

Asia-Pacific Journal for Arts Education

Special Issue ***Current Issues, Trends & Practices in Drama/Theatre Education: Perspectives from the Asia Pacific and Beyond***

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<http://www.ied.edu.hk/cca/apjae/apjae.htm>

ISSN 1683-6995

Volume 11 Number 9

December 2012

The Theatre and Its Socio-Educational Role in Modern Taiwan

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Abstract

The theatre has been given an obscure and tricky role to play in Taiwan's Chinese-speaking society. Although it is now officially recognised as an indispensable sector of the national curriculum, its position within an island that has gone through a long history of migration, colonisation, dictatorship, and democratisation is still uncertain. This essay investigates the relationship between theatre and education in modern Taiwan, with a special focus on two periods: the Japanese and the KMT rule before the 1980s. By contextualising the development of the socio-educational role of the theatre, the author intends to paint the landscape of how theatre was perceived and used to instruct or inspire during the twentieth century in Taiwan, which paved the way for the arrival of different types of educational theatre.

Keywords: theatre and education, Beijing Opera, cultural intervention, experimental.

The Theatre and Its Socio-Educational Role in Modern Taiwan

In Taiwan, an island with a mainstream culture of Chinese origin and some residual effects of the Japanese colonisation (1895–1945), theatre does not always seem to be a compatible companion for education. Several reasons have contributed to this conspicuous division. First of all, as in most modern Chinese societies, education in Taiwan tends to operate above and not alongside the arts. While Taiwanese parents and politicians are notoriously keen to give education – or, more precisely, schooling – a high profile, their attitude towards making arts integral to the young person’s school life is not so enthusiastic. This is not difficult to understand, for a race that has, over the last century, undergone a series of intense wars, not only with its foes but also within itself. Education is inevitably regarded by the government-in-power as a means of securing the legitimacy of the regime.

Politics, Education, and the Theatre in Taiwan

Although claimed by the Communist Chinese government as a rebellious province of The People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan had actually been ruled by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, better known as KMT), who took over the island after Japan lost the Second World War and were in power for more than fifty years until the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)¹ won the presidential election in March 2000. During the 1950s and 60s, KMT chairman Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, who fled to the island with his KMT forces from mainland China in 1949 and called his authority in Taiwan The Republic of China (ROC), made Taiwan a military base for ‘recovering the mainland’. Under his rule, the islanders were manipulated to wipe away their consciousness of being Taiwanese or Japanese. Children

¹ DPP or Democratic Progressive Party, was established on 28 September 1986. Its founding marked the culmination of four decades of democratic struggle against the KMT’s one-party rule and Martial Law in Taiwan.

were taught to be dignified Chinese in order to save the poor fellow-countrymen in the mainland from Mao Tze-tung's terrible communist gangsters. Mandarin became the official language – instead of Japanese – and the Taiwanese dialects² were unreservedly suppressed by the military government. As a result, the cultural features of Taiwan were substantially affected by the harsh political atmosphere during that era. Beijing Opera was, and still is, regarded as the 'national opera' by the official circles, while the indigenous forms of theatre such as Taiwanese Opera and puppetry - usually performed in a local dialect - were purposefully neglected. Different kinds of censorship were forced on literature, drama, and art. Intellectuals and dissidents who acted against Chiang's 'return to the Motherland' policy or stood for the Independence of Taiwan were inevitably arrested and persecuted. Under such circumstances, the educated have long been encouraged by the educators to conform to certain social morals in order to 'stabilise' the status quo. Individuality and creativity are therefore often undervalued or passed unnoticed in the domain of education, as they are by nature against what a domineering or dictatorial government really needs: collectivism and productivity.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of China (ROC), on which the current education system in Taiwan is based, education of the ROC should be governed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People, namely Nationalism, Democracy and the People's Livelihood. The goal of education is 'to improve national living, support a decent existence in society, pursue economic development and prolong the life of the nation so as to achieve independence of the nation, the implementation of democracy, and the advancement of national livelihood.' Education and culture shall "aim at the development of the sense of

² Min-nan-yu, or Fukien, is the most popular dialect in Taiwan, and is therefore nicknamed as Tai-yu, or Taiwanese. It is now used by almost three quarters of the whole population. The second most popular dialect in Taiwan is Hakka; it is spoken by about 12% of the whole population. In addition to the above-mentioned languages spoken by Chinese Han immigrants, there are also some other dialects spoken by Taiwan's aboriginal peoples.

nationalism, sense of autonomy, national moralities, healthy physique, science knowledge, and the ability of the national citizens to earn a living'; in addition, all public and private educational and cultural institutions in the country shall, in accordance with law, 'be subject to the supervision of the State' (Ministry of Education of ROC, 1996, p. 3). Considering these articles, it is obvious that the orientation of Taiwan's education is highly political and based on economic principles. With the State machinery successfully controlling and manipulating the purposes and resources of education, school or college curricula are doomed to have a problematic structure and function like a conveyer-belt of a fully charged mechanical device that produces products of the same mode. As a result, the space left for arts in any curriculum is visibly small: while music, Chinese calligraphy, fine art and crafts are all officially part of the compulsory education, their importance to a child's mental and emotional development is never fully justified. This is particularly true in the case of junior high school education. With the shadow of the very first national entrance examination haunting teachers and students alike all the way through the three exhausting years, arts-related classes are like tiny windows opened for some fresh air rather than doors with open access to a mind-liberating world. Very often, when the pressure of exams becomes unbearable, which happens frequently in the third year, these classes would be removed from the regular timetables and replaced by 'heavyweight' subjects such as Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and English – the consensus being that a good senior high school will then lead to a good university, and thus a smooth career in technology- or business-related fields where a bright future with financial security is guaranteed. The Arts, on the other hand, are not to be taken seriously. They distract one's academic motivation and give the young person reasons to rebel or encourage dreams that cannot be realised. Therefore, for the good of the young generation, as well as the whole society, arts should be stripped of their social potential and

kept as light entertainment. The official approach is that they can be fun; they can be cool; but they certainly cannot turn into bread and feed one's stomach.

The Role of Traditional Drama in the Chinese Society

Given that there is a tendency for the arts to be unfairly treated by Taiwan's education authorities, the long-term prejudice Chinese people have held against *xi zi* (戲子), performers or actors, and the island's heritage of musical and symbolic drama do not help in any way to improve the compatibility between theatre and education. In most Western countries, drama, as Chris Johnson argues, has considerable advantages over art forms such as music or the visual arts by criteria of accessibility:

There is an immediacy to its practice. There are no scales to be learned or arpeggios to be practised; we can begin creating material straight away. Drama's language is simply the language of social experience – what it 'feels like' to be alive – borrowed and fashioned for other purposes. So it's easily accessible to those who lack professional arts training. We can claim, reasonably enough, that everyone has a basic proficiency in its grammar. Everyone 'improvises' from the moment they get out of bed. We all feel pain, experience joy, and learn to 'act a part'. (Johnson, 1998, p. 3)

While Johnson is certainly right in pointing out that Western drama's language is the language of social experience, traditional drama in the Chinese-speaking world does not share the same accessibility. In Beijing Opera, one of the most popular forms of traditional theatre in both China and Taiwan, the artistic means of expression, such as singing, dialogue, acting, combat and acrobatic performance, all "follow conventionalised patterns taken from real life and refined by generations of operatic artists, which become symbols of human intent and sentiment" (Pan, 1995, p. 20). This symbolic performance should not become life as it is, but life as extracted, concentrated and typified. That is why 'false but true, empty but full, and few but many' are regarded as the guiding principles that make Chinese theatre

different from its Western counterparts, as there is hardly any realism in conventional Chinese theatre. The stage is almost empty – in many cases with only a table and two chairs present; the costume, make-up and props are both specific and full of special meaning; the acting is therefore highly artificial and symbolic, as depicted in the most famous guiding principle of Beijing Opera: ‘each voice has to be like singing, each movement has to be like dancing’ (無聲不歌，無動不舞).

To achieve this level of skill, Beijing Opera actors have to be trained rigorously from their early youth, and then work extremely hard to master the highly demanding vocal and physical skills in order to secure the audience’s interest in what they do. For this reason, Beijing Opera has been seen by many drama scholars as an actor-based theatre. Famous actors such as Mei Lang-fang (梅蘭芳), Cheng Yan-chiu (程硯秋) and Yang Xiao-lo (楊小樓) had all made great contribution to the popularisation and refinement of Beijing Opera with their original creativity and personal charisma. However, the same reasons have also led to an unfavourable side of the profession. Since the performance art of the actors is the major cause that makes opera fans willingly buy tickets to fill the seats, they are naturally deemed responsible for the success of the box office, and thus the management and maintenance of their opera groups. Many of them are therefore forced to ‘honour’ their patrons, mostly rich and politically powerful, by ‘entertaining’ them both on and off stage, so as to obtain financial security of some sort. Moreover, given that the majority of their repertoire is concerned with courtship or love affairs between young scholars and beautiful ladies, their personal identity is often confused with the roles they play and the way they interpret these characters. Their true-life personality is, accordingly, widely regarded as being frivolous and untrustworthy, as described in the common saying: ‘prostitutes do not know what feelings are; actors care nothing about righteous principles’ (婊子無情，戲子無義). Consequently, the

social status of opera actors has been relatively low in the Chinese society.¹ Parents would only send their children to actor training schools – which, in many people’s eyes, are like circus troupes – when the family suffers from poverty. On this basis, it is very clear that, traditionally, drama or theatre is not something that the mundane and pragmatic Chinese would care to take seriously. Its position as a unique art form is, as a result, never fully respected by the audience and its potential as an alternative educational medium hardly explored.

The Development of Spoken Drama: From Japanese to KMT Rule

It must be noted, however, that this attitude has gradually been changed in accordance with the development of the so-called modern theatre - which, literally, refers to Western-style spoken drama (hua ju, 話劇). According to *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* and *New Drama Movement in Taiwan under Japanese Rule (1923-1936)*, a defining book written by Taiwanese drama researcher and cultural critic Yang Du (楊度), Taiwan’s earliest performance activity of hua ju can be traced to 1911. This was the year in which The Republic of China was established in the mainland, when a Japanese director staged several productions with local actors. Over the next twenty years, numerous local drama troupes were organised on an amateur basis and they staged works by well-known mainland Chinese playwrights as well as by local authors dealing with Taiwanese themes. During this period of time, drama-making was deemed by many local intellectuals as a way to rebel against Japanese rule, even though the Japanese government had done their best to censor politically oriented meetings or performances. Dramatists such as Zhang Wei-hsian (張維賢), a local director, acting teacher and the mastermind behind the historically important Starlight Performance Research Association (星光演劇研究會), and Zhang Hsen-chieh (張深切), who

helped to set up Yan Feng Youth Association and Drama Group (炎峰青年會劇團) in 1925, had established theatre groups with an anti-colonialist attitude and an anarchist nature. The so-called New Drama Movement (新劇運動), in essence a counterattack on traditional theatre, was thus formed and converged at the level of nationalism – or, more precisely, localism, as Taiwan's political entity has always been in a state of ambiguity.

Although most theatre practitioners involved in the creation of the new drama were forced to run their hua ju groups in appalling conditions, their endeavours did make a major contribution to the rising status of actors and drama-related activities. As Yang Du recorded, the plays presented by Zhang Wei-hsian's Starlight Performance Research Association, such as *You Die First* and *Lotus in the Fire*, in 1925 at the Novel Stage Theatre (新舞台戲院) in Taipei had a strong and immediate impact on people's perception of theatrical performances:

The performances given by Starlight... drastically changed the public's impression of drama as something that 'jeopardises good customs and offends public morals'. They made people realise that drama could also be good for the society aside from being an entertainment... The content of these performances and the actors' talent helped to raise the social status of performers and gain the audience's approval on their work. This certainly is how drama should be treated; because actors are not just ordinary people, but are also artists who bring life and personality to the characters they play. (Yang, 1994, p. 69)

In retrospect, it is clear that these performances were by nature socio-educational at several different levels, and therefore had helped to give hua ju a high profile: First of all, these plays were produced and presented by Taiwanese theatre practitioners for Taiwanese people. Given that Taiwan was still a Japanese colony at that time, it was only normal for the islanders to be treated by the ruling government as second-class citizens. Spoken drama, like education, was deliberately made inaccessible to the general public, as the Japanese were very aware of its social influence. However, the fact that these interesting pieces were created by enthusiastic local drama lovers with the aim of serving local people had enlightened the audiences. They

felt that they were witnessing the emergence of, as well as taking part in, something new and worth looking forward to. The implication of brotherhood and comradeship – between the actors and the onlookers – embodied in these performances was strong and the seeds of people's group identity as Taiwanese were, accordingly, sown. Secondly, the members of Starlight were mostly well-educated intellectuals, who belonged to the upper-middle class. As depicted above, performers of traditional music theatre, such as Beijing Opera and Taiwanese Opera, were often looked down on by society on account of their poor family background and low self-esteem. But this group of hua ju actors appeared to be very different. They were young, fresh, idealistic, and generally considered to be models of talent and brilliance. They brought back what they had learned and seen abroad, particularly in the two 'motherlands' – Japan and China, and made efforts to create theatrical pieces that were based on features of local life. The image they projected as both caring artists and social revolutionaries had thus made the audience look at the actor's profession in a different perspective. Thirdly, as many of the Starlight members were either deeply concerned with or directly involved in the anti-Japanese movement, the realistic plays they created to expose and explore Taiwan's social realities were inevitably filled with localism and, in some cases, anarchist ideologies. Through these performances, the audiences were encouraged to face up to certain issues and problems that confronted them in their daily life. The uplifting spirit and the socio-educational power of drama further distinguished Starlight's works from ordinary entertainment and, according to Zhang, "drew in those who did not enjoy going to the theatre as well as those who had never been to the theatre" (Yang, 1994, p. 69). Consequently, spoken drama became a new fashion. Many theatre groups of a similar nature were established in Taipei within the next few years, including the Fraternity Association and Taipei Mechanics' Club.

Unfortunately, the development of New Drama was soon interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, in which Japan and China were both involved as arch-rivals. In 1945, Taiwan was returned to Chiang Kai-shek's regime in China after Japan admitted defeat. Taiwan was once again made a province of China. Four years later, Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist army, defeated in the Chinese civil war by the Communists, fled to Taiwan and made the island a base for the recovery of his power with the political and financial assistance of the United States, whose government was Chiang's 'comrade in arms' during the War. Political and economic control became the KMT government's top priority. Taiwanese people were forced to identify with their Chinese roots, while at the same time still being treated like second-class citizens because Chiang and his followers – many of whom were actually refugees who did not want to stay in the Communist-ruled mainland – regarded themselves as saviours who liberated the colonised Taiwanese from the control of Japanese imperialists. Meanwhile, martial law was put into practice in the name of national security. Intellectuals, political dissidents and art lovers who dared to speak out and promote the importance of free thinking in public or criticise Chiang's government would either be arrested, jailed, and executed, or simply disappear without any trace. Moreover, the Western-style education system set up by the Japanese had been revised, in accordance with the education articles of the ROC, to meet the needs of economic development. The national curriculum of compulsory education – primary and secondary schooling (6 and 3 years respectively) – was largely technology- and numeracy-based. English was included in the secondary education, so that the efficiency of American management could be introduced to the students of higher levels. Chinese Language and Literature was discreetly designed as a vehicle of traditional values and orthodox thoughts, such as patriotic loyalty and filial piety. Politics and arts remained as forbidden zones. Subjects in relation to the awareness of local and personal identity, such as dialect (mother-tongue) education and Taiwanese culture, were

completely excluded.³ In other words, until martial law was eventually lifted in 1987, there was basically no integrity in education and no freedom of expression in Taiwan, no matter whether it was ruled by the Japanese or the Chinese. People who were willing to take the risk to engage themselves in ‘anti-government activity’, such as seeking the Independence of Taiwan or simply making an ironic play to mock the government’s policy, had to put themselves in exile or go underground.

In this context, it was almost impossible for the movement of hua ju to move forward with distinctive progress. On the other hand, Beijing Opera – instead of Taiwanese Opera, which is performed in Taiwanese dialect and is indubitably the most popular form of traditional musical drama in Taiwan – was made the national opera by Chiang to reflect Chinese nationalism. The government showed a high degree of generosity in subsidising the three famous Beijing Opera troupes operating under the wings of the army, the navy and the air force. The only hua ju performances that could be seen were those of a propagandist or anti-Communist nature. These plays tended to emphasise Chiang’s good deeds and praise his government’s ‘unprecedented success’ in turning Taiwan into a modern and advanced society. Sometimes drama performances would be given for the celebration of his birthday. The artistic value of these pieces was therefore extremely limited in comparison with their ‘socio-educational’ value – that is to brainwash Taiwanese people with the government’s agenda. However, among the people in the pre-1980 Taiwan modern drama scene the female playwright Li Man-kuei (李曼瑰) deserves special mention. According to *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, Li was responsible for the brief Little Theatre Movement in Taiwan in the early 1960s. In 1962 she “organised the Committee on Spoken Drama Appreciation, which was for years the major producing agency of modern dramas in Taiwan. Over 120

³ Due to the rise of Chinese nationalism and cultural identity, opera actors are now better accepted as folk artists both in Taiwan and China. They are, however, still underpaid and their performance art not really appreciated by modern Chinese people, particularly the young ones.

productions were presented between 1961 and 1969 under the auspices of Li's Committee" (Banham, 1993, p. 942). The Committee also started a World Drama Festival in 1967, presenting foreign plays in the original languages by language students in local universities. In 1968 the Committee created a Youth Drama Festival presenting plays by local playwrights and performed by university students in the Chinese language. These two festivals are still in existence today and are instrumental in the development of school drama in colleges and universities on the island. To be more specific, Li's achievement was to make spoken drama and school education co-exist harmoniously and creatively for the very first time. Following her footsteps, education authorities in Taiwan started to set up grants and awards to encourage playwriting and drama performances. The result was very fruitful. Although most productions presented by student drama groups or clubs were neither radical nor highly artistic, the opportunities provided by government-sponsored educational organisations for them to create something together did throw a different light on the theatrical and educational scenes.

Modern Theatre: An Extension of High Education

At the very beginning of his book, *The Playful Revolution*, Eugene van Erven argues that cultural awakening is a crucial stage in the development of a people. He writes: "There is little point in introducing high technology to improve the efficiency of developing economies if one does not also stimulate the minds of the people to take creative control of their own destinies" (van Erven, 1992, p. 1). Although this statement, as van Erven suggests, should not be deemed another progressive idea developed by Western intellectuals and subsequently imposed on the developing world, it is virtually a moral standard shaped in the post-World War Two Western societies and, soon afterwards, embraced by the intellectuals of many developing countries.

Towards the end of the seventies, the foundation of Taiwan's 'economic magic', as it became known worldwide, had been laid by the islanders under the wings of Chiang and his son's authoritarian regime. Meanwhile, a consensus that claimed that the native culture of Taiwan should be respected and treasured by the pro-reunification KMT government as much as the dominant Chinese values was also reached in accordance with people's desire for democracy. It is under these circumstances that a politically flexible and economically prosperous eighties has been 'made in Taiwan', where the first opposition party, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was established in 1986 (but only formally recognised by the KMT government several months later) and martial law was eventually lifted in 1987. Thus, in a society that has been swiftly diversified, the possibility for theatre to grow is further opened up along with other forms of artistic expression, most notably the new Taiwanese cinema, on the island.

The radical change of theatrical features in Taiwan marked a watershed in the cultural development of the island in a way similar to what had happened in the West during the 1950s and 60s. Ever since the early 1980s, theatre has indeed been given a different role to play in the drastically changing Taiwanese society. In the light of Western theatrical movements such as 'off-off-Broadway' in New York and the popularisation of fringe theatre in Britain, the new generation of Taiwanese theatre practitioners have teamed up with some idealistic revolutionary idealists and university/college students to create an alternative atmosphere for theatre. Through transplanting the theatrical concepts and skills set up by their Western precursors into their work, these people seek to resist a dictatorial government and to repress the greedy expansion of capitalist consortia with the help of a theatre which is, in essence, more society-related; an approach very different from the repertoire-based traditional musical theatre. In this way, theatre began to be liberated from its previous function as entertainment or propaganda, and increasingly utilised as a 'weapon of offence' to

challenge the governmental policies and social taboos, or a ‘weapon of defence’ to protect the intrinsic qualities of local Taiwanese culture and the land that nourishes it from being damaged or overly exploited. As a result, in addition to the continuously growing ‘mainstream theatre’⁴, all sorts of ‘action drama’, ‘political forum’, ‘satirical theatre’ and other aesthetics-orientated performances can widely be seen in and out of those properly-built theatrical venues throughout the island in the last two decades, although much more centralised in the capital Taipei after 1985.

In his book *The Politics of Performance*, Baz Kershaw suggests that the practices of alternative theatre can ‘best be considered as a form of cultural intervention’ on the grounds that it has the potential to mount an effective opposition to the dominant culture, as well as to modify its values no matter how slightly that might be (Kershaw, 1992, p. 6). Unsurprisingly, the rising trend of this theatrical thought has soon made up a liberal stage for the long de-voiced Taiwanese young people, whose courage to challenge and eagerness for change are often deemed by the rigid State (education authorities) as ‘aggressive’ and ‘rebellious’, to play an active role in shaping up new cultural values. According to a survey done by Lan Ling Ensemble, whose modern play *Ho Chu’s New Match* is generally considered as the initiator of Taiwanese experimental theatre, nearly eighty percent of their audiences are in the 20–30 age range and seventy-two percent of them have gone through university or college education, no matter that they are still studying or already employed (Jung, 1989). Although the figures cited here may seem the result of a rough estimate, they certainly signify that the new wave of experimental theatre has struck a responsive chord with the island’s young

⁴ As in many other countries, it has always been difficult to define what ‘mainstream theatre’ means in regards to Taiwan’s cultural context. Commercially, theatrical works produced by certain touring *hua ju tuan*, or western-style theatre companies such as the well-known Performance Workshop or Ping Feng Ensemble have mostly enjoyed a successful box office. However, it is traditional theatre like Beijing Opera that has been officially encouraged and subsidised on a regular basis - even though they do not meet the needs of younger Taiwanese any more. Both of them, in my perspective, should be regarded as ‘mainstream’ in the sense that they are strategically managed and financially more stable.

intellectuals, who are mostly from the newly emerged middle-class families. So far, the flourishing growth of experimental theatre has undoubtedly provided an outlet for these well-educated Taiwanese young people to air their grievances against the widespread social problems, such as the increasingly worsened air/environmental pollution caused by continuing industrialisation; the high cost of real estate that makes a lot of people 'homeless'; the spectacularly celebrated materialism; the habitual practices of bureaucracy and autocracy in the official or academic circles; and, of course, the national identity of the island about which they are deeply concerned. Viewed from this perspective, it should be appropriate to take their experimental theatre as an extension of higher education in Taiwan, since it allows the young to carry out what they have observed and learned. Moreover, as the intellectual youth will soon become the backbone of the society, their partnership with the theatrical circles has surely made this 'cultural awakening' a meaningful self-learning process.

From Experimental to Community Theatre: A Socio-Educational Perspective

Although these young people are passionate and courageous enough to exert their revolutionary spirit upon the society through the practice of theatre, their influence, on the whole, remains limited and dispersed. Their participation in experimental theatre is often categorised as a 'minority public culture', or a cultural/theatrical coterie, by cultural analysts in Taiwan. This is not simply because their somehow elitist-centred and sometimes sensationalist-mannered performances do not conform to the accepted practices of society, and therefore fail to appeal to the majority of social members. Deep in the core, there is a crucial issue for people who are involved in this theatrical movement to consider: while most theatre groups of this category are keen on playing a 'cultural interventionist' role in society, they seem unmindful of the need to provide their audiences with more useful and valuable

insights into the socio-cultural context of the island in the first place. Over the last few years, these practitioners have incessantly kept their theatrical works in a dialectical conversation with the Western traditions – among recent developments are the exploration of physicality and the liberation of individuality in accordance with the codes of ‘poor theatre’ and ‘theatre of cruelty’ – rather than the social/theatrical resources shared and enlivened by their fellow people. What matters here is that the self-expressive theatre they produce to reflect Taiwan’s status quo is thereby short of a cultural soul that can help to bridge the ideological gap between the general public and themselves. Paradoxically, the unusual performance of these ‘minority public’ in the theatrical circles has in itself become another social puzzle of the island, as the local Taiwanese may find it difficult to relate to their ambiguous intentions.

It is therefore no accident that both the government and the theatrical circles have lately come to recognise the so-called community theatre as a supplementary force to decode the ‘theatrical myth’ promoted by these young groups’ fulfilment of artistic creativity and political idealism. In the most favourable sense, the task of their mutual concern is to make theatre accessible to the man in the street *again* so that it can be a powerful impetus to the pursuit of a grassroots cultural identity. In 1991, with the assistance from some ‘local’ theatre practitioners⁵, the Council for Cultural Affairs⁶ in Taipei launched a well-meaning, but less well-conducted three-year project to encourage the development of what they called *she chu ju tuan*, or ‘theatre for local community’, including Cornfield (Yu Mi Tian) Experimental Theatre in Shinju, Hua Deng Theatre Troupe (the name was later changed to Tainan Jen Theatre Troupe, and then Tainaner Ensemble) in Tainan, and Spring Wind (Nan Feng) Art Theatre in Kaohsiung. As Su Guei-chih, once an inspector of the Council, points out, the project was meant to “enhance local people’s comprehension of the unique cultural features

⁵ Here, ‘local theatre practitioners’ refers to those theatre practitioners who have been working in a specific city or county apart from Taipei.

⁶ The Council was in charge of running all culture-related affairs, and has been upgraded and re-named as the Ministry of Culture since May 2012.

of their surroundings or communities and, with this premise, call for their participation in theatre by means of the dramatisation of the stories/issues they feel familiar with or related to” (Su, 1994, p. 73). Intriguingly, although this proposition obviously bears a resemblance to the ideas of ‘community theatre’, ‘resident theatre’, or ‘civic theatre’ that was prevalent in the West during the 1970s in its ‘user-friendly’ motive, the application of theatre to a properly defined community is in fact nothing new to the Chinese-speaking islanders. According to Chiou Kun-liang, one of the most established Taiwanese theatre scholars, theatre (or performance arts in general) has long been a crucial factor in the making of Taiwanese people’s social life:

Before 1960s, performing groups of this type (community-based groups, that is) could be extensively seen all over the island. Each community (or residential unit), no matter where it was located, would have at least one amateur theatrical troupe organised by its residents in its own right. Crowned with a distinctive appellation such as ‘shiuan’, ‘jai’, ‘yuan’, ‘tang’, or ‘she’ (軒、齋、院、堂、社, all of them are Chinese characters used to describe a certain place of meeting), the troupe was set up to perform traditional musical theatre (e.g., Beijing Opera, Taiwanese Opera, Lion Dancing and other religious/ritualistic performances) and, more recent, musical pieces from abroad for the community on a regular basis. By virtue of these collective activities, the relationship between the local residents was inevitably tightened and solidified. Meanwhile, the traditions of local performance arts could also be passed over to the next generation through this kind of social interaction. (Chiou, 1995, p. 95)

In this case, it seems quite a creditable attempt that certain groups of Taiwanese theatre practitioners are now contriving to bridge the thirty years’ gap by blending their work with a flavour of locality. As Hsu Rey-fang, the former artistic director of Tainan Jen Theatre Troupe, sums up the situation in the preface to her nostalgic play *The Phoenix Trees Are in Blossom*: it is a top priority for a community-based theatre troupe like Hua Deng (Tainan Jen) to accumulate social and theatrical resources as much as possible through its interaction with local audiences, so that it can help to fill the ‘blank’ resulting from the island’s fragmented cultural history and intensified social change.

Since Tainan Jen happens to be founded in the oldest city of the island, most of the troupe's major productions are based on Taiwan's traditional customs (*Ordinary Life*, 1991), historical events (*Illia Formosa*, 1995), or modern issues faced and shared by the citizens of Tainan (*Journey of the Wind Birds*, 1996). In addition, these productions are mainly performed in Min-nan-yu, the most popularly used dialect in Taiwan, with an aim to reach the majority of Tainanese for whom Mandarin is not *the* mother tongue. In Hsu's mind, it is not an enthusiastic audience that matters, but an *approachable* one. Inevitably, Hsu and her colleagues' theatrical pieces have again brought people who are concerned with the future of Taiwanese theatre, as well as the island itself, 'back to the basics', urging them to re-consider fundamental questions such as *what is theatre for?*, *who is the audience?*, *what do we say in theatre?*, *how can we best say it?*, and so on. In terms of a theatrical context that is desperately in need of cultural spontaneity and popular roots, Chiou's statement certainly deserves to be taken as the basis for the practice of socio-educational theatre in Taiwan.

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