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Taiwan, China Artists Breach Political Divide
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By Tiffany Wu

QUEMOY, Taiwan (Reuters) - In an abandoned Cold War bomb shelter on Taiwan's frontline island of Quemoy, the music of Bach and Beethoven jars with the boom and screech of a piano being smashed to bits.

The composer, Oscar-winner Tan Dun, is one of 18 artists from China and Taiwan who are converting some of Quemoy's 2,000 derelict bunkers into multimedia installations, hoping to use art to bridge a bitter political divide.

"Only artists tell the truth and only artists can reach people's hearts," said China-born Tan, a former rice planter and refugee of the Chinese Cultural Revolution who won an Oscar for his score for the film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon."

The Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art opened on Sunday with artists, film directors and composers engaging in a cultural exchange that aims to promote peace in the Taiwan Strait.

The exhibit comes as tensions smolder across the Strait.

China is speeding its arms build-up to prepare for a possible war, worried that independence-leaning Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian could push for a formal declaration of statehood for an island Beijing views as a renegade province that must return to the fold.

"If you're debating politically, people get confused, people get blocked minds ... which I think for both sides is very tragic," Tan told Reuters outside Tashan Battery No. 3 Bunker and Arsenal.

"From a cultural point of view, from a historical point of view, you see something much more harmonic, much more peaceful."

Taiwan and China split after Chinese Nationalist Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek lost a civil war on the mainland to Mao Zedong's communists and escaped to the island chain in 1949.

Quemoy, a barren islet just 1.2 miles off the coast of China's Fujian province, became the vortex of the cold war that ensued, enduring a bloody battle with invading communist troops and years of devastating artillery duels.

The heavily fortified island had one of the world's densest concentrations of land mines at one time and thousands of mines still lie unearthened today in fenced off land.

TAKING A GAMBLE

"We were on the run all the time. We lived in terror every day. When we heard the sound of gunfire, we ducked into the bunkers," said Quemoy artist Lee Shi-chi, who hung red sorghum liquor bottles outside his bunker to symbolize artillery shells.

He also placed a dice game and lottery balls in the defense post, inviting visitors to gamble on peace or war.

For Lee, collaborating with peers in China has evoked a sense of shared cultural history that underscores his dream of eventual political reunification -- though not in this lifetime.

"Reunification is definitely not something an artist can engineer," he said. "As artists, all we can do is exchange ideas with the other side. If a Chinese culture can be established, then reunification is natural."

It is an irony that most Chinese tourists won't be able to visit the exhibition because of the heavy restrictions on mainland Chinese visiting Taiwan. Quemoy is minutes away by boat from China and an hour by plane from Taipei.

Another Taiwan artist, film-maker Wu Tung-wang, said he discovered a surprisingly strong sense of Taiwan identity when he interviewed children about their views on surrendering to China in a documentary for his bomb shelter.

"It's amazing that they identify with Taiwan very, very strongly and they think dignity is more important than anything. They all think of themselves as Taiwanese," said Wu.

Other artists shied away from an overt discussion of touchy politics, noting some Taiwan entertainers and businessmen have been labeled as pro-independence and blacklisted by China.

But most drew inspiration from Quemoy's violent history for their works, some of which are still in progress.

Chinese painter Liu Xiaodong made history as the first artist to enter army camps on both sides, filling his exhibit with 18 life-size portraits of soldiers wearing camouflage and two blank canvases alluding

to Chiang and Mao.

"My personal ideal is not to have so much nationalism. All I want to do is portray the life of these people who face danger all the time, who may die in conflict," Liu said.

"Because tensions are high across the Strait, war can easily break out. As an artist, I hope for peace as we're all brothers."

MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR

Chiang and Mao also featured in the bunker taken by Yin Ling, a Taiwan-born erotic model who said she will perform on a pink four-poster bed with two actors playing the two leaders.

"I will make some sexy poses on the bed to say that violence is not important and making love is important," Yin said.

Fujian-born Shen Yuan lined her bunker, which sits in the middle of a minefield facing China, with white sponge and built a huge megaphone on top of it to symbolize the loudspeakers that used to blare propaganda back and forth across the Taiwan Strait.

Curator Cai Guo-Qiang, who spent his youth under artillery barrages a few miles away in Fujian's Quanzhou city, said he hoped the exhibit -- which runs until Jan. 10 -- would preserve history and create "an arsenal of wealth" for Quemoy.

"Kinmen (Quemoy) has paid a dear price to protect Taiwan," said county magistrate Lee Chu-feng. "Our intention is to replace gunpowder with art power and express our unity with people across the Strait," he said.

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