy Boulevard, Houston Tx 77032  
 Tel: 713-442-5100

**年會的特色：**

- 運用人才，發揮潛能**  
請來參加會員自己設計、主持、表演的節目，請來聽另一種不同的議題與聲音。
- 認識自己，成長自己**  
讓我們共同來探討性健康、情緒及生活與藝術。
- 共同參與，分享經驗**  
多項活動都有小組座談，鼓勵大家踴躍發表參與。
- 參觀全球獨一的「台灣人活動中心」**  
這是一座象徵著台灣人理想、團結與合作的精神堡壘。二十一日晚間此地同鄉會、台灣學校、信用合作社、傳統基金會與休士頓婦女會將以晚餐與同鄉表演來歡迎遠道而來的姊妹。

**其他的活動：**

- Toastmaster Speech Training Program**：由 MRS. FEROL BEER 指導  
有興趣的姊妹請來聽 35 分鐘的 SPEECH 講座，語文不熟，可以是電影分享、詩歌朗誦、自我介紹等等。
- 藝術創作展覽**  
請攜帶你的作品：繪畫、字畫、手工藝品等與大家分享。如有需要，請聯絡黃靜桂 201-857-2420
- 討論 NATWA 未來的走向**：由梁秀惠主持  
NATWA 姊妹立足美國，心懷台灣。請大家一齊來討論 NATWA 創會的精神及去向以及如何善用我們的資源。

**年會聯絡人：**

葉婉如 713-661-8178	黃麗君 713-589-1802
洪文怡 713-665-5324	陳玉梅 713-488-6772

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Part of the collection, this flier is from the 1995 NATWA conference, "My Body, My Mind, My Spirit," which included a number of small group sessions where women discussed health issues.

**台灣女畫家畫集** 葉菊蘭

WOMEN ARTISTS IN TAIWAN

一九九六年  
 月曆  
 1996 CALENDAR

北美洲台灣婦女會  
 NORTH AMERICA TAIWANESE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION, INC.

國名 "Flower Queen"  
 編號：1371  
 冊：20 頁，7 1/2" x 11"

NATWA addresses current events and issues worldwide while also working to preserve cultural heritage for Taiwanese immigrants and their children living in the United States. This calendar, published by NATWA in 1996, features a number of female artists from Taiwan.





*This cookbook published by NATWA contains a number of recipes from the island nation. Food is an important way for both immigrants and their children to maintain a sense of culture.*

cussion. Additionally, President Lee was instrumental in implementing the NATWA Fund System. The Fund System allocates money contributed by members to points of need such as student scholarships, aid for natural disasters, or other causes strongly supported by the members. In 2005 Cecelia Tsai sent funds donated by NATWA to their sisters in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Part of NATWA's success and growth, both financially and through increased membership, can be attributed to the publication of the NATWA calendar. In 1990, the second president of NATWA, Grace Chou, invited Annette Lu of

Taiwan to attend the annual meeting in Dallas. After her visit, Lu suggested to incoming president Dorothy Hung that NATWA publish a calendar containing every important date relating to Taiwan's democratic movement.<sup>4</sup> With the support and generous donation of \$10,000 from noted businessman and physician, Mr. Ing-ke Kao of Japan, NATWA set out to design and publish its first calendar in November of 1991. The calendar's appeal to NATWA members and international supporters lies in its richly illustrated design. Each year the calendar depicts an aspect or theme important to Taiwan's cultural heritage, such as Taiwanese women artists, crafts, landscapes, and native indigenous populations and their dress.

The archival collection also includes many editions of cookbooks on Taiwanese homestyle cooking published by NATWA's Northern California chapter and the Taiwanese American Citizens League-San Francisco Chapter. For Taiwanese Americans, food has a cultural and nostalgic connotation not only of their heritage and homeland, but also of family, home, and growing up watching meals being prepared. Food evokes customs and traditions that bring members closer together. Recipes for the Taiwanese dishes are richly illustrated and the directions are written on corresponding pages in both Chinese and English.

For the past twenty-seven years NATWA has embodied one of its central themes from its 2008 annual meeting: "Sisterhood is Powerful!" Through the courage and vision of a small group of Taiwanese American women looking for equality and dignity, a long-standing network was forged within the United States, Canada, and abroad, burgeoning their call for respect and independence for themselves and their homeland. Through their network of sisterhood they not only have become powerful in public affairs but also have retained compassion on an individual level to support one another through difficulties. Many NATWA members have discovered that they are openly welcomed at annual meetings and conferences as evidenced in their writings. They are encouraged to be themselves without fear or worry that others will not understand them. The support of the NATWA sisterhood assures them that they are not alone and that others have shared and will share their own experiences and similar perspectives. Many members have forged lifelong friendships.

The North America Taiwanese Women's Association and its mission and values were not formed from a model or template but grew from within the hearts, minds, and spirits of these Taiwanese American women. Many of these values resonated with what they felt at home and abroad in their journeys, as Asian Americans and Asian American women in particular, living in dual worlds while retaining their identity and culture.

Vince Lee is the history archivist for the Carey C. Shuart Women's Archive Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



*Members of NATWA hold a banner at a protest for Taiwan's sovereignty and self-determination.*

The North America Taiwanese Women's Association Collection resides in Special Collections in the M. D. Anderson Library at the University of Houston. Special Collections is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday to Friday and 12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Saturday. For more information, visit, <http://info.lib.uh.edu/about/campus-libraries-collections/special-collections>.