

Wave Makers

The Drama that Sparked #MeToo in Taiwan

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Abstract

Wave Makers, a Netflix original Taiwanese TV series, has not only captivated audiences with its compelling narrative but also sparked the #MeToo movement in Taiwan. The drama, set against the backdrop of a presidential election, intertwines personal and political narratives. This review explores the show's impact, its unique approach to political storytelling, and its role in promoting social reform through media, illustrating how it encourages victims to speak out and inspire a discussion on gender equality and social justice.

Keywords: *Wave Makers*, Netflix, Taiwan drama, #MeToo movement, political drama

In April 2023, a Netflix original Taiwanese TV series, *Wave Makers* (*renxuan zhi ren zaolang zhe* 人選之人——造浪者), was released online. As a political drama that interweaves gender issues into a presidential election, *Wave Makers* was widely accepted and soared to the top of Netflix Taiwan's daily rankings for ten consecutive days after its premiere, maintaining the number one position on the weekly charts for two consecutive weeks. On May 31st, a former worker of the Democratic Progressive Party (*minjindang* 民進黨), Chen Chi'ian-jou 陳汗瑑, revealed that she had been sexually harassed and cited the iconic line from the series in her post: "Let's not just let it go

(我們不要就這樣算了)。” This declaration emboldened numerous victims of sexual harassment to speak out courageously, exposing unwanted physical and verbal behavior from male superiors. The anti-sexual harassment movement, initially spotlighting political figures as depicted in the drama, expanded to academia, literature, social activism, and entertainment. The #MeToo movement that began in the United States in 2017 and influenced mainland China in 2018, had finally reached Taiwan, which is considered “belated” because Taiwan, as the first Asian society to legalize same-sex marriage, has been regarded as a beacon of liberal values and gender equality.

Wave Makers is a political drama that showcases the campaign team of the Justice Party (*gongzheng dang* 公正黨) during a presidential election, rallying support for their party chairwoman, Lin Yueh-chen 林月真. Integrated with the exciting election process is the resolution of two sexual harassment incidents involving staff Chang Ya-ching 張亞靜, who fought for her rights with her immediate boss, Weng Wen-fang 翁文方. Through the perspectives of the political staff, the series captures the multifaceted nature of the political workplace. This essay mainly discusses the ways in which an internationally released television drama ignited a local social movement.



Figure 1: The presidential candidate Lin Yueh-chen.
Source: Screenshot from *Wave Makers* on Netflix.

The Political Is Personal: Grounding the Macro-Narratives in Contemporary Issues

Wave Makers gains popularity by linking politics to ordinary people and presenting contemporary issues that resonate with audiences. It parallels “private” issues like sexual harassment and LGBTQ+ discrimination with public ones like the death penalty and environmental protection, asserting they deserve equal attention. The show distinguishes itself from other political dramas by addressing politics in a contemporary context.

Big-data analysis of search engine keywords related to *Wave Makers* in mid-May 2023, when #MeToo had less impact, revealed significant interest in terms like *staff officer*, *Netflix*, *politics*, *campaign*, and *election*, indicating audiences’ curiosity about the political elements.¹ Before *Wave Makers*, political dramas were a rarity in Taiwan due to producers’ concerns about potential market impact or future cooperation with mainland China. However, with the cross-strait relationship becoming more tense in recent years, two television dramas featuring politics in Taiwan were released: *Freedom of Formosa* (ziyou de xiangwang 自由的向望) in 2019 and *Island Nation* (guoji qipai shi 國際棋牌室) in 2020.² These dramas, referencing real political maneuvers of the twentieth century, did not garner as much attention

1. Ma Bin 馬斌, “《人選之人—造浪者》為何爆紅? 政治幕僚的光與暗 台劇熱風「起浪關鍵」曝光” (Renxuan zhi ren—Zaolang zhe weihe baohong? Zhengzhi muliao de guang yu an Taiju refeng ‘Qilang guanjian’ puguang) [Why did *Wave Makers* become popular? The light and dark of political staffers. The key to the taiwanese drama trend exposed], 中時新聞網 (*China Times*), June 15, 2023, <https://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20230615001852-260404?chdtv>.

2. *Island Nation*, including twenty episodes over two seasons, depicts Taiwan’s transition from an authoritarian state to a democracy in the 1990s while *Freewill of Formosa* is set against the background of three incidents that influence the democratization process of Taiwan, “Li Mingzhe Incident,” the “Sunflower Student Movement,” and the “Kaohsiung Incident.” See *Island Nation* 國際橋牌社, dir. Wang Yixin 汪怡昕, Lin Shizhang 林世章, Sun Dajun 孫大軍, and Lin Longyin 林龍吟 (Taiwan: Mark Twain International Film Company and FarEasTone Telecommunications, 2020–2021); *Freewill of Formosa* 自由的向望, directed by Zheng Wentang 鄭文堂, Su Yixuan 蘇奕瑄, and Zhu Ping 朱平 (Taiwan: PTS Taigi Channel, 2019).

as *Wave Makers*, which features fictional parties set in the contemporary era. The two female presidential candidates in the show related to the current president's election process and the Taiwan society under female leadership. Societal issues like the death penalty, immigration, same-sex marriage, and environmental issues are also well-represented in the TV show, resonating with Taiwan citizens' concerns.

Instead of focusing on bloody political battles, the series centers on the staff behind the scenes, crafting an authentic professional drama full of life and energy. The protagonists in the drama are not central or high-level figures; they are the grassroots of the campaign who drive everything forward. This grassroots perspective crafts relatable narratives, allowing the audience to empathize and incorporate discussions surrounding social issues into their daily lives.

In the ongoing discourse regarding the abolition of the death penalty in this political drama, the Justice Party does not overtly support its elimination due to potential repercussions. Publicly, Lin Yueh-chen advocates for a comprehensive reform of the legal system, given the pragmatic reason that not all party members or voters endorse the abolition whereas, in private she holds opposition to capital punishment. This illustrates the challenge of reconciling personal beliefs with the responsibilities of an electoral candidate. Similarly, campaign staffer Tsai Yi-an 蔡易安 is required to remain neutral in public engagements even as his abolitionist ideals torture him. When his activist friends criticize him for not participating in the anti-death penalty protest, he defends his choice of crafting a video of environmental issues, which is by no means less important than protesting. The narratives of these two characters highlight the complexity of political expressions and illustrate that politics influence people's intellectual being as well as their interpersonal relationships. The depiction of staffs' work is naturally interwoven with the storyline, creating a diverse array of "ordinary people" working in the "campaigning team," making the narrative more relatable to many viewers. Besides, from the perspective of ordinary people, politics is shown to be accessible and not necessarily fierce, thus



Figure 2: The campaign team.

Source: Screenshot from *Wave Makers* on Netflix.

highlighting that politics is like air and water, something that we can never escape from.

The series incorporates the idea that the political is personal by presenting a multifaceted female perspective. As Lin Yueh-chen asks in a public speech, “Does a female president guarantee a society of gender equality?”³ The answer is, of course, no, which is demonstrated through portraying the multilayered repressions on the female characters. In the show, a female deputy secretary attempts to cover up an in-party sexual harassment case “for the interest of the party”; the campaign team leader, despite his progressive values on various issues, denigrates his wife’s domestic labor and her job as an illustrator; the male party secretary feels entitled to lecture Lin Yueh-chen about the “bigger picture”; even the female president is overshadowed by the scandals involving her husband and brother-in-law’s corruption as well as

3. *Wave Makers*, episode 3, 00:10:27.

her male deputy's sexual misconduct. These obstacles are rarely seen in the previous political drama. And the visualization of these issues emotionally engages viewers with the notion that gender equality in Taiwan is far from achieved, even though it has long been advocated.

This perspective also emphasizes the importance of individuals within the collective. If the rights of small party workers cannot be protected, how can we talk about national affairs? This is a question that both Wen-fang and Yueh-chen ask when dealing with in-party sexual harassment. Wen-fang advocates that a party worthy of power must protect its members or it risks disillusioning the youth. In comparison, the opposition party's vice-presidential candidate, Ch'ao Chang-tze 趙昌澤, demands his innocent family cover his mistakes under the guise of "election." His failure is seeded at the moment he sacrifices his family for a career. At the end, the Justice Party wins, and Ch'ao's reputation is ruined. The narrative underscores that the ones who fight for individual well-being would gain the most trust while those who do not will lose it.

The foundational theme throughout the series is the primacy of the individual. No one should be sacrificed for electoral success. This mirrors Taiwan's political evolution, from pursuing democratization to striving for social justice and fairness.⁴ For sure, the government depicted in the series is idealistic. But the series calls for individual efforts to contribute to an idealist civil society, highlighting their positions as the driving force of societal change. In this regard, the title *Wave Makers* not only refers to the campaigning team that creates ripples of public influence but also implies that small actions can create huge waves. The political is thus personal, with

4. Cai Youchong 菜有蟲, "Netflix《人選之人-造浪者》: 窺探台灣民主選舉文化的絕佳窗口, 「中國因素」卻被刻意隱形了" (Netflix Renxuan zhi ren - Zaolang zhe: Kuitan Taiwan minzhu xuanju wenhua de juejia chuankou, 'Zhongguo yinsu' que bei keyi yinxing le) [Netflix *Wave Makers*: A perfect window into Taiwan's democratic election culture, but the 'China Factor' has been deliberately hidden], 關鍵評論 (*News Lens*), May 3, 2023, <https://www.thenewslens.com/feature/eden2023/203131>.

reform resting on everyone's determination to effect change. This encourages victims to voice their experiences, resonating with the core of the #MeToo movement.

The Personal Is Political: An Anti-Sexual Harassment Manual

Wave Makers, with a significant portion of its narrative on the anti-sexual harassment issue, inspires past victims to expose, report, and appeal against their harassers. The show visualizes guidance, equipping survivors with mental support and strategic tools. Those previously harassed but afraid to report or lack relevant information can learn how to act and how to navigate their feelings.

In *Wave Makers*, Ya-ching experiences two instances of sexual harassment, one within her organization and another involving her previous mentor and vice-presidential candidate from another party, Ch'ao Chang-tze. The nature of the two cases leads to different mental stress and approaches. In both, her immediate supervisor Wen-fang stands with her to seek justice. The show presents the entire process of being sexually assaulted and its aftermath, illustrating potential obstacles and coping mechanisms.

Amid pervasive misogyny, victims of sexual misconduct frequently fear coming forward. At the outset of the anti-harassment process, or even prior to initiating it, the victim may hesitate about various potential outcomes. These include the chances of success, possible blame, shaming, attacks, or threats, in addition to the distress of being triggered. In the stance of in-party sexual harassment, when being assaulted, Ya-ching twists the attacker's arm behind his back and dislocates his shoulder. At first, Ya-ching worries about injuring the perpetrator but Wen-fang convinces her that he deserved it and suggests she report the incident. Ya-ching, however, has concerns about the repetitive questioning, the need to recount the harassment multiple times,

the lack of concrete evidence leading to doubts about her intentions, and the complex power dynamics within such a large organization. Wen-fang later encourages her not to give up. She says:

How could I, Wen Fang, not know that this system has a lot of rotten issues? . . . I want to help you, so let's not just let it go. Many things cannot just be let go, because if we do, people will slowly die inside. They will die.

(文方姐怎麼會不知道這個體制有一堆爛問題?現在我想幫你, 所以我們不要這樣算了。很多事情不能就這樣算了, 如果這樣的話, 人就會慢慢地死掉, 會死掉。)⁵

Wen-fang asserts that despite systematic problems, they must fight back and ensure the perpetrator receives a punishment, thus empowering Ya-ching and other real-life victims.

In another case, Ya-ching faces even greater struggles. Ya-ching censures herself for falling in love with a married man; even the nude photos were taken with her consent. She thus grapples with guilt for “loving him” and blames herself for being too naïve to make rational choices. For this reason, Ya-ching doubts her moral standing to expose Ch’ao’s misconduct. In a society where women are held to higher moral standards than men, even as victims, women often subconsciously blame themselves, believing that they must have done something wrong to deserve unequal treatment. Wen-fang emphasizes that Ya-ching is the only who suffers from this incident, but the burden should not fall solely on her; Ya-ching deserves a relationship based on love and respect instead of condemnation or exploitation. These statements not only encourage Ya-ching but also affirm for other victims that sexual assault is not their fault and they have the right to speak out and seek support. This empowerment is instrumental in encouraging victims to come forward.

5. *Wave Makers*, episode 2, directed by Lin Chun-yang, featuring Hsieh Ying-xuan and Gin-gle Wang, aired April 28, 2023, on Netflix, 00:45:25.



Figure 3: Ch'ao Chang-tze and Chang Ya-ching.
Source: Screenshot from *Wave Makers* on Netflix.

Wen-fang's company provides Ya-ching with mental support and offers a perspective for audiences to emphasize. With Wen-fang's involvement, viewers gain insight into Ya-ching's feelings and realize that sexual harassment is a result of institutional justice rather than personal failing. This highlights the importance of companionship, understanding, and collective action. In the reality of Taiwan's #MeToo movement, netizens compile news about sexual harassment and make lists of the accused, demonstrating support from strangers. Previous victims also step forward to support those confronting the same perpetrator, reflecting the core of the #MeToo movement as a collective action by survivors against sexual violation.⁶

Moreover, the "anti-sexual harassment manual" offers insights on publicizing one's voice through a diverse realm of platforms. The show details how the campaign team respond swiftly and strategically in various

6. See Huang Yuzhen 黃于真, Facebook post, June 8, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/jenny040930/posts/pfbid0ZxMC7WErM1BpJkSoESP1Jua5Hx68RgzWNDjdiiYHy-4i7Mhgx2BNomDfPeQNhqdcMl>, and "#MeToo in Taiwan," Facebook group, accessed June 14, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1033617391381997/>.

situations through platforms like Facebook, Line, YouTube, live streaming, and television. The team acknowledges the importance of engaging audiences who are frequent users of online platforms. The show portrays their daily work as seeking funding for their YouTube channel, dedicating hours to editing content for online dissemination, and meticulously managing their Facebook page. These plots underline the power of social media, which later becomes the primary battlefield for the #MeToo movement: victims share their experiences via social networks like Facebook and Instagram. They also engage with journalists and hold press conferences, which mirrors the campaign team's daily operations.

Speaking out often leads to more challenges, as survivors face secondary triggers, victim-blaming, slut-shaming, and potential threats. During the in-party hearing, higher-level officials intimidate Ya-ching and Wen-fang, suggesting that they will be blamed if the party loses the election due to this incident. Wen-fang argues that the perpetrator, instead of the victim who comes forward, should be held accountable if the party fails. It sets an example of countering victim-blaming for others being harassed. In the other case, Ya-ching publicly identifies Chao as the perpetrator who assaulted and bullied her. Wen-fang advises her to use a live television show format to prevent malicious editing and to keep the narrative concise for clarity and avoid misinterpretation. This is also a strategic move for self-protection.

What Wen-fang and Ya-ching said and did outlines the conviction procedure and presents a possible scenario. The show, as a manual, provides statements for unfettering from victim-blaming as well as practical strategies to defend victims' rights and dignity. It is instructional and practical, amplified by visual representation. It is important to illuminate viable actions for those suffering from sexual misconduct. Only by knowing they can act and how to act can victims fight back. In this regard, the visualization of anti-sexual harassment not only provides effective strategies but also raises public awareness, urging viewers to reflect on whether it is possible to differentiate "the personal" from "the political."

The Global Is Local or the Local Is Global?

The popularity of this television show and its later impact on the Taiwan #MeToo movement must be investigated in the context of Netflix's global strategy. With its mature production system and data analytics that forecast audience preferences, Netflix has played a critical role in bringing Taiwanese content to the global stage and making US narrative patterns accessible for local people.

Since partnering with local Taiwanese production teams in 2018, Netflix has seen a rise in the popularity of Taiwanese films and TV series.⁷ Collaborating with North American streaming media has provided financial support and quality assurance to Taiwanese dramas, allowing for multimedia shooting and extensive editing. According to the director and the editors in this series, they designed different cinematographic approaches for different scenes, using multiple cameras for different angles and various equipment for different medial effects.⁸ Such a wealth of equipment is almost impossible without financial support from Netflix.

The presidential election presented in the series offers the global audience a window into Taiwan's unique election culture, which is lively, vibrant, and creative. The local production team strives to depict a realistic fictional election. They invite professional designers for all election-related visuals and materials⁹ and employ musicians to custom-craft the campaign song for

7. “精彩故事無國界—Netflix深耕支持台灣影視內容產業” (Jingcai gushi wu guojie—Netflix shengen zhichi Taiwan yingshi neirong chanye) [Great stories have no borders—Netflix deeply supports Taiwan's film and television content industry], *Taiwan Business Topics*, September 27, 2022.

8. Xu Youde 徐佑德 and Maple, “《人選之人》專訪 導演林君陽、攝影簡佑陶、剪輯施博瀚：如何突破不可能與做出機智鋒利感，真正的『技術』關鍵是什麼？” (Renxuan zhi ren zhuanfang daoyan Lin Junyang, sheying Jian Youtao, jianji Shi Bohan: Ruhe tupo bukeneng yu zuochu jizhi fengli gan, zhenshi de 'jishu' guanjian shi shenme?) [Interview with *Wave Makers* director Lin Junyang, cinematographer Jian Youtao, and editor Shi Bohan: How to overcome the impossible and create a sharp and witty feeling, what is the real 'technical' key?], *Mapless Vision*, April 29, 2023, <https://www.maplesslab.asia/blog/9a55c88b5b7?categoryId=364291>.

9. Xu Youde 徐佑德 and Maple, “專訪 / 《人選之人》視覺總監 方序中*oQliq團隊：如何在《人選之人》打造出職人感，呈現台灣特有美學？” (Zhuanfang / Renxuan



Figure 4: The electoral campaign.

Source: Screenshot from *Wave Makers* on Netflix.

the Justice Party in the drama.¹⁰ The playwrights compose lines with both Mandarin and Taiwanese dialects, presenting lifelike and relatable dialogues. These elements lend the series realism by not only evoking local resonance but also attracting a global audience.

zhi ren shijue zongjian Fang Xuzhong X oqLiq tuandui: Ruhe zai Renxuan zhi ren dacao chu zhirengan, chengxian Taiwan teyou meixue?) [Interview with *Wave Makers* visual director Fang Xuzhong and the oqLiq Team: How did they create a professional feel and present unique Taiwanese aesthetics in *Wave Makers*?], *Mapless Vision*, May 10, 2023, <https://www.maplesslab.asia/blog/x-oqliq?categoryId=364291>.

10. Xu Youde 徐佑德 and Maple, “專訪《人選之人》配樂侯志堅 X 製作人林昱伶：如何決定『政治幕僚職人劇』的音樂調性？劇中競選歌曲與主題曲如何誕生？” (Zhuanfang Renxuan zhi ren peiyue Hou Zhijian X zhizuo ren Lin Yuling: Ruhe jue ding ‘zhengzhi muliao zhirenju’ de yinyue diaoxing? Juzhong jingxuan gequ yu zhuti qu Ruhe dansheng?) [Interview with *Wave Makers* music director Hou Zhijian and producer Lin Yuling: How to determine the musical tone of a ‘political staffer professional drama’? How were the campaign songs and theme song born?], *Mapless Vision*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.maplesslab.asia/blog/x?categoryId=364291>.

As a television series airing on an international streaming platform, it deliberately omits the issue of China appealing to a global audience. Nevertheless, in reality, the controversies over unification with China versus Taiwan's political independence are usually the main themes of elections that mobilize voters to support different political parties. The show features other social issues of debate like the death penalty, same-sex marriage, new immigrants, and environmental protection, which are "safer" topics and allow for a clarified position from both parties. As a result, some may view this series as portraying an alternate reality, depicting a society free from historical burdens.

Netflix's industrialized approach is also reflected in the narrative style of *Wave Makers*. It adopts a multilinear narrative, paralleling the sexual assault cases and the presidential election alongside the intricacies of the campaign staff's lives. This structure continuously holds the audience's interest. The series also employs plot twists every fifteen minutes and cliffhangers at each episode's end, engaging viewers' curiosity. The blend of Taiwanese culture with a globalized narrative structure has enabled the drama to stand out, amassing a large audience and contributing to the subsequent #MeToo movement.

From the above discussion, *Wave Makers* aligns well with the characteristics of recent Netflix original (or coproduced, coinvested) series: they emphasize drama and conflict while avoiding controversial critiques to prevent alienating the audience or causing other adverse effects. The series raises discussions around the death penalty, same-sex marriage, environmental protection, and new immigrants without touching upon the cross-strait relations that are crucial to Taiwan's elections. Additionally, the problems that women face are resolved through temporary compromises or remain unresolved. This might leave viewers feeling that these elements are only superficially addressed.

Fortunately, in the real world, the #MeToo movement has led to lawful changes. In July 2023, Taiwan's Legislative Yuan approved amendments to the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act, the Gender Equality in the

Workplace Act, and the Gender Equity Education Act. These amendments aim to increase the efficiency of the mechanisms for preventing sexual harassment and punishing offenders.¹¹ The political drama *Wave Makers* has ultimately inspired real-world changes, exemplifying how storytelling can drive societal transformation, making the personal political and the local global.

11. “立法院三讀性平三法修正案 完善性騷擾防治網絡” (Lifayuan sandu xingping san fa xiuzheng’an wanshan xingsaorao fangzhi wangluo) [Legislative Yuan passes third reading of Gender Equality Act Amendments to improve sexual harassment prevention network], 司法周刊 (*Judicial Weekly*), no. 2168, August 4, 2023, 1.