

“Enfant Terrible, Minister of Culture, Silent Loner?”

Lung Ying-tai in Conversation with Barbara Mittler

A Cultural Critic and Global Intellectual Fighting for Civility Across the Taiwan Straits: 10 Questions to Lung Ying-tai

“In 1975 when I went to the US for the first time I went to the library and by chance I got a book about Chinese history. That opened my eyes and I thought ‘Oh my God what I was told before were all lies!’”

Lung Ying-tai remembers how, in the mid-1980s, her father would call her every day, just to make sure that she had not been taken away by government spies – for publishing her controversial column “Wild Fire” in the Taiwan daily *China Times*. Her essays – criticizing Orwellian conditions in Taiwan: government corruption, human rights violations, punched milk powder and more – would soon be published in book form. They have been considered milestones in the history of democratization – Taiwan remained under martial law until 1987 – and they were also read on Tian’anmen Square in Beijing, in 1989.

Born on Taiwan as daughter of parents from the mainland (Hunan, Mao’s native province), educated in the U.S. and resident of Europe, where she raised her two sons, and Hong Kong, where she “observed the growing pains of that special administrative region,” Lung Ying-tai has developed a distinct voice of cultural criticism that is informed by global perspectives. And she has never stopped calling on those around her (in Europe as well as in China). “Where is your Outrage?” was the title of her first piece, addressing her fellow Chinese citizens, “Please, show me your Civility” would speak to those at the top of the political echelon – Chinese President Hu Jintao, in this case with the closing of *Freezing Point* magazine in 2006. Her voice continues to be heard, even as she moves into other well-established positions of the Chinese public intellectual – the silent loner practicing solitude (as in her most recent work *Walking—Practice of Solitude* 走路 (2022)). Her voice (as well as her silence) continues to resonate today, on both sides of the Taiwan Straits, and even if many of her writings are forbidden on the mainland, they circulate, nevertheless, in clandestine copies.

In her interventions, which she also put into action, serving her country by acting as Taiwan’s first minister of culture 2012-14, she connects the private and the public, as in her 2009 documentary novel *Big River, Big Sea*, the story of a war, the civil war that killed 10 million people and that forced a mass exodus and divided many families across the Taiwan Straits. Her older brother (whom she meets, for the first time in 1985) remains on the mainland while her parents flee, with Chiang Kai-shek, who would reign as a dictator for many decades to come, from the Communist People’s Liberation Army to Taiwan. But her novel is not the story of a particular war, it tells the story of war more generally, one especially pertinent today: the cruelty of it. Lung captures the suffering from the perspective of individuals, ordinary people, families, thus counteracting the propaganda of both sides: “If we continue to be the unthinking cogs in a

machine,” she once said, “then how do you know whether these tragic misfortunes would not be repeated.”

In this installment of *Encounters*, we will thus probe into questions of democracy, civility, and war, and how they can be approached – from a writer’s point of view.

Lung Yingtai is cited in Charlie Smith “Taiwan Minister Of Culture Lung Yingtai Talks China, Democracy and Culture” *Huffpost Arts & Culture* 6.9.2012.

Lung Yingtai is paraphrased in Oliver Chou “Lug Ying-tai: Minister on a quest for understanding” *South China Morning Post* 28.11.2012.

Lung Yingtai is cited in Verna Yu “Untold Stories of China and Taiwan” *The New York Times* 5.10.2009