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Children as the Oppressed or Oppressors to Parents?

- A Theatrical Observation

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Abstract

This is a collective case study of four group performance project in the form of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, implemented in a university undergraduate drama course. Students were invited to experience the theatre form and create little drama pieces according to their concerned issues, to be presented in front of their peers. The four stories included in this paper have rather successfully captured the cultural reality of Hong Kong's changing parent-children relationships. The dramatic actions are analyzed with other research and cultural references.

Context of Study

This paper gives an analyzed observation of the theatrical actions played out by four groups of university students in Hong Kong, on a drama course offered by the School of Education and Languages at the Open University of Hong Kong. The students come from two degree programmes: one of which is a single degree in English Studies and the other a double degree in English Studies and Education. More than ninety percent of the students are of Chinese ethnic origin. There were some individuals having ethnic origins such as Indian, British, Nepalese and Philippino-Chinese. In the four groups featured in this study, there were three students having these non-Chinese origins. I am listing the ethnic and cultural origins of students here, not to imply that their cultural tendency would necessarily give meanings to the issue being studied. My aim is to state the fact that they were injecting the need to use English in parts of the stories they participated, and in some stories, specifically Case 6 below, the arrangement of an English-speaking Indian classmate was adopted, the relevant students said, in order to convey the message that westernized thoughts were introduced to the Chinese society.

Although all students are English majors, they performed in Chinese (except the 2009 Fall cohort, see below, and the scene with the Indian student who spoke English in Case 6) as they were advised that in drama they should use a language that sounded most natural to them. Being their tutor, I introduced the *Theatre of the Oppressed* by Augusto Boal (2000),

emphasizing that they should present issues of their own interests for wider discussion among their fellow students. They participated in two four-hour sessions in which I demonstrated the theatre form with the use of hot-seating as a feature in enhanced forum theatre (O’Toole, Burton & Plunkett, 2005). Afterwards, students formed groups, each creating a 10-min drama with an issue, to be performed followed by a 20-min interaction with the audience.

Collective Case Study

Within a six-semester (i.e. 3-year) period, I notice that there are 11 (out of 49) issues about the relationship between two generations, to be listed as below:

Story and issue	Semester
1. My “Caring” Dad (father’s authority)	2009 Fall
2. The Drug Testing (the subversive daughter)	2009 Fall
3. You Have to Enter a Band 1 School (mother’s authority)	2010 Spring
4. Why Don’t You Give a Child (between the powerful mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law)	2010 Spring
5. The Scolding Mother (mother’s authority)	2010 Fall
6. The Adoption (the daughter-in-law’s insistence on adoption rather than giving birth)	2010 Fall
7. I Want to Take the Arts (mother’s authority)	2011 Spring
8. Hong Kong Children (the children’s “power”)	2011 Spring
9. The Troublesome Grandpa (the young couple’s oppression over the grandfather)	2011 Spring
10. I Wanna Dance (the mother’s authority)	2011 Fall
11. The House is Not a Home (the step-mother’s oppression over the step-sons)	2012 Spring

The interesting phenomenon of students’ working on recurring issues formulated some collective case studies in which a few similar cases are put together for generalization of

patterns and trends (Stake, 1995). In other words, the similar topics and themes students worked on gave me some initial impact about understanding young people's cultural concern, and I would like to further clarify if there is a clearer picture that could suggest a students' construction of cultural views through the theatre form I used. In the above twelve cases, I can roughly divide them into two collective case studies:

- the parent (-in-law)s' (especially the mother(-in-law)'s) authority over the children (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10 & 11)
- the children's resistance against or power over the parents (2, 6, 8 & 9)

As I have written about the first collective case study involving (3), (4), (7) and (10) in another paper, I am going to focus on (2), (6), (8) and (9) in this paper.

The way I collected data was through:

- Class observation of students' participation and creative processes (in the first six 4-hour sessions)
- Video-taped group presentations (in the seventh 4-hour session)
- Students' written play scripts (submitted after the presentation session)
- Individual reflective essays (submitted after the eighth 4-hour session in which students watch their own presentations play-back)
- Research, comments and personal anecdotes in the social contexts relevant to the

topic

The data will be analyzed by means of narrated individual cases, inserted with students' views and views from researchers and the community at large (including my personal experience) for contextualization, with a generalized conclusion. Before I go straight into data analysis, it would be helpful for first giving some notes on dramatic empowerment to reflect on culture.

Dramatic Embodiment of Culture

Neelands (1996) lists out the modes of empowerment in drama—on the cultural level he states that theatre is the means of making the invisible influences of culture visible and discussable; it is also a mirror of how we are made and who we might become. Jackson (1996) adds that the major conceptual link for students to make is that individuals within a culture are affected by its power structures. Booth articulately asserts:

Drama has become our principal means of expressing and interpreting the world as we explore and communicate ideas and information, social behaviours, values, feelings, and attitudes, with mass audiences greater than anyone had ever contemplated. (Booth, 2003, p.18)

Behaviours, feelings and values are all linked together and presented as symbolic messages in a piece of theatre. Certainly, as Shu (舒志義, 2010) suggests, there are chances that the

misuse of symbols could lead to inappropriate cultural shocks, but it is indeed only the signs and symbols that are interpreted to give meanings once a piece of art work is presented (Barthes, 1968). Augusto Boal, the developer of the Theatre of the Oppressed, discusses the linkage between the authors and spectators in this kind of theatre:

For the Aesthetics of the Oppressed, the most important thing is the Aesthetic Process which develops the perceptions of the person who practices it, though it may be very desirable that it culminates in an Artistic Product – the finished work of Art – for its amplificatory social power. The goal of fruition as work of Art is stimulating – it functions like a search for the dream, for utopia. When the process does culminate in this state, its authors receive the benefits of the recognition of others, which encourages them to make further efforts. (Boal, 2006, p.18)

This long quote effectively delivers the important qualities of dramatic embodiment of culture—reflecting thoughts and attitudes in the author, and inspiring further thoughts in the spectator by its artistic power. What's not needed to mention is the magical function of drama which has its essence in nature the role-taking actions that participants implement with the mind of the role, adopting another's point of view and thus seeing cultural meanings with different perspectives and layers.

Let me now introduce the cases and see how they inspire thoughts. I will culminate these thoughts using other research references and personal experiences.

Case Analysis

Case 2: The Drug Testing

The story is about a hot issue some years ago on the prevention of adolescent drug taking in schools. The government implemented the drug test policy by asking the parents to give consent for the school to test the urine of students. This story starts with two girls' mothers gossiping and exchanging advice to keep an eye on their daughters, after watching a governmental TV propaganda about drug testing, especially when one of the daughters is rather actively involved in after-school activities. Another scene shows this girl to be quite troubled with being monitored, though she is actually not involved in undesirable activities. However, conflict breaks out when the girl's mother insists to sign the consent letter to force her daughter to do the drug test. There is a conversation between the mother and daughter:

Daughter: Why do you tick "yes"? I told you nicely that I don't want it tested.

Mother: I think you better test it. You always come home late. I don't know where you go to, who you're with and what you're doing. I do care about you.

Daughter: Mom! But I don't need to tell you everything I do. I have the right to do whatever I want, stay with whoever I want and go wherever I want. I'm not a little girl. I want freedom!

The mother in this story is rather oppressive and authoritative. The interesting point is that, unlike many other cases listed above, the daughter here is very strong and subversive. Yet the more interesting thing is that this daughter is played by a Nepalese student and her mother by an Indian student. In this group, there were also four Chinese women (one of which grew up

in Canada) playing the narrator, the “proper-looking” classmate, the teacher and the Chinese girl’s mother.

According to Hofstede (1994), the conflict between the daughter and the mother in the above scene is typically described as Eastern individualism versus Western collectivism. Individualism is characterized by having personal goals go first (Singelis et al., 1995) whereas collectivism by having the need for group solidarity and shared activity (Hui and Triandis, 1986). I suspect the more individualistic view of the young people in this group could come from the more “westernized” participants including the Nepalese, the Indian and the Chinese who spent some years in Canada. Having said this, I am not denying the “westernized” mind of local Hong Kong people as well as the traditional Asian mind. Indeed the Indian mother gives a rather convincing performance of being a traditional mother. The conflict becomes greatest when the next day she girl is asked by the teacher to collect urine, and she says:

Daughter: What? My urine? I don’t know what to do with my urine. It’s personal matter. I already told my mom that I do not want to do the test. So why are you giving me this thing?

Teacher: But your mom signed here already, and it’s the government policy.

Daughter: Whatever, I don’t want to be tested. (throws the bottle on the floor) You know how old I am tomorrow? Sixteen. One six. So I have the right to make my own decision. OK? No is no. If my mother has signed yes, why don’t you go collect her urine instead of mine?

And the last scene shows the manifested conflict between the daughter and her mother:

Daughter: You don't listen to me, do you? I've told you many times that I don't want to be tested. So why are you forcing me now? Are you my mother? (the mother slaps her on the face)

This group has put forward an argument about parents' care and monitoring, governmental policy (arising out of a Chinese society), and the adolescents' individual human right. I think the daughter has made a powerful outcry on human rights owned by young people. The teacher shows the reality about the government policy and the institutional authoritative system with the parents' signature going hand in hand with the school's authority. Having half of the group studying education major, this group has sensibly brought out the debate about public security versus private freedom. Indeed, when I asked the group after the presentation why exactly did they choose such a topic; one or two members told me that they were hearing complaints at the schools that students were forced to do the drug test, and that some teacher friends told them that they were already rather worried that the policy could create trouble. They were worried too and agreed that it could be nonsense if students were forced to do what they didn't want. What interested me was the very coincidental, authoritarian styles of government policy and parenting in this play. A Chinese descriptive expression about the government officials used throughout the centuries is "the parent officials", meaning that the officials are like parents—loving, providing, managing and controlling (using their ways, whether you like it or not).

Finally, I also find the ending caption on the TV propaganda quite powerful with these words: “Test them now, or find them never”.

This presents the very dilemma of the (Chinese) parental love-care-monitor psychological complex. The differentiation between care and possession (i.e. fear of losing), upbringing and expectations, love and offering security, and love and giving freedom is always difficult to be identified and balanced. This argument will go on as long as there is parent-child relationship, I believe. And the argument will be hotter on Chinese lands.

Case 6: The Adoption

This is a story discussing the clash between the traditional Chinese and the westernized ways of thinking, embodied in a drama in which the daughter-in-law’s idea of adopting a child is challenged by her mother-in-law, Mrs. Yeung. The first scene suggested an interesting little clash between the two cultural breakfast habits, when the mother complains about the lack of congee and the rawness of the fried eggs prepared by the daughter-in-law who explains that in New York everybody eats eggs in that way.

In the second scene, Mrs. Yeung meets a neighbour in the wet market who has an obedient daughter-in-law, Kwai, proactively carrying the food purchased. Green-eyed with this, Mrs. Yeung is even told that Kwai is going to have a baby boy. Of course, Mrs. Yeung is

infuriated when she is reminded that her own daughter-in-law still hasn't got a baby boy. The Chinese/Asian yearning for a male offspring as a cultural norm is being explicitly depicted through the typically complicated mother and daughter-in-law relationship. Besides, the notorious one-child policy in Mainland China after 1970s has generated quite a number of social problems. An unsigned article in Wenweipo (《文匯報》, 2008) has it that abortions after knowing from ultra-sound check that the foetus is going to be a girl are commonly heard especially on the farm where the boy is a valuable human resource for work, not to mention the traditional view of "valuing the boy more than the girl". I mention this because the student playing the husband has a Mainland accent which suggests he came from Mainland China. In recent years the influx of Mainland pregnant women giving birth in Hong Kong is partly due to their avoidance of paying a heavy fine when having a second child.

Scene three gives a direct view of the western mind by showing how the daughter-in-law chats with her foreign friend Jennifer (played by an Indian woman), complaining that her mother-in-law asks her to do lots of housework. The conversation carries on about the friend's recent adoption of a little girl, putting forward her very westernized thought:

Daughter-in-law: But I don't want to be pregnant and give birth to a baby.

Jennifer: Well I would highly recommend adoption! I mean you don't have to like give birth to say that this is my child, right? I mean relationships aren't formed just based on blood.

This is exactly an opposite view to the Chinese traditional thought that blood relationships are always closer to non-blood ones. The familial ties on which Chinese social structure is based have been nurturing big families for more than a thousand years.

The story develops with the mother-in-law eavesdropping the young couple's bedroom conversation about adopting a child instead of giving birth. She is furious and the other day she gets a medicinal drink from a temple and asks the son and the daughter-in-law to drink it for better pregnancy effect. There follows a dialogue between Mrs. Yeung and his son:

Mrs. Yeung: After your dad passed away, I gave up everything to raise you up and you never disobeyed me. Now because of this woman you can't even agree to drink a bottle of medicine?

Son: I don't mean that.

This is another typical description of Chinese culture: hierarchical power between two generations is seen with submission to parental authority (Yang, 1988) and children are taught inhibition of expression for significant respect for his father, i.e. filial piety or hsiao (孝) (King and Bond, 1985). Total obedience to parents' will is usually regarded as morally good in terms of taking responsibility by the offspring. After the son has quickly taken the "medicine", the final refusal of the daughter-in-law to drink the medicine is a manifestation of the young individual's resistance to the traditional Chinese authority, as a rising westernized culture in Hong Kong.

As I was the facilitator to help each group form their story plots and characters, I remember their reason of hammering down to such a story: when they discussed about oppression in daily life they felt that eastern and western cultural differences had always created conflicts in human relationship. The young man that played the son claimed that he was more traditionally Chinese and the young woman that played the wife said she used to think that she was rather “open” and was not much prepared to bearing children, but after this theatre experience she heard about the cry of the mother-in-law, etc, that made her re-think about the whole issue.

Case 8: Hong Kong Children

This is a very different story from the above two in which there is only one-way oppression by the children over the mother. The story starts with the mother being informed by the school that her daughter cheated in the examination. Being told by the aunt that cheating is a serious crime at school, the daughter says:

Daughter: Mom, you must help me then! (pulling her mom's arm)

Mother: How? How can I help? You're witnessed and caught to cheat! I can't help anything. You have to explain to your teacher yourself tomorrow.

Daughter: (getting mad) What?! You don't help me?? Didn't you hear auntie says that I wouldn't be able to get a university place? You want me to be a loser? Anyway you have to fix it when you see the teacher tomorrow. Don't bother me anymore.

The term “Hong Kong children” is a popular phrase nowadays to show the quality of spoiled children in Hong Kong. The above dialogue embodies the quality of Hong Kong kids taking for granted that their parents need to protect them and cater for them the best environment for prosperous development. Indeed this exactly shows the over-protective tendency of Hong Kong parents so that their children get spoiled and develop rude manners. The student that played the Daughter in this scene wrote in her reflective essay:

I think the main reason is the experience of getting along with my younger cousin...while I am the second youngest, all our family members have tried our very best to make her happy and satisfy her wants since she was born. ... Yet, after the acting, I think, subconsciously, I desire to be person like the younger daughter, though I know she is not a good girl. I found an advantage of being a selfish person. My life seems to be easier when I can put my responsibility on others' shoulder.

The interesting life experience of being an older cousin who provides is contrasted with the reflection on wanting to be the younger who is nurtured to be more selfish. The student's feelings and thoughts in the issue and theatrical experience, I would say, have given her interesting and powerful perspectives that could be impacting on how she positions herself as a member of a group, family and society. The right and responsibility tension has always been a difficult issue when social life is concerned, particularly when culture changes through time and varies from place to place.

The case of Hong Kong children has rightly reflected the view that the family is not a static institution but one that evolves through time (Sow, 1985). Kagitcibasi (1996) argues

that economic and social changes are having great impacts on the family, leading to modifications in both family structures and value systems. There have been arguments in Hong Kong that nowadays when young parents become more economically prosperous their children are not able, and do not care, to manage themselves. That is why a secondary school principal comments that now she prefers training students' self-management to training them examination skills as what was used to be done. Quoted by a reporter, she explains:

Nowadays whenever the children say "I'm bored", the parents offer them mobile phones and computers; whenever they utter "I don't know how to do it", the parents in no time tie the shoelaces and write the answers for them. How could they possibly grow? (錢瑋琪, 2012, Mingpao 《明報》 online version)

Here the dramatization of Hong Kong children might be even a bit imaginative: such self-centred individualism of the daughter and her elder sister results in their next action of asking their mother to cover up for their mistake of breaking a valuable vase at home, and even in the last scene to cover up for the elder sister's mistake of running into a person crossing the road by asking her mother to take the driver's seat and report to the police as the driver! This dramatic action reflects that students' view towards these Hong Kong children being extremely, possessive, selfish and irresponsible. As a Hong Kong citizen, I am, sadly, not surprised by this view.

Case 9: The Troublesome Grandpa

This drama portrays, in my view, the reality of how married couples dislike and mistreat the older generations. The first scene captures the troublesome quality of the grandfather through his inability to use the TV remote control and his unwelcome taste of watching “noisy” Cantonese opera.

In the second scene, the grandfather takes the liberty to order the maid to cook some leftover Chinese herbal medicine (from his own pile of herbs he hasn't finished after his last consultation of a Chinese doctor), intending to treat his grandson who suffers from influenza. Scene three depicts the daughter-in-law's strong objection to such treatment, by threatening to put him into an elderly home. An interesting conversation follows showing another typical point of conflict arising from the uneducated parental style:

*Grandpa: (using his own chopsticks to carry a piece of food into the grandson's bowl)
Little Yin, eat more!*

Son: Oh Dad I mentioned a lot of times that you should not use your own chopsticks to hold food for others; not hygienic!

Daughter-in-law: Exactly! Being messy all the time.

Son: Yin is still coughing now. If you get him food what if you pass him some other bacteria?

Grandpa: Hey! I did this when you were young, see how big you are now! (takes food with chopsticks for Yin)

Son: Stop it!!!

Similar situations actually take place in my own home, with my mother carrying food for my nephew and niece using her own chopsticks. This is particularly Chinese, not only because of the use of the chopsticks, but also the older generations believe that they used to raise and feed their kids and nothing went wrong. The cultural aspect underneath this belief is the collectivistic assumption—we are one family and this is the way to treat family members, intimately. Alternatively, the western concern of hygiene fits with the individualistic character and hence the use of the diner's own plate and public cutlery for carrying food to the plate. Perhaps in the last ten years a Hong Kong dining culture has developed: around a dining table, diners all use “public chopsticks” to carry food to their own plate/bowl before they use their own chopsticks to carry food into their mouth. Personally, or culturally, I feel this is quite a nuisance since I do not feel “sick” without using the public chopsticks, but rationally it might be more hygienic to use the public utensil. I would say the western view on personal hygiene has developed together with their cultural inclination on individualism.

The last scene pushes the action to the highest point, by having Grandpa experiencing urinary incontinence while watching TV and thus wetting the sofa:

Son: Oh my! Dad look at you... (shaking his head) Dad...I think we cannot look after you any more...how about going to an elderly home...

Daughter-in-law: It's not “how about”! He must go to an elderly home!

I think this story has shown some stark reality. As two students consulted me about the choice of story they said that they were quite concerned about the issue of treating the older generation. Apart from the fact that they had old people at home, they would like to open discussions on some improper attitudes the younger generations might have. In fact the episodes included in their play are common stories told by the media as well as friends. The high occupancy rate of elderly homes in Hong Kong is an indirect piece of cultural evidence, contrasted by the view of the traditional Chinese filial morality of living with the elders and catering for their daily lives when they grow old. Hong Kong, as with many other places, has come across industrialization and much modernization. Goodwin (1999) summarizes classic theories and points out that whereas strong bonds and cohesive relationships are found in pre-industrialized societies, industrialized and modern societies exhibit a lack of interdependency between individuals and so fragmented relationships are more encouraged. The “independent” family of modern industrial societies is independent of its kin, and it is contented to “go it alone” as a separate unit (Kagitcibasi, 1996). It is thus not surprising that the couple in this drama is so inclined to put the grandpa to an elderly home. I believe the worldwide phenomenon of aging populations has made the problem worse, though the moral dilemma stays with Chinese/Asian communities.

Conclusion

The four cases are not just interesting but also captivating of essential cultural elements that are very familiar to Hong Kong people. The authoritative oppressions from schools, parents and government are typically Chinese collectivistic concerns for social common interests, including the social security of drug-taking prevention or familial concern of producing offspring. But they also visualize the rise of individualistic power as subversion to these authorities, such as the forceful resistance to the parental orders, the self-centred advantage-taking by the spoiled children and the independence and escaping from the parents. These four stories trigger reflections on the positioning of the self in the society, by means of artistic power and symbolic meaning-making.

All four stories are realistically told. For realistic I do not only mean naturalistic acting or inclusion of realistic events in the scripting, but the well researched cultural reality that students have seriously tried to present. This includes the school's controversial implementation of the government policy of drug testing, the harsh pressure given by the mother-in-law about giving birth, the absurd children's behaviour possibly resulting from parents' over-protection, and the ruthless dislike of aged parents by modern couples. I am quite confident that many Hong Kong people would agree that these situations are close to the social realities.

The theatrical process of creating dramatic contexts and characters relating to personal life or hearsay, of representationally performing the scenes, and of reflecting on the

performance, and so on, has proven to be an empowering process of learning through and about cultural life. The students absolutely have also gained some recognition from their audience through their big round applause and, more importantly, their dramatic participation. I really appreciate the efforts of all spect-actors in both the presenting groups and the audience.

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