

From the “Twenty-five Ladies’ Tomb” to a “Memorial Park for Women Laborers”: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Memory in Taiwan’s Urban Renewal

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ABSTRACT

This essay looks at the recent renovation of the Twenty-five Ladies’ Tomb, and examines the politics of the feminist movements and the politics of memory as they are expressed through different meanings of female ghosts, in southern Taiwan. People who were involved in the renovation process included the families of the deceased “twenty-five maidens,” the Kaohsiung city government, and feminist groups in Kaohsiung and elsewhere in Taiwan – most notably the Kaohsiung Association for the Promotion of Women’s Rights – all of whom had different considerations and therefore diverse expectations regarding the future and purpose of the tomb. In *Specters of Marx* (2006), Derrida uses the idea of “specters” and “haunting” as consequences of historical injustice and tragedy metaphorically but powerfully. These two elements come together in our essay as well. However, the “ghosts” in our accounts are more literally ghosts with whom some (if not all) of our ethnographic subjects interact. They appear, express their sorrow, and demonstrate their grievances. The reestablishment of peace and order essential to residents of both the living world and the afterlife thus hinges upon mutual understanding and close collaboration between them. Yet, as meanings are constantly contested, so is the nature of the deceased’s requests. The different interpretations that the (living) socio-political forces give to the deceased’s needs open up new terrains of contestation for the memory of the past and the rights and obligations at the present. Ghosts are agencies that inform changes in the social life of the living.

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