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Snail Paradise Trilogy: A Series by Chang En-man

Abstract

*In 1933, a Japanese colonial official introduced the giant African snail (*Achatina fulica*), originally from East Africa, to Taiwan from Singapore to be raised for food. Since 2009, I have given presentations on this snail, including projects involving recipes, embroidery, maps, interviews, collaborations, and multimedia work. My inspiration comes from my Paiwan (an Indigenous group in Taiwan) mother, who would always gather snails after the rain, cook them, and give them to my siblings and me to eat. Snails were the starting point for my research into my maternal bloodline, which is part of the Taiwanese Indigenous bloodline. From there, I considered how the path of the snail's dispersal is comparable to the route of imperial expansion in the Pacific, and looked at Taiwan's history and its relationship to the world. This paper considers my evolving project centered around the giant African snail and offers my thoughts on how traditional Indigenous Taiwanese cooking and sewing practices may be reinterpreted as a strategy for resisting colonisation.*

Keywords: *First Nations, giant African snail, Taiwan Indigenous people, Paiwan, cross-stitching, cooking, installation art*

For me, the giant African snail (*Achatina fulica*) is not just a species of animal—it has great traditional significance to my culture and community. Since 2009, I have given nine presentations on this snail, including projects involving recipes, embroidery, maps, interviews, collaborations, and multimedia work. My inspiration comes from my Paiwan (an Indigenous group in Taiwan) mother, who would always gather snails after the rain, cook them, and give them to my siblings and me to eat. After she and my Han father divorced when I was two years old, we lived with our father, but my mother continued to bring snails to us. Snails later became the starting point for my research into my maternal Taiwanese Indigenous bloodline. The fact that mostly only Indigenous people eat them piqued my curiosity and inspired me to creatively explore Taiwan's history and its relationship with the world by looking at how this exotic species came to Taiwan.

I wrote the following song and filmed people from the Pacavalj community singing it to one of their traditional melodies:

Dingding (snail), crack, crack!
I would like to tell you a story about a creature from far away.
It may even be related to the origin of human beings.
However, before that, I will crack this shell, take the snail out,
and cook it with the traditional ingredients of shellflower leaves,
Trichodesma khasianum, and millet.
We make this precious traditional food called *cinavu*
for special guests on important days. *Aya!*

— Chang En-man, “The Legend of the Snail”

The video (Fig. 1) is part of my series *Snail Paradise Trilogy: Setting Sail or Final Chapter*, which was exhibited at the Pan-Austro-Nesian Arts Festival at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts in 2021. The theme of the festival was “Discourse on Ocean Currents and Islands.” The video serves as the introduction to my installation, which explores how the snail came to Taiwan by riding along ocean currents at the hands of travelling humans.



Figure 1. Chang En-man, *Snail Paradise Trilogy: Setting Sail or Final Chapter* (detail), 2021. Video, 14:35 min. Image courtesy of the artist

The Age of Exploration . . . for the Giant African Snail

The Age of Exploration (1400s–1600s), also called the Age of Discovery, initiated exchanges of species throughout the world and posed new challenges related to disease and survival. Later, in the 1700s, British botanist Sir Joseph Banks sailed with the likes of Captain James Cook on odysseys of scientific discovery. With each return home, Banks brought an abundance of exotic species to add wonder to the Royal Garden.¹ From the Nineteenth Century, the giant African snail, originally from East Africa, had been brought on shipping vessels that rode the ocean's currents from Madagascar to Sri Lanka and then to East Asia.² In 1933, Shimojō Kumaichi, an official in Taiwan's public health administration (during the Japanese occupation, 1895–1945), introduced the snail to Taiwan from Singapore to be raised for food. I will not go into detail about this portion of history, but I mention it because it made me realise that the giant African snail was forced to migrate by the actions of colonialism. Due to its fertility and capacity for survival, snail supply exceeded demand. Snails were released from captivity, wreaking havoc on Taiwan's agricultural industry.³ At around the same time, they invaded the Malay Peninsula, North Borneo, Indonesia, and the Hawaiian Islands. Due to the catastrophic damage they cause, they are currently on the list of 100 of the World's Worst Invasive Alien Species.⁴

In Taiwan, people in cities think eating snails is distasteful, that eating them is merely a memory from the time when Taiwan was still agrarian, before the economy took off in the 1970s. But in Indigenous communities, people still collect and raise snails for eating. Gathering and sharing them is not just utilitarian but a major social activity. The Paiwan people in eastern Taiwan use the meat to make our treasured *cinavu*, a food eaten on special occasions such as weddings, festivals, and visits from important guests. The snail-based dishes my Paiwan mother made became a springboard for my research and art in 2009. Every piece of art I make is a process of gathering and sharing. My pieces based on the snail involve a process that traces the animal's migration from Africa to Taiwan via Singapore and are a response to the issues of colonisation and decolonisation from the perspective of the local people.



Figure 2. Chang En-man, still from *Snail Playground*, 2009. Video, 5:46 min. Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 3. Chang En-man, *Fresh Snail*, 2010. Live performance at Hong-gah Museum, Taipei, 30:00 min. Image courtesy of the artist

My first work that centred on the giant African snail was the humorous *Snail Playground* (2009), in which I adhered small models of famous Taiwanese buildings, such as the Taipei 101, onto snail shells, making it appear as if the buildings were slowly crawling on a mound of soil shaped to look like Taiwan (Fig. 2). The following year, I arranged a live art performance called *Fresh Snail* (Fig. 3) in which I described how snails were prepared by my mother. At a local art gallery, I cracked open snail shells for thirty minutes, after which people in the audience were given bags of frozen snail meat, which is how my mother used to give the meat to me. In 2013, for *Snail Dishes Interview Program: Highway No. 9* (Fig. 4), I went to the southeastern county of Taitung, where my mother was born and raised, along the southern portion of Taiwan’s Highway No. 9. There I invited locals from the Kanadun, Tjuaqau, and Pacavalj communities to be interviewed and give demonstrations on how to cook snails. For this piece and *Fresh Snail*, I tried to highlight how Indigenous people view the snails and the relationship between Indigenous Taiwanese cultures and the snails. I realised that the everyday task of gathering snails has integrated these introduced animals into local cultures. By sharing these dishes, social networks among people have been established and linked, as evidenced in the way my mother would prepare snail dishes and give them to us to maintain her connection with us.



Figure 4. Chang En-man, still from *Snail Dishes Interview Program: Highway No. 9*, 2013. Three-channel video (24:36, 21:53, and 20:39). Image courtesy of Singapore Biennale 2019

In June 2019, I attended an art event in Singapore in which Malay artist ila and Peranakan artist Kin placed their dishes together on a large mat, forming a fusion that prompted me to want to collaborate with them (Fig. 5). I discovered that even though Singapore had been a major hub for the spread of the giant African snail, people there no longer ate them. I decided to collaborate with Kin and ila to create snail dishes with a Southeast Asian flavour for the 2019 Singapore Biennale (Fig. 6). Thinking of the slime trails left by the snails as a metaphor for the marks of colonial expansion, I explored the hybridisation and transformation of culture in various places. Through recipes from many countries and their differing ingredients, cooking methods, and accompanying vegetables—in addition to the need to find substitute ingredients because colonisers forced our ancestors to migrate to different locales—the artists and I discussed our historical connections. In this way, we worked together to eliminate the slime of colonialism that kept being secreted and to give the snail meat the most delectable local flavour.⁵



Figure 5. Malay artist ila (bottom left, brown shirt) and Peranakan artist Kin placing their cuisine together at an art event in Singapore, June 2019. Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 6. Peranakan artist Kin, who was born and raised in Singapore, created a snail dish for the author called “Snails on *buah keluak* soil and butterfly pea flower.” The dish simulates snails crawling on soil and eating flowers. The “soil” is made from *buah keluak*, an important ingredient in Peranakan traditional cuisine. Image courtesy of the artist

A major aspect of processing snail meat is removing the slime—a must to ensure good flavour. Since I view the slime as comparable to the marks left behind by colonisers, its removal is akin to the attempt to remove the negative effects of colonisation. Such understanding prompted me to further probe how Indigenous people have responded to the cultural discontinuity that resulted from colonisation and how they have integrated things brought by colonisers (such as the snail) into their culture. This also piqued my interest in learning about the attitudes of people in other countries toward things brought by colonisers. On this journey of exploration, including the collection of plants and vegetables used for making snail-based dishes, I created a foodscape map using embroidery, a highly significant part of my Paiwan culture.

Navigation System: Course and Paper Mulberry Trees

Sewing and textile arts are important media for me. Having grown up in a city, the experience that has made the deepest impression on me since returning to my mother’s community of Pacavalj is learning the cross-stitching of our traditional attire. Cross-stitching is a type of sewing in which X-shaped stitches are made on

even-weave fabric to produce geometric figures and shapes as well as symmetrical and repetitive motifs. The book *Writing Script in the Indigenous Village: Course* describes how Taiwanese Indigenous women gently “write” by substituting a needle for a pen and thread for ink, and how they have examined old articles of clothing kept in museums to find out how people of the past stitched.⁶ The word “course” in the title refers to the navigation term used to mean a route from point A to point B. Cross-stitching, an easy-to-learn type of stitching, became like a compass for me, guiding me in mending my mother’s culture.



Figure 7. Chang En-man, *Snail Paradise: Preface* (detail), 2019. A pair of men's rear-open pants with embroidered images of varying dimensions. Exhibited at *The Middleman, the Backpacker, the Alien Species, and the Time Traveller*, TKG+, Taiwan, July 20, 2019–September 8, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist

The hierarchical society of the Paiwan people is basically divided into nobles and commoners, whose social status and even clan history are designated by the patterns adorning their clothing and accessories. With the loss of cultural knowledge among the younger generation, identity and social status are

becoming less well known; people no longer know the significance of the sewn patterns or how to wear traditional clothing properly. Since this is happening to Paiwan people, I thought I should write a history of myself, the locality, and the world through cross-stitching. I made a pair of pants based on the style of traditional pants for men from Pacavalj, on which I stitched imagery of warriors going out to headhunt, snails, and two suns (representing two colonial stories that Taiwanese Indigenous people have lived through—the rising sun of the Japanese Empire’s flag and the bright sun against a blue sky of the Chinese Kuomintang’s flag) (Fig. 7–8). These pants help patch the holes in our culture resulting from colonisation. The imagery is a record of history and may serve as a reference for our tradition in the future.



Figure 8. Chang En-man, *Snail Paradise: Preface*, 2019. Mixed media installation with video (3:25 min) and three traditional pairs of men’s rear-open pants with embroidered images of varying dimensions. Exhibited at *The Middleman, the Backpacker, the Alien Species, and the Time Traveller*, TKG+, Taiwan, July 20, 2019–September 8, 2019. Image courtesy of TKG+



Figure 9. Chang En-man, *Snail Paradise*, 2019. Installation with projection on embroidered screen, 300 x 200 cm. Exhibited at Luodong Cultural Factory, Yilan, Taiwan, Photograph by Sing-ying Wu

By looking at the process of modernisation in recent history, I am figuring out how and with what attitude we should respond to globalisation. Perhaps the giant African snail's home of East Africa will provide answers. I have recorded the history of the snail's introduction by colonisers through cross-stitching on a screen (Fig. 9). This work also incorporates a number of cross-stitch patterns—some are traditional, while others are my own creations based on what I have learned about the giant African snail being brought to Taiwan and becoming part of the local diet. For the Paiwan, who did not have a system of writing to record history, embroidery served as a substitute. The patterns I created may be used by the Paiwan as symbols of their identity. The point of my art is not to criticise the history of colonialism but to focus on how Taiwanese Indigenous people, to their own benefit, transformed certain effects of the colonisers.

Another motif I stitched onto the pants, and in other works, is that of a paper mulberry tree (Fig. 10). While collecting ingredients for snail dishes, I learned about the leaves of the paper mulberry, a native species of Taiwan, which make removing snail slime—an otherwise trying task—very easy. The snails from East Africa and the paper mulberry trees from Taiwan form a complex network through which I have explored the history of the island resulting from colonisation.



Figure 10. Chang En-man, *Snail Paradise Trilogy: Setting Sail or Final Chapter* (detail), 2021. Nine pieces of embroidery in Plexiglas, 16 x 16 x 2 cm each. Installed at the Pan-Austro-Nesian Arts Festival exhibition, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan, July 17–October 31, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist

A Griot in an Indigenous Village in Taiwan

There will always be debates about origin (or authenticity), whether it be in relation to food or the human race. In my art, I focus on the interaction and integration that takes place when different communities of people make contact. I first looked for answers to my questions by researching the cooking of snails, which in turn influenced my art. Since the protagonist of this story came from Africa, I looked for clues in the Out of Africa theory which argues that all humans can be traced back to a population of gracile *Australopithecus* in East Africa, but African history was only orally transmitted.⁷ In West Africa, people known as *griots* are repositories of stories whose job it is to travel and spread information.⁸ According to the influential Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1901–1991), “In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns down,” which is an apt description

of what is happening in my mother's culture.⁹ In Pacavalj lives a young carrier of culture, much like a *griot*, named Sedjam Takivan Kavunga. He is said to have been raised by ten of the wise elderly people in the community and is highly skilled in numerous areas of traditional handicraft, agriculture, singing, and dance. He also has a deep understanding of his mother tongue, the Paiwan language, including archaic terms. With the spirits of his ancestors inside him, he sang an ancient rain prayer for me, bringing conclusion to my snail series and seemingly seeing me off on my "Out of Africa" journey. My recent artwork *Snail Paradise Trilogy: Setting Sail or Closing Chapter* (2021) includes a series of cooking recipes, embroideries, mappings, interviews, collaborative projects, and multimedia works inspired by the spread of giant African Snails (Fig. 11). While creating these pieces of art, I sang traditional Paiwan songs. For the Paiwan, who have no writing system, song is a method of recording and transmitting history and culture. I specifically asked Sedjam Takivan Kavunga to sing a rain prayer for me as a means of calling snails out (as they usually come out after a rain) and metaphorically referring to the re-emergence of the marks of colonialism.



Figure 11. Chang En-man, *Snail Paradise Trilogy: Setting Sail or Final Chapter*, 2021. Installation comprising painted boat (50 x 100 x 400 cm); projection (15:28 min); video (14:35 min); and embroidery, nine pieces of 16 x 16 x 2 cm. Exhibited at the Pan-Austro-Nesian Arts Festival exhibition, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan, July 17, 2021–October 31, 2021. Photograph by Hung-long Lin. Courtesy of the artist

So, am I setting sail or is this already the final chapter? The subject of my work is Taiwanese Indigenous history, but snails are my main interface for communicating that history. What I am concerned with is how culture can transform and develop on its own and how the colonised individual deals with colonisation. Taiwanese Indigenous people of the past may have just been ordinary people who had little power to resist their colonisers, but you can see how they coped by looking at their use of one of the effects of colonisation—snails. I have learned from and been creatively inspired by how my people responded to colonisation.

In looking back to further understand the value of tradition and its feasibility in the modern era, I have considered precious things that people have come to take for granted. I wish to show that Taiwan is a rich land with extensive cultural variety. The snail's spiral movements are by chance, not choice, and the spiral shapes evoke the multiple paths of colonisation, the way the snail expands on its own after being brought to Taiwan by humans, just as local peoples' responses are manifold. My snail series illustrates an evolution of interactions between human, animal, and environment— and incorporates traditional food and modernity. I wish to transcend colonialism and anti-colonial forces, leading to the path of decolonisation practice through cooperation, sharing, exchange, and transmission based on symbiosis, coexistence, and shared concepts.

Chang En-man was born in Taitung, Taiwan, and currently lives and works in Taipei. Her artistic practice, which includes film, photography, sculpture, and project-oriented works, explores the intertwining relationships between Taiwanese Indigenous peoples and their land in the face of colonisation. She holds an MFA in plastic arts from the Graduate School of Plastic Arts, National Taiwan University of Arts. Chang has had several solo exhibitions, and her work has been featured in the Taipei Biennial (2014), the Taiwan Biennial (2018), the Istanbul Biennial (2019), the Singapore Biennale, (2019), Kathmandu Triennale (2022), and documenta fifteen (2022).

Notes

¹ Kathy Willis and Carolyn Fry, *Plants: From Roots to Riches* (London: John Murray, 2015), 24–5.

² Albert R. Mead, *The Giant African Snail: A Problem in Economic Malacology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 5.

³ Zhu Yao-yi 朱耀沂, *台灣昆蟲學史話 (1684–1945)* [*History of Insects in Taiwan (1684–1945)*] (Taipei: Yushan Publishing Company, 2005), 304–7.

⁴ Global Invasive Species Database, “100 of the World’s Worst Invasive Alien Species,” http://www.iucngisd.org/gisd/100_worst.php.

⁵ Chang En-Man, ila, Kin Chui, *NUSANTARA ARCHIVE 10: Chang En-Man - Snail Paradise* (Taipei: No Man’s Land / Digital Art Foundation, 2019), <http://www.heath.tw/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/na10.pdf>.

⁶ Lin Pei-jun 林佩君, *部落書寫體：針路* [*Writing Script in the Indigenous Village: Course*] (Taitung: Ata, 2016), 11.

⁷ William A. Haviland; Harald E. L. Prins; Dana Walrath; and Bunny McBride, *The Essence of Anthropology* (Cengage Learning, 2009), 90.

⁸ Birago Diop, 阿瑪杜·庫巴的非洲寓言 [*Les Contes d’Amadou Koumba*], trans. Du Qiu-zong 杜邱宗 (Taipei: Homeward Publishing, 2015), 4–5.

⁹ Ibid.