



Chair Narratives of Power in Transnational Female Artistic Journeys

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Abstract

As a Taiwanese woman in the United Kingdom (UK) connected to diaspora populations struggling to form their identities, my arts-based account of my experience witnessing childbirth in the UK, and case study of art by three women in my online devotion session, focuses on how a pedagogy of chairs reflect the triadic social position of women in terms of family, culture, and society. Through art, a powerful vehicle for religious expression and meditation, and a pedagogy of chairs, my drawings, and those of three women in my “art devotion” group, are contemplations of women’s power, resilience, and transnational liberation theology.



Keywords: arts-based devotion, birthing chairs, chair pedagogy, childbirth, hospital delivery care, resilience, Taiwanese diaspora, transnational liberation theology

The Lost Chair¹

In quiet moments, my chair a lowered bough,
an alarm rang, a whispered vow.

Through door by door, in a relentless stream,
No chair awaited, just a fleeting dream.

With all my might, the doors I’d held,
Yet, no chair surfaced, no story told.
A crimson sea within the seat,
Alarms echoed, their anxious beat.

From raucous clangs to whispers thin,
Nervous beats to a numb din.
the chair is elevated, then crushed so low,

In silence, a door left ajar, speechless echoes trail.

Figure 1. The three-layered motif, I created digitally, illustrates the spiraling paths leading to endless doors, drawing inspiration from my dreams and the extended period spent in the hospital. The transparent layer reveals myself in different times and spaces with a compressed experience as I stayed in between different doors. Navigating through numerous doors, I became lost in the quest for a fitting seat during my ten-month sojourn in the UK. It was within this labyrinth of doors that I discovered a profound reflection of myself. The visual served as inspiration to writing the poem “The Lost Chair.” In addition, the ‘flower of lily’ symbolizes purity, while the ‘sketched hands’ represent suffocating to break free. These elements further depict the journey of escaping from one door to another.

¹. See Figure 1.

The idea of chair pedagogy comes from my experience as a visual art teacher in a public high school in Taiwan. As a teacher, my chair was larger and higher than the students' chairs (see Figure 2). Therefore, the teacher's chair, in the Taiwanese classroom, represents unspoken power to elevate status and grant me, as teacher, substantial control, deemed both my right and duty in the classroom. The elevated nature of my position led to moments where I unintentionally overlooked the equality and non-hierarchy that should exist between myself and others.



Figure 2. The digital drawing created by the me, in 2024, represents the traditional educational setting in Taiwan. The dynamics of authority are often symbolized by the educator's position in the classroom in relation to the students. In the center, there is a blackboard and lecture table denoting the highest position of power in the classroom, which is my reflection on the power dynamics imposed by seating arrangements in my classroom.

Arts-based Devotion Methodology

During an art journey of spiritual devotion, I acted as a guide for artistic prayer in cooperation with pastors from an online community, which involved working with a group of transnational Christian women, who lived and worked in and outside Taiwan, and sought to reconcile multiple cultural norms and expectations (Yuval-Davis, 2016) with their dynamic and multifaceted identities. The blended physical and online devotion and meditation space, unlike the

hierarchical arrangements of chairs in classrooms and some houses of worship, positioned me as facilitator guiding creative collaborative social activity toward fostering a sense of community and connectedness.

My arts-based devotion sessions present a system of ideas for cathartic spiritual discipling, nurturing the Christian faith of Taiwanese females through a transnational cohort. We used an online platform² and in my sessions I incorporated the visual culture of chairs for spiritual and personal art investigations. My study occurred over an extended period of time, where I led daily sessions in devotion through art creation during Lent.³ I led one of the sessions, while at a hospital, due to accompanying my friend to the hospital when she went into labor. The group for this study was comprised of three women, who identified as Christians for many years and were born between 1960 and 1980. They had little or no art background. The three women and myself, whose drawings of chairs discussed in this visual essay, are members of a transnational Taiwanese Christian society based in London, Taiwan, and Europe.

High Seat – Investigate Power and Chair Cards – Interrogate Culture

I first guided participants in my “art devotion” session to find a high seat, take a chair, and sit down physically. I led their experience through prompts to perceive power by stating: “Feel the chair you are in now. What is its height? Is it stable? Try to feel your body in a different position on the chair and move back and forth to feel whether it is suitable for you.” For many, power may seem like a negative sensation, giving the impression of wanting to control others and the external world. However, power can also influence and impact through joining together and helping each other and social just causes. Such transformative power can inspire hope and a sense of possibility in meditation journeys (Yuval-Davis,

² We used an online platform for convenience given time and locational differences, and to provide a safe gathering space.

³ Lent is a deeply spiritual time that encourages Christians to renew their faith, practice self-discipline, and prepare for the joyous celebration of Easter (Brueggemann, 2016) for increased prayer, meditation, and reflection on one's life and faith (Devotions et al., xxxx). Lent is a significant season in the Christian liturgical calendar, observed as a period of preparation leading up to Easter. It lasts for 40 days, symbolizing the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert, enduring temptation by Satan. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday. During Lent, Christians often engage in practices of fasting, prayer, penance, and almsgiving as a means of spiritual reflection and renewal.

2016).

Secondly, I invited everyone to choose a chair from the chair cards (Figure 3), which has a strong link to their position in life. Their choice is a reflection of their unique experiences and perspectives. There were many different chairs from which the three women selected. The dining room chair might be associated with building relationships with others. The hospital bed and wheelchair might represent suffering and difficulties, or poignant physical and emotional situations including memories of family members or friends. The desk chair and regal chair might present the authorities with an ambition to control others. The stool without perfect legs, yet still works well enough to maintain balance could reflect surviving challenges. I encouraged the participants to consider notions of power (e.g., status, authority, mobility, communion) in selecting a chair. For example, a chair might embody pride and self-righteousness, while a humbler chair might suggest the power to connect with others.



Figure 3. The purpose of the activity I designed is to stimulate dialogue with self by selecting chair cards based on Minibar's chair cards called "Chair Lean/Lean," which is based on the Gestalt psychology therapy referred to as the "empty chair technique". These cards reignite emotions, offering an opportunity to discuss the bittersweet memories of life experiences and provide a platform to express and reinterpret past pains. The chairs, set in different surroundings, are intended to guide the participants in my devotion session to make sensory, emotional, spiritual, and analytical connections.

Chair Narratives

Chairs play a crucial role in our daily lives, providing a place to rest and sit, but their significance extends beyond mere functionality. In a broad sense, the chair is not just a piece of furniture but a symbol of decision-making and status that permeates various aspects of our lives (Strati, 1996). Cultural context and perceived alternatives influence decisions and are deeply intertwined with how we arrange chairs in space, reflecting societal norms and hierarchies (Knappett, 2010). Chairs hold broader sociological significance (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010), serving as a medium for nonverbal communication; how we sit and position chairs can convey messages about power, intimacy, and social relationships (Patterson & Quadflieg, 2016). Moreover, the ideology behind sitting arrangements reflects cultural preferences and personal identities. Transforming the arrangement and design of chairs can create a non-hierarchical space in which individuals express their unique sitting culture and preferences. This interplay between chairs and their users highlights the intricate connection between everyday objects and social structures, illustrating how even mundane items can carry profound sociological meanings (Keifer-Boyd, 1992).

Specific to the art devotion sessions, I shared that in the Bible, chairs and seating arrangements often symbolize power and authority. This symbolism is vividly demonstrated by the phrase 'The right hand of God, God's son,' which highlights the significance of Jesus sitting at the Father's right hand. This seating arrangement is a powerful symbol of supreme power and status. The chair, or throne, carries profound spiritual significance, reflecting the intricate relationship between God and humanity. For instance, God's throne represents ultimate sovereignty, as in passages like Revelation 4:2, which describes a throne set in heaven with God seated upon it. The 'Chair in Daniel' refers to the 'Son of Man' (Jesus) sitting in a position of judgment and authority (Daniel 7:13-14). The Jewish tradition of learning at the feet of a superior, such as Paul learning at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) or Mary sitting at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:39), illustrates the profound reverence and respect for spiritual authority that is deeply ingrained in biblical symbolism. Similarly, the narratives of Deborah's seat under a palm tree (Judges 4:4-5) and King Solomon's throne (1 Kings 10:18-20) further underscore the themes of leadership and judicial power. Through these narratives, chairs in

the Bible serve as powerful symbols that communicate the dual nature of Jesus as both fully God and fully human. This duality, embodying both humility and supreme authority, adds a complexity and depth to the biblical narrative that is both intriguing and profound.

Given, one of the art devotion sessions was during a member of the group in labor at a hospital, I shared with the group that the birthing chair encompasses more than a functional object used during childbirth; it symbolizes the convergence of cultural, medical, and historical practices surrounding maternity. Traditionally, birthing chairs have been employed across various cultures to facilitate a natural and gravity-assisted birthing process, reflecting an understanding of the female body and cultural practices of childbirth (Stol & Wiggermann, 2000). The design and use of the birthing chair underscore the importance of maternal comfort and positional advantages, which can significantly impact labor outcomes. Furthermore, with its rich cultural symbolism, the birthing chair represents a critical intersection of medical knowledge and cultural traditions. It embodies the shift from traditional midwifery to more institutionalized medical practice in many parts of the world (Beckett & Hoffman, 2005). The Birthing Chair, therefore, is not merely a tool but a profound cultural symbol that reflects the evolving practices and ideologies of childbirth.

Symbolic Narratives of Art Devotion Chair Drawings

While I accompanied my Taiwanese friend in the London hospital, I did a series of drawings. Vulnerability hung in the air as her water (amniotic fluid) broke, intensified by the initial struggle to secure a resting place. The threat of infection lingered, yet the quest for adequate care persisted. For more than 50 hours, we awaited improved services, each passing moment etching the contours of an intricate narrative. Within the confines of the maternity ward, I found myself compelled to capture the essence of the ordeal with drawings, moments frozen in the lines of my sketches. In Figure 4, I sketched with pencil the chair in the delivery room with a simple line, which combines a bed and a chair, where I and other friends of the women giving birth took turns to lay and sleep. There were frequent sounds of alarms and the flickering of lights, accompanying the rhythmic beating of a new heartbeat. In the delivery room, the chair (see Figure 4) is not just a piece of furniture, but a powerful symbol of the waiting journey and the devotion

to art. It is a fusion of bed and chair, serving as a resting place during the long hours of anticipation.

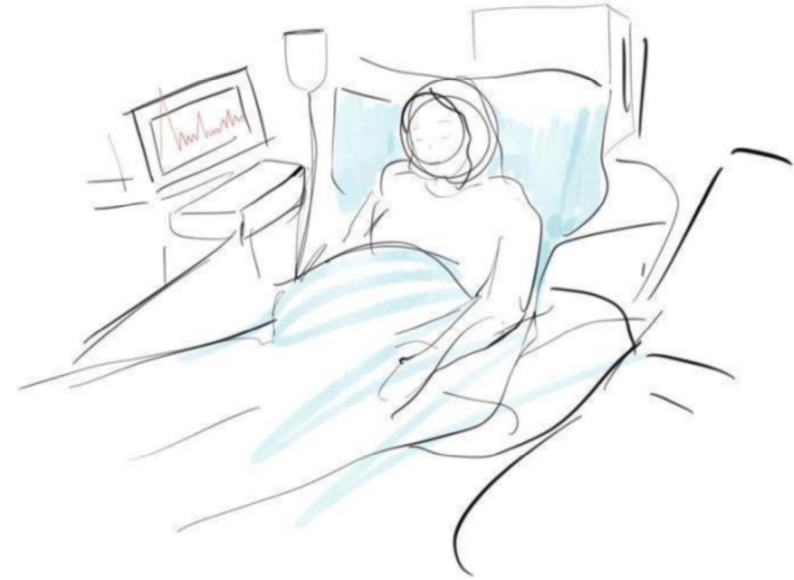


Figure 4. The digital line drawing is of a woman laying in a hospital bed in a delivery room that I drew in 2024 while stayed with my friend about to give birth. We waited more than 50 hours in anticipation of a new life. In the delivery room, I sketched the poignant tableau. On the right side of the pregnant woman, there is a pacemaker, that we heard amidst the rhythmic harmony of the baby's heartbeat and the tense symphony of silence between the sporadic hospital alarms. We existed in a delicate balance of expectation and the looming specter of unforeseen challenges.

In what follows, I share two more drawings that I sketched while my Taiwanese friend, in labor, was in a UK hospital and I was by her side or nearby in the waiting room facilitating what I have come to call “art devotion.” The drawings encapsulate the hierarchy of trials within a foreign system, a visual testament to the labyrinthine challenges foreign women face navigating the intricacies of medical services. I then discuss drawings of the three women in my art devotion group, not at the hospital, but during the same time within the Lent art

devotion sessions in 2023.

As I guided the art devotion group online to feel the chair where they sat, I sat on the ground in the corner of the hospital delivery room. I could feel the temperature and the texture of the ground, the noise of people moving in and out of the hospital, and the doors that seemed to go many directions. I heard sounds of birth, sadness, excitement, frustration, and screams of pain from the delivery room, cesarean section room, and emergency room. I translated this experience into drawings. In Figure 5, the large hand symbolizes the emptiness of the corner of a chair while I sat on the cold ground with the lowest position. I used warm colors to convey the warmth of new life, but these colors turned to black and white in the middle of a darkened space. The fingers of the hand are intertwined with red vessels and lines, representing the intricate process of childbirth. Time and space condense into more than 50 hours of waiting and uncertainty, a period filled with physical pain and emotional turmoil. Many unfamiliar obstetrics and gynecology phrases, displayed on the walls, seemed to fill the air and stretch from wall to wall, creating an insecure environment even within the hospital.⁴

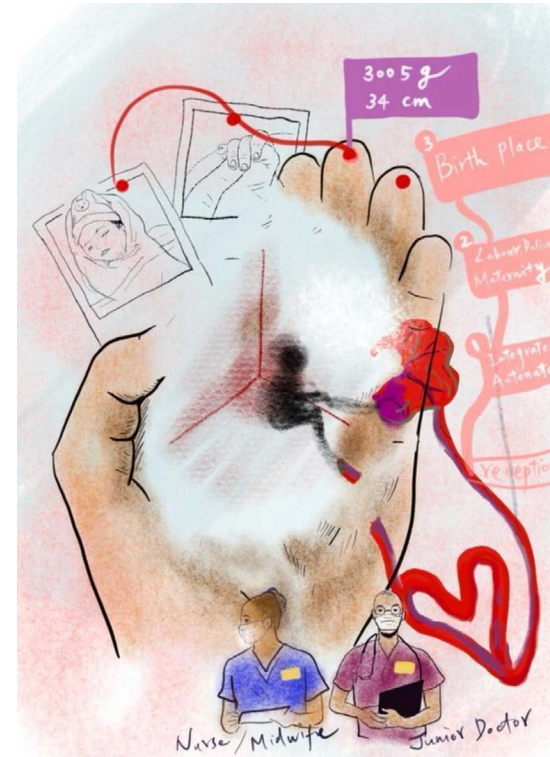


Figure 5. In the center of my digital artwork, a large hand symbolizes the overwhelming uncertainty I experienced during my hospital stay, struggling to find a suitable chair to guide the art devotion. The terms “maternity” and “antenatal” surfaced as unfamiliar words on my journey from door to door with the presentation of different processes of delivery. Additionally, the artwork features portraits of a midwife and a junior doctor, who accompanied us during the lengthy wait for the arrival of a newborn baby.

My reflections as visual analysis of my artwork reveals a canvas filled with small pieces and organic red hues, absorbing and contrasting with the black colors that punctuate the space, transferring and crossing energy throughout the composition (see Figure 6). This interplay of colors and forms not only symbolizes the experience of waiting and uncertainty but also amplifies the emotional weight of the moment. I vividly remember the sound of the midwife mentioning

⁴ I posted Figures 5 and 6 and wrote about my experience in the UK hospital in a community forum that I have been a member since October 2023. My text about Figures 5 and 6 in this visual essay is directly quoted, with some edits, from my public-private diary entry in that forum (PADD, 2024).

“breathing” before the baby’s delivery. I used many shades of red, reflecting the intensity of the moment, as I felt the urgency and importance of the experience. The digital drawing materials allowed for erasure and layering, adding depth and complexity to the artwork. The small, spotted elements in the artwork (Figure 6) represent the process of cultural shocks and the blockage of routes for seeking help, reflecting the hierarchical nature of medical emergencies. The patterns and positions within the artwork not only capture the disorientation and cultural clashes experienced but also underline the profound complexity of the emotional and physical journey of childbirth.



Figure 6. I divided the paper into two sections, delving into the flowing blood both inside and outside as I listened to the repetitive sounds of deep breaths amongst alarms, screams, and cries. I could not find a suitable chair and bed in the cramped delivery room. The shapes twist together. On the right side, a big heart and vessels surround the space, representing how I felt the sound of bleeding. On the left side, I used many organs divided into small pieces and connected with vessels surrounding the space. I created the digital drawing while experiencing a sense of chaos, indicated by the dissolved colours that suggest time passing as I waited 53 hours for my friend, who labored, to give birth..

Art Devotion Supporting Women’s Resilience

In what follows are digital drawings by each of the three women in my art devotion group.

Art devotion, particularly among transnational women, serves as a medium to reflect and reinforce resilience through creative expression. In my art devotion sessions, the women in my group explored and expressed their intersectional identities through art, drawing on community solidarity and collective action to develop unique and intriguing resilience strategies.

The concept of resilience, referring to the ability to recover from adversity and maintain functionality, is crucial for understanding the positions of transnational women in various societal contexts, such as migration, displacement, and cultural adaptation (Yuval-Davis, 2016). Resilience in women is shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors influencing their ability to navigate challenges and opportunities. It is embedded within social and environmental contexts that provide support and resources (Ungar, 2008). Moreover, intersectional perspectives highlight how factors such as race, class, and gender intersect to shape women’s experiences of resilience differently (Rogers, 2021) to develop strategies of resilience that draw on community solidarity and collective action. Therefore, understanding women’s resilience necessitates a holistic approach that considers individual capacities and structural influences, underscoring the need for policies and interventions addressing the broader social determinants of resilience (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014).

Artistic creation empower those who don’t conform to patriarchal norms, enabling them to articulate perspectives on their personal and collective positions, and address the challenges of oppressive social and symbolic structures through artistic meditation.

The process of drawing chairs can transport into personal narratives not easily accessed through other means (Green, 2021). The position and scale of the chair can reveal the power of gendered social status and the unstable impermanence of the female position in the hierarchies imposed by patriarchy. The Taiwanese women’s chair drawings also convey their female-oriented path through

family life and society infused with European imperialism that impacts their stories. The usage of the chair cards and art meditation guided the women in my art devotion sessions to reconsider their familial position and social situation while sitting on a physical chair and experiencing the conflict of a patriarchal framework. The meditation reached towards the root of the relationship between foreign land and transnational women within patriarchal societies and gender stereotypes dismissing female power of collective critical contemplation.

Familial and Cultural Traditions of Chairs

Figure 7 is a drawing by a woman in my art devotion group who was based in Taiwan and travelled around Europe regularly. She spiritually participated in art devotion every day and found a renewed connection with her birth family by doing so. She travelled Europe for a long time, and on one of her journeys, she visited a French household. There were five family members, and the living room was filled with various chairs including a sofa, a chair on wheels, well-worn chairs, and a floor mat. Each member sought the most comfortable way to relax with different chairs, sometimes preferring someone else's spot. For example, the older family members used larger and more comfortable chairs, whereas the younger ones used small and lower chairs. All of these chairs can be reorganized in various areas of the house and the multiple positions of the people in the same space, as well as the time to gather in the same and different times.



Figure 7. The digital drawing depicts six distinct chairs in one room, each with its own unique and powerful symbolism. The chairs are positioned in different places, some lower and others elevated. The inclusion of wheels on some chairs adds a layer of mobility, while others seem firmly rooted in their positions, each with its own symbolic power. This drawing is a reproduction courtesy of the participants in my art devotion group.

There is a distinctive horizontal line in the fourth or fifth line on the background with a wooden texture in the private space.

However, Figure 7 shows different familial and cultural traditions from Taiwanese living rooms. She noted during art devotion the rarity of very low chairs and large pillows serving as chairs in Taiwanese living rooms. This exploration of differences between Taiwan and France not only deepened her understanding but also allowed her to more vividly interpret the roles of each family member in the French household. Her drawing meditative process explored the contrast of power represented by the types and arrangement of chairs in familial living spaces. The arrangement of chairs in Figure 7 also reveals the uncertainty of being a female roamer, a term I use to describe a woman navigating and adapting to different cultures. To relocate in a different culture than one's familiar childhood, something as seemingly mundane as chairs, can reveal familial and cultural power dynamics.

Empowerment Chair

Another participant in my art devotion group, a mother who has dedicated her life to experiences in Taiwan, London, and the United States, where her daughter pursued her studies, is proficient in preparing delicious Taiwanese food, and has a keen interest in unraveling the stories of characters from the Bible. Emphasizing female empowerment through biblical scripture study, she portrayed the chair as a symbol of strength, crafted from sturdy wood to mirror her resolute spirit (see Figure 8). Seated in this position of authority, during our devotion sessions, she often clutched a cherished book, peering outside at the swaying trees, passing pedestrians, and bustling express deliveries. Her devotion prayers tended to seek protection for her family and wisdom to confront upcoming challenges. The essence of her authority lies in self-discipline and a quest for divine blessings, epitomized by the chair gracing the study room.



Figure 8. The first women presented the chair with color pencils in the study room. In the center of the painting, there is a wooden chair with a woven backrest, which represents a women in the room and symbolizes female empowerment. Placed with strategic precision amidst the surroundings, the chair occupies a space where a large window, cabinets, and books coexist in a well-lit and reflective ambiance. The background is represented with simple line and light colours showing the sun light from the big window. Reproduction of the drawing courtesy of the participants in my art devotion group.

The chair in Figure 8 represents the private space of a woman biblical scholar within a family. The moment she represented was in a light and open area, with books on a shelf in the background. The chair symbolizes the pursuit of education and attainment of knowledge. A cushion and a basket woven backrest suggest comfort in scholarly pursuits within one's everyday life.

Navigating Patriarchy Rocking Chair

The third participant in my group highlighted in my visual essay is a female pastor who has devoted more than two decades of her life to serve people in Taiwan, France, and the UK. With vivid experiences, she navigates the challenges posed by patriarchal and hierarchical structures within the clergy, grappling with societal and cultural stereotypes.

She drew a rocking chair in which the movement symbolizes the sway of power. During our art devotion session, in speaking about her rocking chair drawing, she described memories of her childhood home and the how rocking sound induces memories of the sounds of insects she heard in her youth and the feeling of a loving home. The phrase 'change in height' on the artwork (see Figure 9) demonstrates the potential to assist more people through the authority of the priesthood. The overlapping colors weave together a sacred light and a cross, and although the space may be empty, the brightness shines into the future, extending infinitely. This imagery resonates with the struggles and discrimination faced by female pastors in a patriarchal society, as if they find themselves in an endless expanse, constantly needing to challenge and overcome various obstacles as a leader in the church.



Figure 9. In the drawing, a rocking chair is patterned with cross-crossed lines in interwoven hues of yellow, green, red, and blue. The lines serve as pathways in horizontal and vertical directions through the intricate weaving of recurring struggles in life, and the need to navigate the realms of both elevated and humble powers. The rocker intimately connects with the soothing memories of enduring familial ties. Reproduction of the drawing courtesy of the participation in my art devotion group.

Conclusion and Discussion of Art Devotion Chair Pedagogy: Female Resilience within Liminal Space

My daily devotion through art and meditation is not just a commitment; it's an integral part of my identity and a form of storytelling, reflecting elements of the incarnation process. The artistic journeys of the three women participants in my art devotion group and my own drawings, during an art devotion session while in a UK hospital during my friend's labor to deliver her baby, are not intended as

art as part of our professional careers as artists. We do not claim or seek the status of artist for livelihood and recognition. However, participation in the creative production of physical and digital artifacts in human beings' day-to-day lives can increase sensitivity and deepen understanding of how patriarchy impacts our lives and how to find female power through art meditation (Flax, 2018). Our art devotion sessions, an artistic journey of self-reflection through a pedagogy of chairs, brought us together in community to share our physical and mental battlefields between being a subservient woman and defying the manners and stereotypes promoted in patriarchal social, economic, and visual culture systems, among other intersecting systemic controls (e.g., race bias, immigration laws, reproductive healthcare access) intended to limit women's lives.

The group discovered a liminal space through drawing and visual analysis of chair drawings by contemplating power in relation to their female social position and Taiwanese diasporic identity during transitional periods: whether blocked by a physical doorway, an emotional shift like a divorce, lost job, or an identity reformation. This nuanced exploration through what I refer to as "art devotion and chair pedagogy" adds insights into female resilience, intertwining the physical and emotional aspects within the liminality of the depicted chairs.

Liminality refers being in a state, situation, or stage of transition. In a physical context, liminality might be where one is situated while experiencing art devotion. In addition, female resilience within physical liminal spaces could suggest a dependence or reliance on transitional zones, perhaps for safety, identity exploration, or empowerment. In the digital realm, liminal spaces could be metaphorical, symbolic, or literally (re)present a transition or boundary. Art devotion can guide online communities, social media platforms, or other digital spaces toward female resilience. Art devotion practices involve examining seemingly mundane objects, such as chairs, for their symbolic and physical power that impacts life.

Liminal spaces can be unique spaces between real and utopian realms to transcend geographical distances and achieve spiritual connection and exploration through virtual links (Saldanha, 2008). Liminality possesses a dual nature, being both grounded in reality and endowed with a transcendent quality, which is relevant how our online art devotion practice nourished our spirituality and

fostered a sense of female empowerment and balance within the hierarchical patriarchal societies we traverse.

The chair symbolizes the liminal journey between psychological and virtual within blended heterotopia spaces. Through art devotion and chair pedagogy we navigated our transnational female status to embrace freedom and accept ourselves, independently from the constraints of the patriarchal gaze, and surpass various real-world limitations. The chair drawings showcased paths toward strength and resilience in both spiritual and societal dimensions, as we shared opinions and experiences, as well as established support networks.

Chair pedagogy can be transformative in the art devotion journey, guiding women towards self-discovery. I began art devotion with the "empty chair technique" based in Gestalt psychotherapy (Orfanos, 2021). The process involved participants selecting a chair card and then I guided recall of past relationships, and engaged the group in dialogue about their past to address unresolved issues or unspoken farewells. The chair cards served as device to reveal hidden layers of transnational and cultural identities, encompassing aspects of life, belief, power, cultural differences, and stereotypes. Discussion initiated with images of chairs provided an opportunity to express realizations and experiences. Drawing chairs encouraged interactions and communication that linked to the physical body. Thus, the participants could have body engagement and connect to the online art devotion learning space. The chair pedagogy process fostered compassion and loving-kindness, leading to the release of emotional stress and the attainment of mental clarity.

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