



Made in Taiwan: Trunk Sign Section VI (1990) and, below, Superwoman and Goku (1996). Courtesy of the artist



Cartoon elements: Part of Yang Mao-lin's Superman and Goku canvas (1996) from the Made in Taiwan series.



Courtesy of the artist

## Pop goes a culture

"Artist Yang Mao-lin stands out as having made the search for Taiwan's political and social identity central to all his major works"

### ARTS

Ian Findlay

Since the 16th century, Taiwan has had many faces – not all of them beautiful. It's been a colony, an imperial outpost and a place of refuge as well as a political playground for foreigners and Chinese alike. Since 1949, when China's Nationalist government and Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan, the island has regularly been at the center of political and social controversy. Under a draconian Martial Law Act, freedom to examine and to question Taiwan's history and leadership was virtually outlawed. For artists the system strangled the creative process, essentially silencing their art as an independent political and social voice. It was rare indeed to find art that was at all critical of any aspect of Taiwanese.

This situation changed dramatically after the lifting of Martial Law in 1987. Since then artists have been able to tackle almost every subject with little anxiety over censorship. In a commotion of activity, artists have produced an enormous range of work on politics, social questions, traditional values and cultural identity. Young artists such as Huang Chin-ho, Wu Tienchang, Lee Ming-tse, Mei Dean-e, Hou Chunming, Lu Hsien-ming, Kuo Jen-chang, and Yang Mao-lin have made art which highlights and questions many of the problems confronting modern Taiwanese society.

Their works are bold explorations in observation, criticism and analysis. Of these, 43-year-old Yang Mao-lin stands out as having made the search for Taiwan's political and social identity central to all his major works. While he has made other series, beginning in late 1980s, such as *Behavior of Game Playing* and *Yun Mountain Memorandum*, *Made in Taiwan* is his major accomplishment. His work is an affirmation of Taiwan as an individual society with a strong cultural and personal identity.

"In 300 years, politics in Taiwan has changed greatly through other influences. Today, Taiwanese are now beginning to know themselves and understand themselves and to believe themselves. We can do anything, now," Yang said. "But Taiwan can't reject or close any single part of the influence – Japanese, American or Chinese. It must accept all of them for they are part of its culture."

His *Made in Taiwan* series, he's still working

on the third part – is both an investigation of Taiwan's modern identity and a personal voyage. His work ranges across a broad front – historical, social, political, cultural and artistic. And the spark which inspired his change of direction was a line in an American film of the mid-1980s which suggested that anything made in Taiwan was of inferior quality. The comment and its implications were deeply felt by Yang. Behind that view, he felt there was a suggestion that the island lacked a recognizable and cohesive culture. Emonion told him there was a recognizable culture, but his intellect and instinct suggested otherwise.

"Taiwan is an island whose culture is a mix of local influences and those from abroad. Taiwan's culture is a form of everywhere culture which has become its own," he said. "Often when foreigners look at Taiwan's culture they see its special trait is that 'mix'. They often cannot see the original. Even Taiwan people often can't separate their own culture from the numerous influences because it's such a mix."

Yang doesn't seek to escape the cultural mix. He just tries to understand each historical, cul-

ture, hence the robots and the cartoon characters. These series reflect the three generations that my family represents.

"The culture has in a strange way somehow come together. But really what is being said is that if I don't want my grandfather's culture or my father's culture and if I don't want to accept contemporary culture with all its foreign and local influences, then I don't have a culture or an identity. Even though I accept this cultural mix, I feel uneasy about the future. If Taiwan was returned to mainland China there would be yet another political change which would undoubtedly reject the culture we have created for ourselves much in the same way the Qing, the Japanese, and the Nationalist rejected the past. They wanted a cultural identity, but on their own terms."

What Yang has achieved is to create a whole spectrum of the Taiwanese experience. Each series is rich in the diversity of symbols which make up the panorama of Taiwan's past and present. The exception is that there are virtually no religious elements or symbols in his work which is odd given the strong Buddhist/Taoist and,

### 'Through three generations we have gone through the Qing dynasty, Japanese occupation and the Kuomintang government'

tural, political and social thread that combine to form it. Yet he admitted there can be no true understanding of the present, if "you" cannot come to grips with the past. For his "Taiwan" reveals an abundance of simple and esoteric data, obscure intellectual reference, and clear historical fact.

And his central starting point was not high-brow history or politics, but a deeply personal one. He has tried to maintain as objective an approach as possible and his work shows this. There is no strident voice here. The academic research of others has lent an intellectual sheen to the meaning of Taiwan as an international entity. Yang, on the other hand, looked closer to home – his own family – to unlock the past and the molding of a modern identity. In his work over the past decade he asks, in this age of cross-strait discord, a highly pertinent question: What is Taiwan culture? His answer: A hybrid of three centuries of invasion and exploitation.

His early impassioned works of the late

1980s show him depicting the struggle between the land and traditional industry, and the rush to modernize. While he brings into play such traditional figures as Kung-Kung and Hor-yi into his individual works, it's the series titled *Behavior of Game Playing* in which Yang simplifies the drama of struggle. Included in the series is works such as *Fighting Section I to VII*. Here the colors are strikingly clear, browns and yellows.

The line of the muscle massed men possesses the exaggeration of comicbook characters touched by the hand of the great muralist Diego Rivera. Here is Yang's nod to revolutionary socialist art but without the stiff unreal posturing of the figures. These pictures also represent the pictorial, as well as the intellectual, beginnings of Yang's own personal search.

"There are two important reference points here. Through the land I'm looking for my position and my identity as a Taiwanese. And through history and culture, I can find today's Taiwan culture and position in the world," he said. "The search for me began at home when I started really listening to my grandfather argu-

"The third part is about contemporary cul-

ture, hence the robots and the cartoon characters. These series reflect the three generations that my family represents.

Western religious influences. (Shells, plants, vegetables, animals, historical figures) and objects, contemporary cartoon characters, and private symbols are woven together as a narrative that finally achieves its own voice.

Each individual aspect of his work presents its own set of problems – line, color, and com-

struction. As does the theme of his paintings. "The problem lies in studying new things. When I finish one series then it's closed. I don't go back. I have to start a new one and to do this I have to be open to new ideas as in studying my children's culture and how it influences me," he said.

"In some ways this can be seen as a problem. New ideas are a problem, but I don't have a problem with technique – I have that already. I like to use characters such as Superman and the Japanese cartoon character Goku because they are contemporary culture and they represent the most basic cultural aspects of today's youth. Some people see them without any value. But this isn't true. Perhaps today's low cultural icons may become the high culture of tomorrow. I have to look to popular culture as it's part of our cultural identity. Besides being a painter I also have to be an historian, sociologist and so on. So it's a question of time. And I don't have time. I really don't have any other problems, other than perhaps that I'm poor."

Yang's voyage has been one of discovery through all aspects of his culture as well as his personal world. It has changed him – made him a much calmer individual with an eye to the future. "I have discovered the tragedy of our history. Through three generations we have gone through the Qing dynasty, Japanese occupation and the Kuomintang government. That represents the three last generations of my family. Myself, my father and my grandfather. I have discovered that each generation has gone through many changes, politically, socially and culturally. But with each change the previous changes were rejected," he said.

"The Qing dynasty was rejected by the Japanese and the Nationalists rejected both previous influences. The changes have not been reflected in each step of the process of our development though some have been reflected in our culture that hasn't quite meshed yet. So the points of cultural reference have disappeared and each new generation has had to look for and to create a new culture. My grandfather was brought up in the Qing dynasty but I have no real reference point or contact to that era. My father was educated during the Japanese occupation and used to speak Japanese at home. But his cultural background was rejected by the Nationalist. Now I have to look elsewhere with my own children."

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