

NOTES FROM TAIPEI  
讀書雜誌  
001

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# ABOUT THIS PROJECT...

I've always had a passion for the written word, and this pamphlet gives me an opportunity to experiment with adding my own words to the world. I'm writing about topics that interest me based on media I consume, people I meet, and ideas that hang out in the back of my head. Most of this is centered around Taiwan because I am currently living here, although later versions may discuss other places.

I read once that writing poetry is putting a note in a bottle and flinging it into the sea, sending a message from your beach to another. While it may be sunny and warm from the beach where you write, the bottle could wash up on a frozen shore that stains the page with rain and snow. So, the atmosphere of the place where the content is read has an impact on the manner in which it is interpreted. The content in this pamphlet is a product of the things I learned through my experiences in Taiwan. But I'm not Taiwanese, I barely know 100 Mandarin characters, and I have fewer friends on the island than I have fingers. Point being, I brought my own beach to these pieces, but I know there are other important topics that will resonate differently with others. This is just how I see it.



Author: Andreas Zai (在風)

Note: I gave myself this family name in Mandarin because my surname is pronounced the same in both languages. I also love the wind, so I chose the character for wind as my pseudonym. Someone once told me that together they sound like the name of a dynastical lord, so I'm certainly not going to change it now.

# CHU AND ME AND HE

If you take a moment to think back on all your previous partners, between long-term relationships and one-night stands, you'll likely realize that you have a lot of different types. There was the bookish girl with thick glasses and a penchant for coffee after 4 p.m. The comfy guy with a dad bod and a warm smile that makes you feel safe. The exotic one with skin kissed by the sun and an accent from some archipelagic country. The person you discussed deep intellectual topics with, versus the hard body you lusted for after a few drinks. You have had all these different preferences, these wants, but one person has never ticked all the boxes. So, when the time came to settle down (or when it comes in the future), you compromised, chose what's most important to you, and set the rest aside. Locked up in the monotony of monogamy, you narrowed your

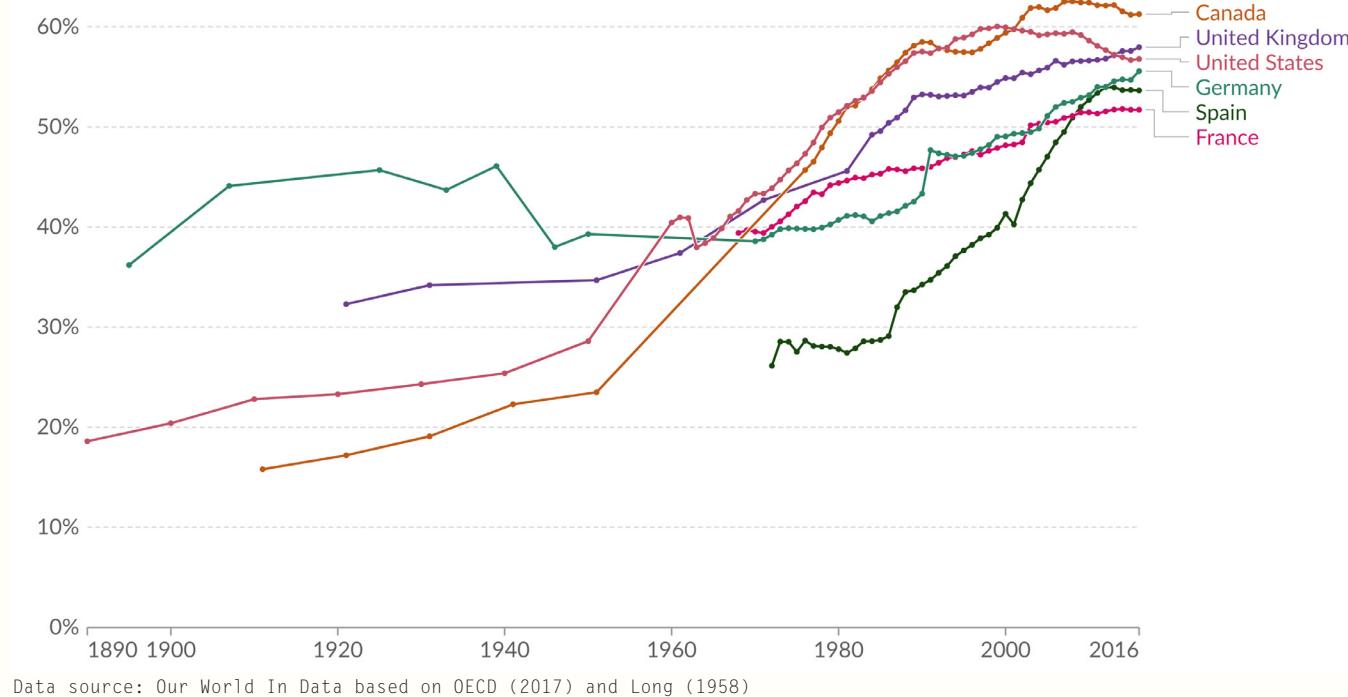
future romantic and sexual encounters to one of these types, whichever happened to promise the most serious prospects at the time which you felt obligated, perhaps by family pressure, social coercion, or financial reasons, to seek a marriage.

But with all your romantic and sexual needs, you may come to feel that you are missing something. You love that your partner shares your passion for camping, but it irritates you that they won't stay in hostels. You love late-night chats about films and art, but maybe your partner likes going to sleep early. Perhaps you don't want to sacrifice anymore, and in addition, the tedium of long-term partnership is beginning to wear on you. After the same 15-minute sexual encounter for the fifth time that week, or after watching the same niche TV series that your partner likes for the fourth night in a row, you begin to crave something else. You reflect on all those other partners you had and wonder, what if it had been one of them instead? Or better yet, what if it could have been all of them? Is that



"Let's Talk About Chu" Episode 2

## FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES



Data source: Our World In Data based on OECD (2017) and Long (1958)

possible through the lens of a modern marriage?

Let's take a step back. About a century ago, even the most progressive of marriages treated women as a piece of property which was transferred from her father to her husband upon legal consummation. In the 20th century, as many women gained the right to vote, started earning higher wages, and ultimately gained greater independence, marriage shifted from ownership to partnership, two people working together to create an environment in which they can find fulfillment and possibly establish the foundation for a larger family.

Now, women's financial and political independence has improved even further. In the US, the percentage of female participation in the labor

market has increased from 19% (1890) to 57% (2016), and for most major western countries (Germany, UK, Canada, Spain, and France) the labor participation rate is around 50-60%. Although women's pay still trails that of men in most countries, there has been an improvement in the financial wealth of most women in these countries. Similarly, and over the same time horizon, 97% of countries have established the universal right to vote for men and women, whereas in the 19th century 0% of countries had that right.<sup>1</sup>

The point is that the developed world today consists of more financially independent and politically unbound individuals than the one at the end of the 19th century. But we are still practicing this archaic institution of marriage, limiting ourselves to only one partner at a time because, among other

<sup>1</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/female-labor-force-participation-oecd>



"Let's Talk About Chu" Episode 2



"Let's Talk About Chu" Episode 2

reasons, our modern social constructs deem anything more as inappropriate and freewheeling. A new Taiwanese television series, "Let's Talk About Chu" (愛愛內含光), provides some thought-provoking content on this topic, but as elaborated below, falls flat in delivering what could be a very progressive idea.

In the series, Chu Ai (Chan Tzuhuan) is portrayed as a young, modern Taiwanese woman with a YouTube channel where she candidly discusses sexual themes, including the idea of having multiple sexual partners at the same time. For younger generations, this idea is quite commonplace and is referred to as polyamory. Having multiple sexual partners can range anywhere from brief, overlapping flings to a more permanent arrangement. For Chu, she establishes relationships somewhere in the middle

of that scale: friends that also have sexual privileges with one another. In the first episode, she outlines a series of rules for this type of relationship predicated on being communicative and transparent with one another. In the third episode, she has an experience which teaches her the importance of getting tested for STDs to protect her own health but also that of her mutual sexual partners. These are conventional practices for those who practice polyamory, and the show presents them in a fresh and exciting manner.

But then in episode seven, Chu's progressive stance suddenly falls apart. She is featured on a talk show and stands up for her beliefs. The host of the show, portrayed as a tough critic, dissects Chu's argument as the product of her fear of being alone, her

fear of commitment, and accuses her of being "love impotent." This leads Chu to reflect on her upbringing by an unfaithful father (later revealed to be a mix-up, but the argument remains) and she concludes that it's his fault she's "impotent," because she inherited some unhealthy, adulterous quality from him. This would lead the viewer to believe that polyamory is only for people from broken homes, or only for people with faithless qualities. The healthy, proactive, and open-minded ideas from the early episodes are cast aside when Chu fails to defend them.

Separately, throughout the show Chu begins to exhibit a deep attachment to one of her partners, Ping-ke (Ko Chen-tung) as she develops strong romantic feelings for him. After the talk show episode, she realizes that she has hurt Ping-ke and decides to throw herself at him with the hope that he will forgive her. Ping-ke, who is not so enamored with polyamory and has longed for Chu's singular affection, willingly accepts her. Just before the credits start to roll, we see Chu completely eschew polyamory as she begins a more serious monogamous relationship and moves in with Ping-ke.

This is an unfortunate series of events for several reasons. First, the idea that individuals who favor multiple partners are somehow broken or adulterous is a flawed one. The fact that humans can love multiple people is a prime counterpoint to this; if you can separately love your mother, your brother, and your best friend with different forms of love, why can't

you love multiple romantic partners in the same manner? Second, traditional values in Taiwanese culture don't favor tolerant ideas like polyamorism, nor the independence of women (as pushed by Chu's mother, who wants Chu to marry and wants her sister to have children), and the show gives in to these cultural norms by throwing Chu's ideology away. Third, the monogamy which Chu and Ping-ke find in conclusion is just a romantic trope designed for television, and instead of using it's platform to challenge an element of Taiwanese culture, the show concludes in a self-satisfying manner. It would have been far more engaging to see Chu and Ping-ke start to navigate the trials of a polyamorous relationship. This idea would also offer a whole slate of content for a potential second season.<sup>2</sup>

Instead, by the finale, "Let's Talk about Chu" undermines the original ideas presented by Chu in her romantic encounters and therefore fails to present a progressive theme, allowing itself to become subsumed into the masses of typical romantic comedies. To me, this is a real disappointment for what could have been a unique and ambitious piece of media created by a Taiwanese director and studio.

<sup>2</sup> There is an Instagram series "The Poly Couple" by username "danaandthewolf" which is full of rich content for exactly this purpose, and the show has been successful in developing a following of almost 270k users.

# 死刑

The guillotine, the breaking wheel, the brazen bull, the electric chair, and the gallows. These are all dreadful methods of enacting capital punishment, a term otherwise referred to as “the death penalty.” Although

The Mandarin characters for “capital punishment”

most (not all) of these torturous forms of execution have been suspended from use, those who are subject to capital punishment still undoubtedly suffer from the overwhelming psychological impact of coming to terms with their execution. Despite this pain and suffering, there are still many countries in the world that enforce the death penalty, including Taiwan. This article will

attempt to unpack some of the legal and political context surrounding Taiwan’s implementation of the death penalty.

In September of 2022, the Taiwanese Foundation for the People released survey results indicating that 87% of the population opposed the abolition of capital punishment in Taiwan, and only 10% agreed with the statement that the “abolition of the death penalty is a universal goal.”<sup>1</sup> That means that almost

9 out of every 10 people in Taiwan believe that their government should be using capital punishment as a means of carrying out the law. That rings like a bloodthirsty statement. How can more than 20 million people believe that death is the best way to punish crime?

Peek under the covers and you’ll find that most people believe the death penalty is actually a strong deterrent for crime. That same survey mentioned above indicated that 88% of the population

agrees with the statement that capital punishment helps prevent crime. This is in fact a misconception, as there is no statistically significant proof which indicates that the death penalty can help reduce crime. In the US, there is no difference in the crime rate between states which enforce capital punishment and those that do not enforce it. Similarly, a study of Illinois, New

Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Washington crime rates before and after those states abolished the death penalty indicate no impact on crime rates.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the US is a culturally, economically, and politically distinct place from Taiwan, particularly given the proliferation of firearms and high crime rates across America, but these studies are still a meaningful datapoint.

In addition to a deterrence of crime as a whole, proponents of capital punishment may suggest that the death penalty specifically helps deter violent crime.

A common argument is that a potential criminal is far less likely to commit a crime if they recognize they will be killed for doing so, rather than just incarcerated for a long time. This is a logically

<https://www.vecteezy.com/vector-art/643788-taiwan-map-symbol>

flawed argument. While it may be true for premeditated violent crime, most crime is committed opportunistically and emotionally. A planned approach to violent acts is the machination of a severe psychopath, of which there are

less than <1% in the human population.<sup>3</sup> This deterrence argument for violent crime can be rejected, given that most criminals are committing heinous acts in the heat of the moment.

So, what happens when a criminal is caught? How does the Taiwanese legal system determine if they should use capital punishment? The answer is the Wu Can Benchmark (吳燦基準).

Wu Can is the former President of the Supreme Court, who proposed a set of standards for testing death penalty sentencing. These include evaluating the perpetrator’s motive, character, intelligence, emotional state before and after the crime, etc.<sup>4</sup> These criteria appear to take an investigative and scientific approach to determining the character of a criminal, so that judges can decide whether the perpetrator is still fit to participate

in human society. However, it appears this scientific thought process ends at the boundaries of the courtroom and has not percolated into the minds of voters. Such a thoughtful approach to the application of the law should also



1 <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2022/09/13/2003785231>

2 <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/news/research-halting-the-use-of-the-death-penalty-did-not-result-in-an-increase-in-homicide-rates>

3 <https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/psychopathy#:~:text=Although%20severe%20psychopathy%20affects%20just,fall%20under%20this%20broad%20umbrella>

4 [http://demo.cktweb.com/laws/www/criminal\\_code\\_no.php?c=57](http://demo.cktweb.com/laws/www/criminal_code_no.php?c=57)

persist in the creation of the law. If there is no proof that maintaining the death penalty deters crime, why keep it in place?

Furthermore, why keep the law if its not being used? The Taiwanese Ministry of Justice has been reticent to carry out executions in recent years. Since 2016, only two (but still as many as two) inmates have been executed according to the proper legal procedures. During the 2024 presidential election, opponents targeted the current ruling Democratic Progressive Party in saying that they were prohibiting the application of capital punishment by delaying the execution of the 37 inmates on “death row.”<sup>5</sup> The party subsequently denied this, but the fact remains that Taiwan’s system of execution is hung in a stalemate. Without officially declaring a hiatus on the policy and inciting the ire of voters, Taiwan’s leaders have been skirting around application of the death sentence. Policy makers don’t want blood on their hands. But if the practical application of the law is to not enforce it, Taiwan should move to simply renounce the practice altogether.

A pragmatic first step in this renunciation could begin with testing. Remove the death penalty in select jurisdictions to see how crime rates are affected, and conduct polling to see if residents of those areas still feel safe. If all goes well, the death penalty could be slowly abolished in all jurisdictions throughout Taiwan. Political supporters and third party organizations could direct campaigns throughout the country explaining the

statistics around crime, and try to share the human stories of convicts on death row. These types of actions should be taken in the interest of reducing potential miscarriages of justice, which is of the utmost importance when at odds with the irreversible penalty of death.

Other related readings:

<https://www.aclu.org/documents/death-penalty-questions-and-answers>

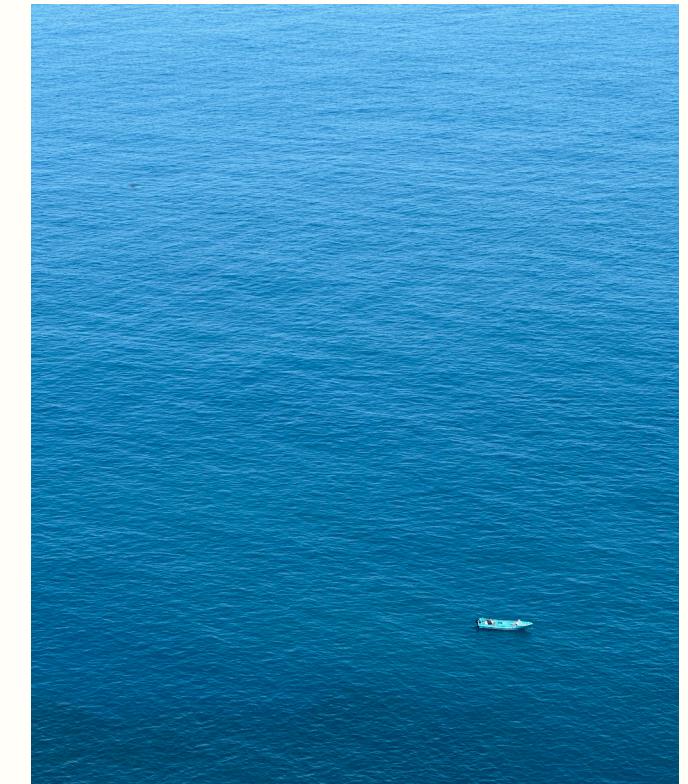
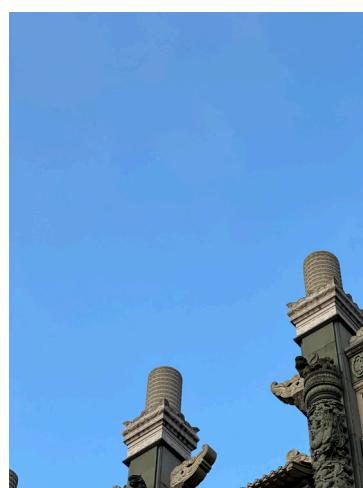
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/act500062008en.pdf>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202401050016>

# 11 SKY

A few years ago I started taking pictures of the sky and augmenting that crisp, electric, blue with objects in the foreground. Now, as I've traveled all over the world, I have photos of all these foreign objects with that same beautiful sky in the background. These are a few I snapped in Taiwan, from different locations across the island. One day I might be able to fill a gallery with just the color blue, and I'll put all the frames on the ceiling so viewers can look up to see across the sky through time and space.



I was struck by the color of the water in Taiwan. It mirrors that current of the sky but reflects some greenish underbelly, as if all the nausea of the sea were spread in a thin film across its surface. Its enchanting, especially when it meets the sky at the horizon to create two hues of blue. A few of these I captured north of Taipei, near the ever-crowded and overwhelming Jiufen (九份). The photo which includes a backdrop of mountains was actually shot at Sun Moon Lake (日月潭), so its not technically the sea, but that mystical blue carries on all the same.

# 12 SEA



In high school, my English teacher once told the class that everything is about sex. The media we consume, the clothes we wear, the restaurants we patronize, the people we affiliate with; all of this is about conveying that we are admirable, desirable, or sexy. It's not that we are constantly having sex, but that we are always trying to create the illusion that we are sexy.

I think my teacher was right. Maybe 95% of my mindshare is spent on matters that ultimately lead to trying to feel hip or sophisticated. But as I grow older, my body ages, and I have begun to witness personal tragedies, I've discovered that there's another side to this. The question now is not "am I sexy?" it has become "will people still think I'm sexy after

I'm dead?" Put simply, I'm beginning to rationalize the inevitability of my death and come to terms with what happens afterwards. Naturally, I fear death, and I desperately want to be remembered after my last breath. I want to persist, to exist, after death. Some people find support for this through religion and the belief that the spirit continues. Others, those without faith, seek courage through the belief that they will live on the hearts and minds of loved ones.

In Ghost Town (鬼地方) by Taiwanese author Kevin Chen, several devices offer reflections on the idea of life after death. The most apparent of these devices is the idea of "ghosts." All of the characters in the book believe that ghosts exist, and some of the narrators actually are ghosts. This belief in ghosts is a tool used by the characters to cling to life, a hope that some ethereal manifestation of their spirit will survive after death. In the novel, the timeline centers around the Ghost Festival, when the "Hellgate" is thrown open and ghosts can wander the earth. Traditionally, families will offer food and burn paper objects to appease the spirits of their familial ghosts. There is a similar remembrance in the practices of Tomb-Sweeping Day or Dia de Los Muertos, and also in the construction of gravestones, memorials, and tombs. All of these concepts center around creating temporal or physical space for people who no longer exist, so that the living may gather and remember, thus allowing the deceased to persist through this remembrance.

Another topic Chen repeatedly highlights is the significance of having a son. The central family of the story have five daughters before they have any



their ancestors, and therefore, those who have died will have someone to remember them. Alternatively, a daughter will be absorbed into the family of her husband and inclined to honor the memory of his family rather than that of her own, which leaves it up to the sons to maintain the family tradition.

That hereditary tradition goes hand-in-hand with the importance of legacies. As we age and death's shadow hangs further over life, people begin scrambling to ensure they are leaving something meaningful behind in this world. For some, a son is an important part of that legacy, but often it goes beyond that. Did you have an illustrious career that made you popular? Did your name or likeness become inscribed in a history book? Several of Chen's characters exhibit want of a legacy, and the most evident are the members of the Wang family. Empire builders, this family seeks to generate enormous wealth and spend it lavishly, on a garish wedding featuring a hippopotamus, a skyscraper illuminating their name in Taipei's night sky, and a luxurious family home called the White House which includes a garden à la Versailles. This legacy of wealth is just another way for these people to be seen, to be remembered, and hopefully to be memorialized.

For me, Ghost Town elucidates all these desperate desires to be noticed, both in life and in death. The characters in this novel display a fear of death, which drives a need to create permanence thereafter. While alive, humans greatly want to be perceived, to be seen as an object of sexual

desire, then in death to subsequently be remembered. Why? It seems a gambit to derive meaning from this existence, so that when life ends there is something which remains to mark the significance of the years spent on earth. We struggle to conceptualize that time will continue after our consciousness does not, and so we try to leave something in the world of the living that will also continue, so that we are not left in the past. It's a narcissistic and insecure way of coming to terms with death, but given that most of us find ourselves so insignificant in the vastness of our universe I ultimately think it's quite understandable.

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